The Atonement in St. Mark's Gospel.

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J. P. Hickinbotham

The present unpopularity of the traditional Evangelical theory of the Atonement, that of Penal Substitution, and the tendency to dismiss it as something peculiar to St. Paul, makes it worth while to re-examine our oldest extant record of the life, teaching, and death of Jesus Christ, St. Mark's Gospel. If, as the writer holds, the theory underlying that Gospel is such as can only be rightly described in terms of penal substitution, then it is a theory which (while not necessarily the whole truth) cannot be discarded without unfaithfulness to the central tradition of the New Testament Church.

Before turning to St. Mark it will be convenient to summarise the principal characteristics of the theory of Penal Substitution, and its two chief rivals, the Moral theory of Dr. Rashdall, and the vicarious Penitence, or Representative, theory of Dr. Moberley. The penal theory has four essential features. (1) *It asserts that sin requires judgment*. Forgiveness is not possible on a basis of repentance alone: God's righteousness demands that His condemnation of sin be not only declared in word but actually put into effect. This is a necessity required by God's character: sin remains a fact even when the sinner has repented, and were God *simply* to ignore it, as He does ignore it when He forgives, He would be less than perfectly Holy. (2) *The judgment on sin must be death*. Sin is judged when the sinful organism is exposed to the direct action of God upon it: that action, since God is holy, must be "wrath", *i.e.,* complete antagonism. The effect of such antagonism must be a complete absence of well-being, which implies either annihilation or extreme torment. Since it is the whole personality, and particularly the soul or spirit, which is the seat of sin this "death", as it is called, affects the spiritual part of the sinner even more than his body. In the Bible bodily death is commonly regarded as the result of, and outward symbol of, this spiritual desolation. (*cp*. St. Paul's exegesis in Romans 5 and the conception of 'life' in St. John's Gospel). (3) *This judgment has been borne by Christ instead of sinners who are saved from it by faith in Him*. On the Cross Christ was identified with men not *qua* men but *qua* sinners: God judged our sins upon Him as though they were His, and therefore He need no longer treat us as sinners. Christ's death was therefore a spiritual desolation even more than a physical mortality; it was an acceptance of God's condemnation. We shall suffer bodily death, because our redemption is as yet only complete in the spiritual sphere (Rom. viii. 23), but it has been emptied of its significance as symbolic of spiritual death: Christ has borne that so that we may never bear it. (4) *This judgment was borne by Christ as Incarnate Son of God*. A transference of penalty by God from the guilty to a third innocent party would be a-moral if not immoral. Therefore, like St. Paul, we must stress the One Divine Person of Christ rather than His Human Nature: it was *God Himself* Who was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. It was, of course, necessary that God should be made man in order to identify Himself with sinners; but ultimately it is the Judge, not a third party, who pays the penalty which His own justice demands should be exacted.

A comparison of the alternative theories with these four characteristics will reveal their principal differences. The first point is denied alike by the Moral and the Representative theories. They hold that God can rightly forgive on a basis of repentance alone. But the Representative theory adds that repentance must be perfect, *i.e*., there must be a complete

