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## Milton's Theology of the Cross: Substitution and Satisfaction in Christ's Atonement

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# Milton's Theology of the Cross: Substitution and Satisfaction in Christ's Atonement

Samuel Smith

**Abstract:** *Recent scholarship on John Milton argues that Milton rejected the popular Reformation understanding of Christ's atonement, the penal-substitutionary theory of atonement, and that Milton was uncomfortable with the Crucifixion of Jesus as God's means of human salvation. A close reading of Milton's Paradise Lost and De Doctrina Christiana clearly shows, however, that Milton did in fact embrace the penal-substitutionary theory of atonement, and he believed that Jesus' death on the cross effected this atonement. Milton's decision not to dwell on the cross or the details of the crucifixion in his poetry does not manifest a rejection of the cross as God's means of effecting atonement.*

A surging tide of recent Milton criticism advances a Milton who has become our contemporary, a poet-theologian who shares our moral discomfort with Christ's crucifixion as a divinely-ordained sacrifice that atones for the sins of humanity, where Christ substitutes his own bloody death for a guilty and justly condemned humanity in order to satisfy the wrath of God. As a Christian who rejects the penal-substitutionary theory of atonement, with its implications for an unethical God who requires the crucifixion of his Son, I would be most gratified if Milton were indeed our contemporary on this score.<sup>1</sup> Recent critical efforts to distance Milton from penal-substitutionary atonement parallel the critical situation concerning Milton's Samson and his relation to Milton's Son in *Paradise Regained*. In his illuminating description and assessment of this trend, David Loewenstein remarks that "there has been a notable tendency among recent critics to argue that ultimately Milton wants his readers to sympathize with the pacifism, quietism, and patience of Jesus in *Paradise Regain'd* and to reject

the Old Testament violence and militarism of Samson in its companion piece, *Samson Agonistes*" (276). Loewenstein shrewdly suggests that this tendency is motivated by our commitment to rendering Milton more like ourselves, shaping him to fit "our own (more acceptable) image of the radical visionary poet who, unlike the Samson of his dramatic poem, could never or who could no longer, after the Restoration, condone an act of holy violence and vehement rage as a devastating yet creative and heroic political act" (278). I suspect that recent criticism on Milton and the crucifixion and/or the atonement may be similarly motivated by the desire to render Milton more like ourselves.

In his reading of "On the Circumcision," John Rogers claims that Milton's apparent "neglect of the Crucifixion" reflects his "provisional faith in man's ability to effect his own salvation, without the help of a sacrificial redeemer" (190), arguing that Milton rejected the dominant seventeenth-century theory of atonement—the Reformers' revision of Anselm's "satisfaction" theory, what C. A. Patrides calls a "penal-substitutionary atonement" (136)—in favor of the early Church's "recapitulation" theory of atonement (193).<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Rogers asserts that Milton exposes "the savage logic of revenge and the plight of human helplessness at the emotional core of the Christian Crucifixion" (210), presenting the "virtuous human action" of circumcision as "a rational correction to the act of substitutive sacrifice which lay at the heart of Christianity" (213). More recently, Gregory Chaplin has argued for a Milton who resolves his "vexed relation to the Crucifixion" by rejecting Anselmian theories of atoning "satisfaction" and embracing instead an Arian Son whose sacrifice becomes "an ethical decision" rooted in "the classical friendship tradition" (356).<sup>3</sup> While Chaplin reasonably identifies a relative resistance to the "spectacle" (367) of crucifixion on Milton's part, he mistakenly assumes that this entails a rejection of penal-substitutionary atonement as well, and that this rejection is evident in, and supported by, Milton's Arianism. A more radical expression of this growing consensus comes from Gordon Teskey, who claims that "Milton as a poet was largely unmoved by the two definitive images of Christian worship: the baby in its mother's arms and the man on the cross" (485). Teskey goes on to say—minus the qualifier here—that "Milton was unmoved by the baby in its mother's arms and by the man on the cross because they are images of helplessness, not of power, and their appeal is to the emotions, rather than to the instincts for order and for command" (485-86). But this assumes that if Milton never wrote about the crucifixion of Jesus in the agonized

fashion of a George Herbert, he was not moved by Christ's passion—such a conclusion does not necessarily follow, of course, and Teskey's assumption mistakes the absence of evidence for evidence of absence.

In a more circumspect and convincing query into the "poetics of sacrifice" and atonement, Michael Schoenfeldt reads Milton's "The Passion" as a possible site of resistance to the "plight of human helplessness at the emotional core of the Christian Crucifixion"—a plight more evident in poets like Donne and Herbert.<sup>4</sup> Schoenfeldt is justified in suggesting that in his epics Milton is "far more interested in moral rectitude than in salvific suffering" (580), and it is possible that Milton may at times have experienced the crucifixion as a "sacrifice [which] inevitably defeats human response" (581). But it does not necessarily follow that "Milton deliberately relocates the atonement from a scenario of corporeal martyrdom to a moment of ethical decision" (581). As we shall see, for Milton the atonement clearly requires Christ's "corporeal martyrdom," and Milton embraces in both his poetry and prose the crucifixion as an effectual penal-substitutionary sacrifice for human sin, one which satisfies divine justice. That ethical decision necessarily entails corporeal martyrdom. The Son in *Paradise Regained* discerns from his reading of Hebrew scripture that he must follow a path of suffering that will likely end in his death—"Ere I the promis'd Kingdom can attain, / Or work Redemption for mankind, whose sins' / Full weight must be transferr'd upon my head" (1.265-67). Here the Son clearly speaks of his substitutionary atonement for sinful humanity.<sup>5</sup> This understanding of atonement through crucifixion appears in both Milton's prose and poetry, providing sufficient evidence for his lifelong commitment to the crucifixion as the site of humanity's redemption.

Despite Rogers' cavalier dismissal of C. A. Patrides' account of Milton and the atonement, Patrides remains a helpful initiation to Milton's Christian understanding of the atonement.<sup>6</sup> Patrides delineates the ways in which Reformation theologians developed a penal-substitutionary atonement theory from Anselm's classic "satisfaction" theory. Their primary revision featured a more exclusive use of "juridical terms" to present the atonement as "a legal transaction, as a 'contract'" (135). Patrides' summary of this theory uses the language of the Reformers, which we find repeated in Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Paradise Lost*: the crucifixion fulfills a contract "whereby the debt *paid* to the Supreme Judge was considered to be both the *satisfaction* demanded by *divine justice* and the just punishment required for *our sins*"; in his death on the cross, "Jesus *substituted* for us, according to the

Reformers, and in a just *payment* of our sins diverted the wrath of God *upon himself*" (135, my emphases). That God's justice required such satisfaction was for the Reformers "in accordance with the established and unalterable law of God" (136). In other words, as Patrides makes clear, the necessity of divine punishment for transgression against God's moral law functions as a theological datum for reformers like Calvin and Luther. I will show that Milton largely agrees with this approach to atonement, although he does diverge in important ways, most significantly in having his distinctly Arian Son satisfy divine justice in his sacrifice on the cross. I will also suggest why Milton was committed to this understanding of atonement.

Milton's own clear assertion in *De Doctrina Christiana* that divine justice must necessarily condemn Adam and all his posterity needs no defense from his point of view; this claim appears as a theological datum authorized by Scripture. Nevertheless, while citing Exod. 20:5, Num. 14:33, Lev. 26:29, and Ezek. 18:4, he identifies a universal principle which affirms this: "Moreover, it is not only a constant principle of divine justice but also a very ancient law among all races and all religions, that when a man has committed sacrilege (and this tree we are discussing was sacred), not only he but also the whole of his posterity becomes an anathema and a sin-offering" (*De Doctrina Christiana* 385).<sup>7</sup> "Die hee, or justice must"—this is important: if we are looking for justification for this principle from Milton, we won't find it. This is simply a given for him. What we find instead are repeated articulations of human redemption from sin employing the language of the contract-based, penal-substitutionary atonement doctrine which dominated Protestant Reformation theology.

Key terms in *De Doctrina Christiana* reflecting Milton's commitment to—and comfort with—this theory of atonement include "satisfaction," "sacrifice," "redemption," "blood," "price," "paid," "appeasement," and, of course, "divine justice." Milton clearly marks the crucifixion as the primary act which effects atonement between God and humanity when he defines the term "redemption": "REDEMPTION IS THAT ACT BY WHICH CHRIST, SENT IN THE FULNESS OF TIME, REDEEMED ALL BELIEVERS AT THE PRICE OF HIS OWN BLOOD, WHICH HE PAID VOLUNTARILY, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE ETERNAL PLAN AND GRACE OF GOD THE FATHER" (415-16, my emphases). When Milton prooftexts the phrase, "AT THE PRICE OF HIS OWN BLOOD," he cites verses which include the terms he favors for understanding atonement: "Rom. iii. 25: *a means of appeasement through faith in his blood*; I Cor. vi. 20: *they are*

bought *with a price* ... ; Rev. i. 5: *he has washed us clean of our sins with his blood*" (417, my emphases). Scripture authorizes Milton's acceptance of the redemptive violence of blood sacrifice, and he does not shy away from embracing this doctrine.

Equally important to Milton's understanding of atonement is the voluntary nature of the Son's incarnation and sacrifice, which Milton identifies as the Son's "humiliation": "His HUMILIATION means that CHRIST, AS ΘΕΑΝΘΡΩΠΙΟΣ, GOD-MAN, SUBMITTED HIMSELF VOLUNTARILY, BOTH IN LIFE AND IN DEATH, TO THE DIVINE JUSTICE, IN ORDER TO SUFFER ALL THE THINGS WHICH WERE NECESSARY FOR OUR REDEMPTION" (438, my emphases). When he explicates the biblical support related to the phrase, "IN DEATH," Milton remarks the curse associated with crucifixion and Christ's pain in bearing divine wrath: "IN DEATH. Psal. xxii. Philipp. ii. 8: *made obedient right up to his death, even the death of the cross: a death which was a supreme disgrace, Deut. xxi. 23: the hanged man is accursed in the sight of God, and the curse due to us was transferred to him, Gal. iii. 13, along with a horrifying awareness of divine anger being poured upon him, an awareness which led to that dying cry, Matt. xxvii. 46: my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (439). Here Milton's language of substitution appears in "the curse due to us was transferred to him" (the precise term used by Milton's Son in the passage from *Paradise Regained* cited above).