abhorrence for sin, and that this is impossible for a sinner. By having sinned he has corrupted his nature, and given it a proclivity to sin which he cannot, by the power of that nature, cure. To the second point both theories would assent, with the proviso that only unrepented sin needs this judgment. Both, however, would deny the interpretation of Christ's death which is the third point. They are forced to do so by their denial of the necessity of judgment. The Moral Theory sees Christ's death as the culmination of a life of love to mankind: it is the supreme demonstration of God's forgiveness offered to men as they do their worst. Hence it stirs men to repentance and thus makes them forgivable. This is the Atonement. The Representative Theory treats Christ's Death rather as the culmination of a life of perfect obedience to God: Christ as Perfect Man offers to God that complete obedience and abhorrence for sin, even at the greatest cost, which is perfect repentance. Moreover, He is not a *man* but *Man*; and His offering is made on behalf of the human race which He sums up and represents. On the basis of this perfect repentance God can forgive the sinner who by faith identifies himself with Christ. Because he is one with Christ, Christ's offering can be regarded as his: it is what he would now offer if he could; it is what he will one day be able to offer as he becomes progressively like Christ in virtue of faith-union with Him. Thus in neither theory is made an identification of Christ with the sinner *qua* sinner; there is no taking of the sinner's place, no experience of God's condemnation. His death is the death of the perfectly Righteous One and therefore can only be a bodily death; spiritually He remains in perfect fellowship with the Father. He does not stand in the sinner's place, so that we may never stand there; He stands in His own place of perfect obedience and love, so that there we may join Him. In the Penal view, the Death of Christ is an experience from which we are saved; in the other views it is an experience with which we must identify ourselves. On the fourth point, the Moral Theory generally takes the same attitude as the Penal. It is the forgiving love of God which the Cross displays: therefore His Divine Person must be stressed. But the Representative Theory emphasises the Human Nature of Christ: it is as Representative of men, and therefore as Himself Man, that Christ offers His sacrifice of obedience to the Father. Certainly, only God Incarnate can be Perfect and Representative Man; but the emphasis is on the movement from penitent man to God not from God to sinful man.

We now turn to St. Mark's Gospel, to consider whether it exhibits the characteristics of the penal theory, or diverges from them along the lines of the other two. In doing so we shall remember that it is a Gospel, *i.e.*, a narrative of God's saving acts in history, not a doctrinal treatise. We shall not find a clear-cut theory: the theory must be deduced from the facts presented to us. But we shall also remember that it is a Gospel, not a biography; it is written with a theological and religious purpose; the facts are selected and narrated because they proclaim a theological and religious message; the writer does not intend us to treat them just as facts, still less to explain them away or separate the facts from his interpretation of them. Therefore we shall treat them seriously, and expect to find a doctrinal position emerging from them.

Four main characteristics, all of importance for our study, confront us in St. Mark's Gospel. (1) *Jesus is presented as a Divine Person.* The reality of His Human Nature is, of course, essential and it appears with a naive vividness. But it is something assumed and taken for granted: the emphasis is on His Divinity: the thought is not that "it behoved Him to be made in all things like unto His brethren" "but that *this* Man is different from all other men, the Messiah, the unique Son of God, Whose divinity is witnessed by the things which separate Him from other men, His acts and words of power. This is the theme of the first half of the Gospel (i. 1-viii. 30, with ix. 2-8, as an epilogue). We are confronted with it in the title "The

gospel of Jesus Christ *the Son of God*" (i. 1). It is clarified and developed in the Introduction (the Witness of the Fore-runner, and the Consecration of the Messiah, i. 2-13). The Messiah is heralded in the words of an Old Testament prophecy about Jehovah Himself "make ye ready the way of the Lord": the coming of Jehovah is fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, and the coming of the Messiah is fulfilled in the coming of—Jesus. That this is so is attested by God Himself: the Messiah is according to Scripture the dispenser of the Holy Spirit, so the Spirit descends as a dove on Jesus, and the voice of God Himself declares "Thou art My Beloved Son". There follows the Ministry of the Messiah in Galilee and its environs (i. 14-viii. 30). Through it all, drawing all the varied incidents into a real unity, runs one theme: the revelation of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God through His words and deeds of power. To this His works of healing, His exorcisms, His miraculous power over nature, His teaching with authority all bear witness. True, the majority do not read the signs aright: for Jesus deliberately avoids direct statements about Himself and speaks in parables 'That seeing they may not see'. Nor does He do the mighty works *in order* to reveal Himself: they are done rather through compassion and because evil cannot withstand the presence of the Son of God; but rightly understood they *are* signs of His Divinity and so the Evangelist intends his readers to understand them. Hence even among the most obtuse they cause "astonishment", "amazement", "fear"; hence the ascription to Him of supernatural powers, whether good or bad (John the Baptist risen from the dead, Elijah come again, Beelzebub). The demoniacs, as is natural to men supernaturally possessed, recognise Him from the first; and the section comes to its climax when the disciples get beyond their first awed question, "Who is this?" to the insight of faith: "Thou art the Christ." In the Epilogue God Himself confirms this verdict: Christ is seen in Divine glory, in the place of honour between Moses and Elijah, the supreme representatives of Law and Prophecy, both of which He fulfils; and the Voice comes again "This is My Beloved Son."