Perhaps the most important word for Milton's theory of atonement is that associated with Anselm—"satisfaction": "SATISFACTION means that CHRIST AS ΘΕΑΝΘΡΩΠΙΟΣ FULLY SATISFIED DIVINE JUSTICE BY FULFILLING THE LAW AND PAYING THE JUST PRICE ON BEHALF OF ALL MEN" (443, my emphases). For Milton, Christ's blood payment clearly indicates a substitution: "THE PRICE ON BEHALF OF (i.e., in place of)" (444; Milton cites Matt. 20:28, 1 Cor. 6:20, and 1 Tim. 2:6). In case there is any doubt, Milton adds, "[t]he Greek words plainly signify the *substitution* of one person for another" (444, my emphasis; Milton cites 1 Pet. 1:18, Rom. 5:10 and 4:25, 1 Cor. 15:3, 2 Cor. 5:21, Tit. 2:14, Gal. 1:4, Heb. 7:22 and 10:12, 29). He continues with a dig at the Socinian position, in terms that might as readily be applied to Milton scholars who wish to distance Milton from a belief which many of us find unethical, but to which Milton was committed: "[t]hose who maintain that Christ sought death not *in our place* and for the sake of redemption, but only for our good and to set an example, try in vain to evade the evidence of these texts" (444, my

emphasis). Here Milton clearly speaks of Christ *seeking* death in the place of humanity in order to effect atonement. He also speaks of this satisfaction in terms of sufficiency. Thinking perhaps of virtuous theistic “pagans,” or the devout figures who live in the pages of the Hebrew Bible, Milton extends Christ’s penal-substitutionary atonement to all believers in God who never heard the name of Christ: “[s]ince, moreover, *the price of redemption which he has paid is sufficient* for all mankind, it follows that everyone is called to share in that grace although not everyone may know how the grace is given. ... How much more, then, ought we to believe that Christ’s *perfect sacrifice* is in every way *sufficient* even for those who have never heard of his name, but who only believe in God” (455, my emphases; see also 475).

Milton’s understanding of Christ’s satisfaction as an atoning substitute for humanity also figures in his explication of yet another key term, perhaps the key term for the Protestant Reformation—“justification”: “JUSTIFICATION is THE JUDGMENT OF GOD, FREELY GIVEN, BY VIRTUE OF WHICH THOSE WHO ARE REGENERATE AND INGRAFTED IN CHRIST ARE ABSOLVED FROM SINS AND FROM DEATH THROUGH CHRIST’S ABSOLUTELY FULL SATISFACTION, AND ARE ACCOUNTED RIGHTEOUS IN THE SIGHT OF GOD, NOT BY THE WORKS OF THE LAW BUT THROUGH FAITH” (485, my emphasis). Then, citing Isa. 53:11, Rom. 5:9, 19 and 10:4, Milton echoes Luther’s justification by faith in his explication of “THROUGH CHRIST’S SATISFACTION”: “Just as our sins, then, are imputed to Christ, so Christ’s righteousness or merits are imputed to us, through faith” (486; Milton cites 1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:19, 21, Rom. 4:6 and 5:19). Milton’s satisfaction with Christ’s satisfaction once again returns to the language of contractual penal-substitutionary atonement which I have been tracing in his theological discourse: “[s]o it is evident that our justification is freely given so far as we are concerned, but it is not free from Christ’s point of view. He *paid the price* and imputed our sins to himself, and *of his own free will* washed them away and expiated them. We receive his righteousness imputed to us, as a gift. We *pay* nothing for it, we merely have to believe. Thus the Father is *appeased*, and pronounces all believers righteous. There could not be a simpler or more equitable method of *satisfaction*” (486, my emphases). It is also difficult to imagine a simpler, clearer statement of how this understanding of atonement functions as a basic theological datum for Milton.

Finally, Milton explains how the Arian Christ which Chaplin finds inimical to substitutionary atonement effects precisely just such an



atonement that for most of Milton's contemporaries required full Godhead. Milton makes it clear that innocence, purity, and complete obedience—but not Godhead—are required for an effective substitutionary sin sacrifice. Clearly addressing Trinitarians who do require full Godhead for the atoning sacrifice to be satisfactory,<sup>8</sup> Milton says, “So let us get rid of those arguments which are produced to prove that the person who was made flesh must necessarily be the supreme God. First of all there is that text from Heb. vii. 26, 27: *such a high priest was fitting for us, holy, removed from all evil, spotless, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens*. But these words do not prove even that he is God, let alone that he must have been God” (425).<sup>9</sup> In a third citation of this verse from Hebrews, Milton does insist on the necessity of the miracle of the virgin birth, since the sacrificial substitute must be free from original sin: “The aim of this miraculous conception was to evade the pollution of Adam’s sin. Heb. vii. 26: *such a high priest was fitting for us, holy, spotless, separate from sinners*” (428). He repeats this in the context of arguing that children of regenerate parents are not born regenerate, but with original sin: “Christ alone was free from this contagion [original sin], since he was produced by supernatural generation, although descended from Adam: Heb. vii. 26: *holy, spotless*” (389-90). For Milton, Christ does not need to be God to provide satisfaction and effect redemption; he only needs to be free from original sin and fully obedient to the will of God—an Arian Christ in no way precludes or impedes a substitutionary atonement.<sup>10</sup>

The Son must also voluntarily take on this task, exercising his own free will to offer himself as a substitutionary sacrifice which satisfies divine justice. Milton represents this in book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, where the language of both the Father and the Son in the council in Heaven echoes the language of Milton’s systematic theology. After the Father confirms his expressed intent to show grace to transgressing humanity, he works his way toward the question of who will mediate this grace to humanity by defining the terms by which that atonement must be effected:

Man disobeying,  
 Disloyal breaks his fealty, and sins  
 Against the high Supremacy of Heav’n,  
 Affecting God-head, and so losing all,  
 To expiate his Treason hath naught left,  
 But to destruction sacred and devote,  
 He with his whole posterity must die,



*Die hee or Justice must; unless for him*  
Some other able, and as willing, *pay*  
The rigid *satisfaction*, death *for* death,  
Say Heav'nly Powers, where shall we find such love,  
Which of ye will be mortal to *redeem*  
Man's mortal crime, and just th' unjust to save,  
Dwells in all Heaven charity so dear? (3.203-16, my emphases)

Here the Father begins with the "sacrilege" Milton refers to in *De Doctrina Christiana*, the transgression against Divine law that renders not only Adam but all his posterity culpable and in need of atonement, and then moves on to the fundamental theological datum requiring atonement: "Die hee or Justice must." He uses the Anselmian term adapted by the reformers, "rigid satisfaction," and insists on the substitutionary nature of redemption: "for him ... death for death." He insists that only love can fulfill this demand, emphasizing the term by including it as an extra syllable in an extended line and by repeating the word a second time in its cognate form, "charity."