In the second half of the Gospel the theme changes to the Suffering of the Messiah; but Christ's Person is still viewed from the same angle. It is the Son of Man who suffers; but the Son of Man is a title of divinity rather than humanity, and the Sufferer is that same Son of Man Who will "come in the glory of His Father with the holy angels," Who will judge men, and award them eternal life or death according to their attitude not to God but to Himself. This section, also, reaches its climax in a human recognition of His Divinity, a recognition at the moment of His greatest humiliation: the centurion's "Truly this man was the Son of God." The recognition is once again confirmed by God Himself: on the third day He rose again. We have assumed that St. Mark gives to his typical titles for our Lord, 'Christ' 'Son of God', 'Son of Man', a maximum content, *i.e.*, that they imply the unique Representative and Agent of God enjoying a unique metaphysical relationship to Him, whatever their varying meanings in the O.T. and contemporary Judaism. That this is so is *a priori* likely, both because it is the customary usage of N.T. writers, and because of the tremendous supernatural character of the events connected with the holder of the titles. This is confirmed by further indications in the Gospel. The title Son of God is explained by the Voice from heaven 'my *beloved* Son", where αγαπητος has the connotation "unique" even more than "beloved," and by the parable of the Vineyard, in which our Lord compares Himself to the "yet one, a beloved (αγαπητος) son," as contrasted with the servants who symbolise the prophets. The title Christ implies, as we have seen, One to Whom prophecies about Jehovah can be rightly applied. The title "Son of Man," connected as it is with predictions of His coming in Divine glory, must be taken from Daniel 7, interpreted, as in the Book of Enoch, of a Divine Supernatural Being.

(2). The Messiah is presented as One Whose Mission it is to suffer.
The secondary theme of the first part of the Gospel, the growing conflict of the Messiah with the Jewish leaders, is a prelude to this. It becomes the dominant theme immediately after Peter's Confession. Three solemnly repeated predictions of the Passion, the journey to Jerusalem heavy with foreboding and sayings about self-abnegation, the anointing beforehand for burial, lead to the Passion Narrative which is the climax of the Gospel. The suffering is neither accident nor the inevitable result of circumstances, even that most significant circumstance the meeting of the Son of Man with sinful men. Rather *it is an essential characteristic of the Messiah:* that is implied by the fact that immediately after Peter's Confession, and as a commentary on his words "Thou art the Christ," Jesus begins to teach that He must suffer. Because the Messiah acts for God, His suffering is the direct will of God: it is a smiting of the Shepherd, not by men but by God: it is the Father's will that He should drink the cup. For the Messiah as God's Agent it is therefore a Divine theological necessity: "the Son of Man *must* suffer;" "the Son of Man goeth as it is written of Him"; "this is done that the Scriptures might be fulfilled." But for the Messiah as sharing the Divine Authority and Will it is a free choice, independent of men: He deliberately chooses to court death by going to Jerusalem, despite His disciples' forebodings; He challenges the authorities by the Triumphal Entry; at the Trial He makes a claim which must lead either to worship or to condemnation for blasphemy, and then keeps silence, refusing either to explain or defend Himself. Moreover, *the suffering is presented as an end in itself*. In the three Predictions it is linked with His future glory, which clearly has value in itself, not by the purposive 'in order that' but by the co-ordinating 'and.' There is no suggestion that it is the spirit in which He accepts the suffering that matters rather than the suffering itself: that the suffering is only the means whereby He may demonstrate in its fulness His forgiving love to men or His obedience to the Father. So in the Predictions it is always "the Son of Man must suffer," "they shall kill Him," not "the Son of Man must be obedient even to death," "He shall forgive even His murderers." So in the story of the Passion there is no reference to love, one only to obedience, and even there it is upon the fact of His actually drinking the cup of suffering rather than His obedient attitude that our attention is focussed. "Remove this cup from Me; nevertheless not what I will but what Thou wilt." The story of the Cross is told objectively, almost brutally: the scourging, crucifying, the reviling and mocking, the death of Jesus, these are the things stressed: and the only recorded Word of Jesus is that of intense suffering, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? "The Word of forgiving love, "Father, forgive them", and the Word of obedient trust in God, "into Thy hands I commend My spirit", are conspicuous by their absence.

(3). The Messiah's Suffering is Death, and Death in a more than physical sense. "The Son of Man must suffer . . . and be killed." Indeed His Death is itself the purpose of His Mission: "the Son of Man came . . . to give His life," and this is reflected in the structure of the book: after convincing us that Jesus is the Messiah, and then showing that the Messiah must suffer, we come to the climax—the story of the Cross. There are some hints which prepare us to interpret His Death as something more than physical. Since, as we have seen, physical death is often taken in the Bible as symbolic of spiritual desolation, it is not surprising to find the Evangelist treating it in this sense. Thus in the story of the Paralytic, disease, which is the beginning of death (cp. iii. 2,4), is taken as the outward sign of sin. "Life" is habitually used in this Gospel as a synonym for spiritual well-being, the membership of the Kingdom which is fellowship with God. Thus the attempt to save (physical) life is the way to lose (spiritual) life; the opposite of entering into life is something more than physical dissolution—it is being cast into hell fire. So Jesus refuses to admit that in the case of Jairus' daughter (a little child like those of whom He said "of such is the Kingdom

of God") death is a proper description of physical mortality: so, too, He refuses to describe as dead the patriarchs long since in their tombs: God is the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob; but "He is not the God of the dead but of the living." Were the death of Jesus merely a physical death we should expect it to be thought of in a confident and even joyous spirit, as a glad home-coming to the Father. This is the spirit in which many a Christian disciple, even many a pious Jew, has faced physical death and, even the most painful martyrdom: like St. Paul "they have the desire to depart. . . for it is very far better". How much more the perfect Son of God! Yet precisely the opposite is the case. The predictions of the Passion are charged with tragic tension, even with supernatural awe. Our Lord's repeated words have a solemn significance; they terrify and puzzle His disciples. "They understood not the saying and they were afraid to ask Him." They hang back in alarm and wonder: "Jesus was going before them and *they were amazed*, and they that followed *were afraid*." In the Garden of Gethsemane the tension deepens: it tears the heart of Jesus Himself in mysterious agony: "He began to be greatly amazed and sore troubled. And He saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death. And He fell on His face and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass from Him." Unless Jesus is less brave, less confident in God, than many a weak and sinful man, what He is facing here is not only physical death: we must interpret "death" in terms commensurate with the Agony which it caused to the Son of God. We are therefore prepared for the climax in which St. Mark puts beyond doubt the meaning of this death: the one recorded cry of Jesus from the Cross: "My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" We have already insisted on the impossibility of separating event and interpretation: unless we are to say that St. Mark is both a false historian and a false theologian we must accept both his facts and the meaning which he attaches to them; for history is events shewn in their true meaning, and historical theology, a Gospel, is events shewn in their true meaning which is seen to be their relationship to God and His purpose. Therefore, just as we are not free to explain away the nature miracles, or the raising of Jairus' daughter, as natural phenomena misunderstood, so we are bound to take the Cry of Dereliction as seriously as the Evangelist intends it to be taken. A cry so liable to misunderstanding would probably not be recorded at all, certainly would not be recorded in splendid isolation, unless it were charged with theological meaning. To dismiss it as the cry of a delirious man is to make it trivial: to argue that because it is the beginning of Psalm 22 which ends with a recovery of faith Jesus must have repeated the whole Psalm and experienced the suffering and the faith of the later verses but *not* the forsakenness of this verse, is to introduce unwarranted speculations which make the Evangelist, not to speak of Our Lord, mean precisely the opposite of what he says. It was *this* verse, and this verse only, that we are told Our Lord spoke: and He spoke it not at the beginning of the Hours of Darkness but at the end. We cannot doubt that St. Mark intends us to understand that the Three Hours of Darkness symbolise a real darkness in the soul of Jesus: a real consciousness of being forsaken by God which finds its expression in the Cry of Dereliction. It is this spiritual desolation which makes plain the significance of His Death.