In his response, the Son understands his voluntary sacrifice as a substitution which pays down the debt or penalty incurred by Adam's sin, thereby appeasing Divine wrath and satisfying Divine justice. The Son also understands that his death cannot be considered apart from his resurrection:

Behold mee then, mee *for him*, life *for* life  
I offer, on mee let *thine anger* fall;  
*Account mee man*; I *for his sake* will leave  
Thy bosom, and this glory next to thee  
Freely put off, and *for him* lastly die  
Well pleas'd, on me let Death wreck all his rage;  
Under his gloomy power I shall not long  
Lie vanquisht; thou hast giv'n to me to possess  
Life in myself for ever, by thee I live,  
Though now to Death I yield, and am his due  
All of me that can die, yet *that debt paid*,  
Thou wilt not leave me in the loathsome grave  
His prey, nor suffer my unspotted Soul  
For ever with corruption there to dwell;  
But I shall rise Victorious, and subdue  
My vanquisher, spoil'd of his vaunted spoil. (3.236-51, my emphases)

Here the Son willingly offers himself as a substitute for humanity, a sacrifice

that will pay the due penalty to satisfy the Father's wrath. When he returns to Heaven with his redeemed, he will see the Father's face, "wherein no cloud / Of *anger* shall remain, but peace assur'd, / And reconcilment; *wrath* shall be no more" (262-64, my emphases). The Son clearly sees his sacrificial work as an effective appeasement of Divine anger.

The Father responds by praising the Son, who has "the only peace / Found out for mankind *under wrath*" (274-75, my emphasis). The Father follows this with a verse summary of Milton's theological prose in *De Doctrina Christiana*:

As in him [Adam] perish all men, so in thee  
As from a second root shall be restor'd,  
As many as are restor'd, without thee none.  
His crime makes guilty all his Sons, thy merit  
*Imputed* shall absolve them who renounce  
Thir own both righteous and unrighteous deeds,  
And live in thee transplanted, and from thee  
Receive new life. So Man, as is most just,  
Shall *satisfy* for Man, be judg'd and die,  
And dying rise, and rising with him raise  
His Brethren, *ransom'd with his own dear life*. (287-97, my emphases)

Eventually the Father declares that the substitution works both ways: as the Son substitutes for guilty humanity and pays the penalty for sin, so this substitution will effect all believing humanity's participation in the Divine. The Father asserts that because in the Son "Love hath abounded more than Glory abounds, / Therefore thy Humiliation shall exalt / With thee thy Manhood also to this Throne" (312-14). Milton identifies the "Humiliation" which exalts humanity as the suffering and death—especially the ignominious death by crucifixion—of Christ (*CPW* 6, 439).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, lest we think that only the Father and the Son present atonement in penal-substitutionary terms, the Miltonic narrator closes this scene with his own celebration of the Son's sacrificial love, rejoicing in a Son who expresses his Father's compassion with his very life:

No sooner did thy dear and only Son  
Perceive thee purpos'd not to doom frail Man  
So strictly, but much more to pity inclin'd  
Hee to *appease thy wrath*, and end the strife  
Of Mercy and Justice in thy face discern'd,

Regardless of the Bliss wherein hee sat  
Second to thee, offer'd himself *to die*  
*For man's* offense. O unexampl'd love,  
Love nowhere to be found less than Divine!  
Hail Son of God, *Savior* of Men, thy Name  
Shall be the copious matter of my Song  
Henceforth, and never shall my Harp thy praise  
Forget, nor from thy Father's praise disjoin. (403-15, my emphases)

It is difficult not to hear Milton himself in these lines, deeply moved by the Son's sacrifice, as he employs his own favorite epithet for the Son in *Paradise Regained*: Savior. The Son is a savior who satisfies or appeases Divine anger—or justice—by offering himself as a substitute who will pay the price of redemption. As we will see in Michael's discourse on this redemption in book 12, that price can only be paid in blood.

Michael's narrative presents an obvious obstacle to any attempt to render Milton our contemporary when it comes to responding to the crucifixion of Jesus and understanding the atoning work of his death. Critical attempts to overcome this obstacle have thus far relied on elision and dismissal of Michael's account. In his argument against Milton's commitment to penal-substitutionary atonement, Chaplin, while he cannot deny the presence of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, claims that Milton "relegate[s] Christ's sacrifice to a few lines toward the end of *Paradise Lost* because he has already depicted the Son's definitive act of obedience and love" (361) in book 3. But Michael clearly depicts that "definitive act" as a penal-substitutionary atonement, and—contrary to the rhetorical force of Chaplin's "relegate"—the crucifixion arrives in book 12 as the necessary and crucial climax in the story of humanity's redemption.

However, before Michael arrives at that moment in his narrative when he presents the crucifixion as an effective atonement for humanity, he lays the groundwork for the requirement of blood sacrifice for expiation of sin, a groundwork in turn founded on the discourse of atonement articulated in the council in Heaven. Michael explains to Adam that the Mosaic law can expose sin, and the contingent and provisional sacrifices offered by the Israelites under ceremonial rituals are instructive but not fully effective; the Lord's demand for "[t]he blood of bulls and goats" (12.292) instructs us, foreshadowing that

Some *blood* more precious *must be paid for Man,*  
*Just for unjust,* that in such righteousness  
To them by Faith imputed, they may find  
Justification towards God, and peace  
Of conscience, which the Law by Ceremonies  
Cannot *appease*, nor Man the moral part  
Perform, and not performing cannot live. (293-99, my emphases)

One purpose of the Law, Michael tells Adam, is to teach humanity that a blood sacrifice will be required to pay the penalty for human transgression and appease God (in this case, both God and God's "umpire," conscience). This prepares Adam for the unexpected: a victory over Satan, Sin, and Death achieved not by glorious battle but by a "shameful and accurst" death: crucifixion. This is how God will reconcile humanity to himself. It is important to recognize that on this matter all four authoritative speakers—the Father, the Son, the narrator, and Michael—agree and speak the same language of atonement. Milton does not offer any Bakhtinian dialogic on this issue, nor does he produce the kind of tension critics like Joseph Wittreich and Peter Herman have documented in other moments in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>12</sup>

Michael's narrative of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection focuses on its theological meaning, forgoing any graphic description of crucifixion. We might wonder, now that Adam is hearing the Word, not seeing it as vision, if Adam really knows what kind of death the Messiah faces. Thus Chaplin is right when he observes that Milton resists the "spectacle" of the crucifixion; in doing so, Milton follows the gospel writers and Paul, who also resist the "spectacle" of crucifixion.<sup>13</sup> But to claim therefore that Milton was unmoved by Christ's sacrificial death, or that he did not embrace a penal-substitutionary theory of atonement, constitutes a *non sequitur*. Michael's account emphatically identifies Jesus' crucifixion in precisely the terms of this theory of atonement, marking the crucifixion as the means of its achievement. He tells Adam that "high Justice" can only "rest appaid" (401) by "suffering death, / the penalty to thy transgression due" (398-99) on the part of one who fulfills the Mosaic law "[b]oth by obedience and by love, though love / Alone fulfil the Law" (403-4). The Savior substitutes for Adam and all his progeny: "thy punishment / He shall endure by coming in the Flesh / To a reproachful life and cursed death" (404-6). This "cursed death" is death by crucifixion (Galatians 3.13), by which means the Son of God will redeem all who believe, imputing his own perfect obedience to those who have faith in him and in his atonement:

For this he shall live hated, be blasphem'd,  
 Seiz'd on by force, judg'd, and to death condemn'd  
 A shameful and accurst, nail'd to the Cross  
 By his own Nation, slain for bringing Life;  
 But to the Cross he nails thy Enemies,  
 The Law that is against thee, and *the sins*  
*Of all mankind, with him there crucifi'd,*  
 Never to hurt them more who rightly trust  
 In this his *satisfaction*. (412-19, my emphases)

This is hardly a turning “away from the Passion,” nor has Milton “deftly converted” the Crucifixion “into an act of triumphant heroism” (Chaplin 367) which excludes the violent and torturous blood sacrifice-substitute required by Divine justice to appease God’s wrath. For a poet who would sing the greater heroism “Of Patience and heroic martyrdom” (9.31), these two ways of seeing the Crucifixion are entirely compatible. Like Luther, however, Milton does not separate the Crucifixion from the Resurrection; Michael continues:

so he dies,  
 But soon revives, Death over him no power  
 Shall long usurp; ere the third dawning light  
 Return, the Stars of Morn shall see him rise  
 Out of his grave, fresh as the dawning light,  
*Thy ransom paid, which Man from death redeems,*  
*His death for Man, as many as offer'd Life*  
 Neglect not, and the benefit embrace  
 By Faith not void of works: this God-like act  
 Annuls thy doom, *the death thou shouldst have di'd,*  
 In sin for ever lost from life. (419-29, my emphases)

Here we have again, pivoting on that Anselmian term—satisfaction—the language of the penal-substitutionary atonement theory embraced by most Protestant reformers.

The understanding of atonement expressed in Milton’s epics and in *De Doctrina Christiana* also appears briefly in Milton’s final prose polemic, *Of True Religion* (1673). At a moment when Milton advocates tolerance for the many Protestant sects abounding in Restoration England, Milton identifies the importance of his understanding of *satisfaction* in Christ’s atonement on the cross by marking his continuing disagreement with the

Socinian position on atonement: “their other Opinions are of less Moment. They dispute the satisfaction of Christ, or rather the word *Satisfaction*, as not Scriptural: but they acknowledge him both God and their Saviour” (425, Milton’s emphasis).<sup>14</sup> When Patrides remarks that “[t]here are few opinions Milton held more sincerely or more consistently than his view of the Atonement” (141), he implicitly recognizes that Milton was a dynamic theological thinker whose understanding of key Christian doctrines changed significantly during his life—the nature of the Godhead, the relation of soul and body, mortality, and Creation, to name a few. But Milton’s view of the atonement as a substitutionary sacrifice providentially offered by the crucified Christ holds steady from his earliest poems, such as “Upon the Circumcision,” to his final prose treatise, *Of True Religion*. This is Milton’s theology. However unethical or repulsive many of us who have devoted our lives to reading Milton may find this doctrine, a faithful account of Milton’s prose and poetry grants the sincerity and importance of this belief to him; it is central to his Christian faith and understanding. But why is this understanding of Christ’s crucifixion and atonement so important to Milton?

In his recent essay on Milton’s theology, William Poole poses a question much like this, puzzled by Milton’s commitment to some form of Anselmic atonement despite his “dismantling” of Trinitarianism.<sup>15</sup> He offers as one possible answer Milton’s politics, related to the execution of Charles I:

It has recently been demonstrated that in the aftermath of the regicide, some pro-regicidal theologians felt obliged to re-affirm a model of justice that required strict retribution. Their supposed opponents had protested that “rigid satisfaction” was not required in all cases, and that England could have forgiven Charles I. Certain pro-regicidal theologians associated such political leniency with the theological analogue that God could have forgiven his Son. This shrewd polemic maneuver allowed Independent theologians such as John Owen to elide their Presbyterian enemies, who did not want Charles executed, with the feared and hated Socinians, for the most notorious Socinian tenet was indeed that it made no sense to claim that an omnipotent God was somehow forced to exact vengeance on man, let alone on himself. Milton, the foremost literary apologist for the regicide, here affirms the theological corollary: “Die he or Justice must.” (479-80)

This is a fair suggestion, if indeed Milton’s motivations for espousing a penal-substitutionary theory of atonement are political (even if unconsciously so).

But I wish to suggest two more obvious answers for Milton's continuing commitment to God's use and authorization of redemptive violence or sacrifice: because it is important to his personal Christian faith and because the Bible authorizes it.

A biblicist like Milton may well have considered as unbiblical, if not anti-biblical, the manner in which poets like Donne and Herbert lingered in helplessness before the image of Christ crucified. The gospel narratives do not linger over the crucifixion; while clearly sharing the climax of the Jesus story with the resurrection, the violent death of Jesus is presented succinctly, as a fact, and then the narratives move on to burial and resurrection. The actual crucifixion itself is never described, and the agonizing pain that strikes Donne and Herbert is largely condensed into a single moment where Jesus cries out, with the gospels of Matthew and Mark attributing to Christ the phrase which Milton remarks in *De Doctrina* when he considers the humiliation of the crucifixion: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Neither does the apostle Paul linger over Christ's suffering on the cross, despite his repeated references to that cross. He does use language which the Protestant reformers draw on to develop into their penal-substitutionary theory of atonement, but we find nothing in Paul's letters like the detailed meditations of Donne and Herbert.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the Epistle to the Hebrews—which Jason Rosenblatt identifies as the most formative text for the final two books of *Paradise Lost* (218)—details a doctrine of sacrificial atonement effected by Christ's death on the cross without gazing on—or lingering helplessly before—the "spectacle" of crucifixion. In fact, while not explicitly naming the crucifixion, one passage in Hebrews suggests that the crucifixion was likely considered so basic to the faith that it should not preoccupy the mature, regenerate Christian:

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrines of baptisms, and of the laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. (Heb. 5:12-6:2)



Certainly the Milton who was a life-long Christian, deeply committed to his Christian faith, saw himself as a teacher, as one “of full age” skilled in the use of a “reason” that enabled him “to discern both good and evil.” Ready to eat “strong meat,” he had left “the principles of the doctrine of Christ” behind, not because he did not believe them or they were not vital to his faith, but because they were so basic, especially to his pervasively Christian culture, that there was hardly any need to speak of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. He had no need to do the work of evangelism; he was instructing fellow Christians who had already embraced this basic doctrine. The biblical writers’ own relative “neglect” of the “spectacle” of crucifixion authorizes and explains Milton’s own; we have no need to speculate that he was somehow repulsed by blood atonement, or that his relation to the Crucifixion was “vexed” (Chaplin 357). Schoenfeldt may be quite right to argue that Milton in his epics is “far more interested in moral rectitude than in salvific suffering” (580), but to suggest that Milton experienced the crucifixion as a “sacrifice [which] inevitably defeats human response” (581) is another *non sequitur*. Milton in fact responded to this sacrifice with a life of obedience and commitment to the one he repeatedly called “Savior.”

If I may be allowed my own moment of unqualified speculation, I wish to suggest a reason why so many Milton scholars may sense in Milton a resistance to a theory of atonement which he—paradoxically—so clearly embraces in his texts. We find in Milton very little evidence of the anxiety that plagued his cultural moment and drove the success of the penal-substitutionary theory of atonement. In *The Courage To Be*, Paul Tillich identifies three eras of “anxiety” and the theories of atonement which addressed those anxieties. The early centuries of the Christian church were haunted by the anxiety of fate and death, and the prominent theory of atonement was the *Christus Victor* theory—Christ’s overcoming of sin and death in the crucifixion and resurrection liberated believers from the bondage of death, as Christ “recapitulated” and reversed the fateful disobedience of Adam and Eve in Eden. The medieval and Reformation periods were haunted by the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, and the substitutionary atonement theory provided a means to remove that guilt and condemnation, displacing it onto the suffering Christ, who appeased the mighty wrath of a just God on behalf of fallen humanity. But the modern era generates a different anxiety—that of meaninglessness and purposelessness. None of the previous theories of atonement addresses this anxiety, and the church has only just begun articulating theories of atonement that do address our

contemporary uncertainty about ultimate meaning and purpose in life.<sup>17</sup> If Milton ever experienced the anxiety of guilt and condemnation addressed by his theory of atonement, it must have been in his early boyhood (to which possibility I can attest), for we see little evidence of this in the adult Milton—perhaps in this sense Milton is indeed our contemporary.<sup>18</sup> And it may be that Milton's adherence to penal-substitutionary atonement theory is simply a dutiful response to what he finds in authoritative scripture, and the apparent absence of any felt need for such atonement leaves some readers wondering if Milton espoused such a doctrine. On the other hand, there is much about Milton's emotional life that we do not know, especially in his youth. It may be, as I have suggested, that Milton embraced Christ's redeeming sacrifice early in life with gratitude and rejoicing, and then he turned his focus to what that redemption enabled: a life of obedience to what he understood to be the will of the God who claimed him, who bought John Milton with the price of his Son's precious blood shed on the cross for satisfaction and appeasement of divine justice. Otherwise, we must imagine a Milton who removed the Epistle to the Hebrews from the biblical canon, substituting the Milton we want for the Milton we have.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a survey of another surging tide, this one in Christian theology, that offers both a more ethical and a more relevant understanding of crucifixion and atonement for our contemporary situation, see Marit Trelstad, ed., *Cross Examinations* and especially Lutheran theologian Douglas John Hall's *The Cross in Our Context*. In this respect, I must say that the critical readings of Milton reviewed in my opening paragraphs offer an understanding of Milton I would be happy to embrace if it were true.

<sup>2</sup>Although there are a number of flaws in Rogers' argument, the primary fracture results from his misreading "And that great Cov'nant which we still transgress / Intirely satisf'd" (21–22) as referring to the Abrahamic Covenant, which is sealed by circumcision, instead of the Mosaic Covenant (with the Decalogue at its core) that Milton clearly intends. Rogers makes no argument for reading "that great Cov'nant" as the Abrahamic covenant; he simply assumes this is the case. (I'd be willing to hear an argument for that against what seems to be an obvious reference to the Mosaic Law; every editor of current scholarly editions of *Paradise Lost*—Hughes, Flannagan, Carey, Leonard, Orgel, Revard, and Kerrigan, et al.—reads the line as referring to the Mosaic covenant.) Milton includes the *Christus Victor* or

“recapitulation” motif in his poetry, but it does not inform his primary understanding of atonement.

<sup>3</sup>Chaplin rightly identifies the Son’s decision as primarily ethical, but he mistakenly excludes penal-substitutionary atonement in favor of the classical friendship tradition. For an astute and engaging analysis of the nature of the Son’s ethical decision-making at the moment he volunteers himself as a sacrifice for humanity’s redemption, see Jeffrey S. Shoulson, “The King and I: the Stance of Theodicy in Midrash and *Paradise Lost*,” especially 71-73.

<sup>4</sup>The difference between Milton and poets like Donne and Herbert can be accounted for in a number of ways: temperament, religious heritage, and perhaps the fact that as priests in the English church—a vocation which the young Milton rejected—Donne and Herbert were continually re-enacting that sacrifice in a Eucharist-centered service, while Milton preferred a more Presbyterian or Independent Word- or sermon-centered service. With respect to “The Passion,” it has become something of a critical commonplace to assume that Milton’s decision not to finish this poem reflects a significant discomfort with the crucifixion; however, this remains mere speculation for which there is little to no evidence. We can just as reasonably take Milton at his word—that he was not up to the task of writing about something so important to him, and that he included the attempt in his published poems to identify the importance of the Passion to his faith.

<sup>5</sup>Rogers claims that Milton was able, in *Paradise Regained*, “to narrate a Christian redemption, figured as the regaining of Paradise, that overlooked Crucifixion altogether” (189). But clearly the crucifixion appears in these lines, and Charles Huttar demonstrated three decades ago the presence of the Passion in Milton’s brief epic: “The Passion of Christ in *Paradise Regained*.” More recently, Russel M. Hillier has added depth to Huttar’s analysis in “The Wreath, the Rock and the Winepress: Passion Iconography in Milton’s *Paradise Regained*.”

<sup>6</sup>Rogers’ treatment of Patrides is odd, to say the least. He claims that Patrides was writing in opposition to the “earlier, more daring, opinion of E. M. W. Tillyard” that Milton subconsciously rejected his conscious belief in the Crucifixion as an atoning sacrifice (189-90). But Patrides neither addresses nor cites Tillyard, who is utterly absent from Patrides’ discourse. It appears to be Rogers who sets up the opposition, not Patrides. What makes this odd—especially Rogers’ rhetorical use of the word “daring” to laud the “heretical” Tillyard and discount the “orthodox” and “safe” Patrides—is that Patrides signals his own discomfort with substitutionary atonement theory, and seems to wish that Milton had shared this discomfort. After noting that this theory of atonement has been identified as “immoral,” Patrides writes, “We cannot be absolutely certain whether some such notion had not occurred to Milton as well; we can only suspect that it might have, principally because nearly every time God appears in *Paradise Lost* the poetry responds adversely, becoming flat, dull, monotonous” (141-42). Rogers ironically turns a friend into a foe: Patrides joins him in questioning the morality of substitutionary atonement

theory. But Patrides appropriately acknowledges that Milton nevertheless joined the majority of his contemporaries in embracing this belief.

<sup>7</sup>Jason Rosenblatt identifies Adam's sin in *Paradise Lost* as just such a sacrilege: "But Adam has transgressed a commandment divine rather than natural" (210). Rosenblatt's point is that Adam's logic in his long soliloquy in book 10, especially lines 794-98 and 801-08, fails because his premise is false—he speaks as if he had transgressed a "natural" command, not a "divine" command. Rosenblatt also observes that Adam is unaware of his allusion to Christ's atonement in 10.801-4: "Rigor / Satisf'd" echoes "rigid satisfaction" (3.212), or "Christ's satisfaction through torture and death" (213). Note Milton's repeated use of Anselm's term for atonement: satisfaction.

<sup>8</sup>David Urban points out that for orthodox Trinitarians a Son who does not enjoy "full deity" cannot "propitiate[e] the Father's holy wrath against sinful humanity"; an Arian Christ cannot "offer genuine forgiveness of sins" (235).

<sup>9</sup>Milton carries this argument forward, with emphatic repetition, for four pages.

<sup>10</sup>This is why the Father can offer the role/task of redeemer to all of the angels during the heavenly council in book 3. And this is why Adam could have offered himself to redeem Eve before his own fatal tasting of the forbidden fruit in book 9 of *Paradise Lost*. This is also crucial for understanding just what is accomplished in *Paradise Regained*. The brief epic does not present the redemption of humanity but what makes that redemption possible—again, why the angelic hymn ends with "now *begin* to save mankind" (*PR* 4.635). Paradise is a state of innocence, of utter, complete *obedience* to God's will. To regain Paradise is to regain this obedience, this state of innocence; only one who is innocent can offer the redeeming sacrifice demanded by God's justice. This is what Jesus does in resisting Satan's temptation: fully obedient to God's will in his humanity, he establishes an innocence that merits an effective atonement when he voluntarily offers himself in sacrifice. Because of this effective atoning sacrifice, believers like Milton are now free to obey God fully and attain this same Paradise—but this would not be possible without the sacrifice, without the crucifixion and resurrection.

<sup>11</sup>Here is yet another instance of the kind of chiasmus that Jeffrey Shoulson discovers in Milton's "understanding of the dialectical nature of accommodation, upward and downward, divine and human" (*Milton and the Rabbis* 188).

<sup>12</sup>See Joseph Wittreich, *Why Milton Matters*, and Peter C. Herman, *Destabilizing Milton*.

<sup>13</sup>Gerard S. Sloyan notes that by the time Paul offers what is allegedly the first written articulation of "the gospel" (1 Cor. 15:3), "[t]he center of gravity in the narrative has evidently shifted, some decades before, from the cruel manner of his death to the simple fact of death" (68). Paul's priority for Protestant reformers like Luther and Calvin is common knowledge, and he was of course prior in early Christian narrative, writing well before the completion and circulation of the canonical gospel narratives. Milton's own primary reliance on Paul for understanding Christ's atonement is evident in *De Doctrina Christiana*.

<sup>14</sup>For the most helpful discussion of Milton's relation to Socinianism, see Michael Lieb's chapter, "The Socinian Imperative," in his *Theological Milton*. Lieb notes Milton's hermeneutical affinities with Socinians while demonstrating Milton's doctrinal differences from them, especially with respect to atonement: "Milton endorses the doctrine of satisfaction throughout his poetry" (329).

<sup>15</sup>Poole recognizes the Anselmic tradition in Milton's atonement theory, but he does not discern the "penal-substitutionary" theory delineated by Patrides. The question he poses is the question Chaplin would have done better to answer in his own essay, but Chaplin's determination to force Milton's representation of the Son's sacrifice into the ethics of the Renaissance friendship tradition occludes Milton's clear commitment to penal-substitutionary atonement through Christ's crucifixion. Interestingly, for such a political thinker, Milton does not appear to ever politicize the crucifixion or atonement.

<sup>16</sup>As Douglas John Hall demonstrates, Paul's interest in Christ's suffering focuses primarily on its value as both model and consolation for his own suffering and the suffering experienced by many in the early church (138-39; Hall examines Rom. 5:1-5 and 2 Cor. 4:5-11). Shoulson is on to this when he examines the role of "suffering for truth's sake" in Milton's theology and practice, but he misunderstands the role of suffering in the believer's experience as in itself salvific (*Milton and the Rabbis* 221-27). Neither Milton nor Paul ever asserts this.

<sup>17</sup>I have summarized Tillich, 32-63. For some contemporary Christian attempts to understand atonement in our own cultural moment, see again Trelstad and Hall.

<sup>18</sup>Richard Strier offers another compelling possibility for Milton's apparent lack of a sense of guilt and condemnation in his superb essay, "Milton against Humility." However, he mistakes the role of human effort in effecting redemption, decontextualizing remarks from *De Doctrina Christiana* which, when re-contextualized, do not support his contentions regarding, "Christian soteriology" (269). First, Strier contends that "Milton holds that even in the post-lapsarian world, 'everyone is provided with a sufficient degree of innate reason to be able to resist evil desires *by his own effort*' (DDC 186; emphasis mine)" (269). While this is sufficient to establish the value and purchase of classical ethics, it does not refer to attaining redemption, unless Milton is blatantly contradicting himself in the same paragraph. Just a few lines *before* the passage cited by Strier, Milton asserts that "[o]ne thing may be established at the outset: although *all men are dead in sin* and children of wrath, nevertheless some are worse than others" (DDC 186, my emphasis). This preceding context clarifies that Milton is not referring to any effort to attain salvation. Similarly, when Strier asserts that "[s]alvation is not by faith alone—'our own effort is always required' (480)" (269), reading back to the page just before this remark reveals that Milton is talking about the *result* or *effect* of salvation, about the effort the already regenerate man must put forth to do good works—Strier has misconstrued Milton's point.

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