(4). It is through this Death of the Messiah, and only so, that sins are forgiven. Contemporary Judaism thought of the Kingdom primarily as the reward of the righteous: the Baptist, and Jesus after him, revived Jeremiah's emphasis on forgiveness by making Repentance the condition of membership: for repentance presupposes sin, and sin implies the need of pardon. Now Repentance was possible for those who heeded John's preaching: but the assurance of forgiveness came only with Jesus. John's baptism was a baptism "of repentance unto, *i.e.*, with a view to, remission of sins," but the gift of the Spirit, the sign of the Kingdom, of fellowship with God, and therefore of forgiveness, depended on the One "who cometh after me." Jesus proclaims that His Mission is to sinners ("I came not to call the righteous but sinners," implying that all men *need* forgiveness); and He actually forgives

them. “The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins.” Yet this power is used surprisingly sparingly in His ministry: The reason becomes clear when, at the approach of the Passion, we learn that such pardons are, so to speak, proleptic, and that forgiveness depends upon His Death. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.” The references to ‘serving’ and ‘for many’ make it plain that this saying recalls Isaiah Iiii. 10-12 and that therefore it is from sin that His death ransoms men. The words at the Supper “This is My blood of the covenant which is shed for many” clinches the connection of His Death with forgiveness by a double O.T. reference: first, they again recall Isaiah Iiii; secondly, they announce the inauguration of a Covenant in which His blood shed is the sacrifice which puts it into effect just as the blood sprinkled on the altar and the people validated the Mosaic Covenant: the word “New” is not used, but obviously it is a new Covenant, not the Mosaic; and must refer to that foretold by Jeremiah, a Covenant based specifically on forgiveness, “I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more.” The new thing added by Jesus is that it requires His Death to bring that covenant of forgiveness into being. Finally, the rending of the Temple Veil at the moment of Christ’s Death means that from that point on there is free access into the Holy of Holies, the Presence of God: an access hitherto barred by sin.

These four themes make it impossible to hold that St. Mark presents us with a Moral or Representative view of the Atonement. Christ acts as a Divine Person, not as Representative Man; Christ suffers, and the sufferings are important in themselves not as the background against which love or obedience is displayed; Christ suffers a spiritual desolation which is unnecessary and indeed impossible if His Death is only the crowning act of love or obedience by One Who is perfectly loving and obedient and therefore in perfect union with God; and it is only through this Death that sin is forgiven, though some repentance at least is possible even before His Coming. But these four themes are perfectly consistent with the theory of penal substitution. That theory says, “In order that sin may be forgiven the Son of God must bear the spiritual death which is its penalty, instead of the sinner.” St. Mark says “Sins are forgiven because the Son of God has borne that spiritual death.” Two further links only are needed to complete the chain. First, that the desolation Christ suffered *was our penalty transferred to Him*. This can hardly be disputed, since the only alternatives are that it was a penalty due to nobody, which makes God arbitrary, or a penalty due to Christ which makes Him a sinner. St. Mark implies the transference of penalty by stressing the identification of Jesus Christ with men *qua* sinners, though not *qua* men. The acceptance of John’s baptism of repentance by Jesus is set in the forefront of the Gospel: it can only be interpreted as an identification of Jesus, Himself sinless, with His sinful people. The mission to sinners, and the stress on His habit of companying with them point in the same direction. The point is clinched by the two references to the Suffering Servant; whatever the contemporary Jewish view of sacrifice may have been (and there is reason to doubt the modern assumption that it always meant the symbolic offering by man of a perfect life rather than the acceptance by God of a substitutionary death), in Isaiah Iiii. it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that sins are forgiven through the Righteous Servant’s identification of Himself with sinners, and His substitutionary acceptance of the penalty due to them. The final link is *the necessity of this substitutionary penalty before God can forgive*. Here St. Mark goes no further than to say that God does forgive on the basis of the substitutionary penalty suffered by Christ, and only on that basis; and that it was His Will that Christ should suffer it. But to say more is needless: God does not will suffering unnecesssarily; the fact that He has willed to forgive in this way means that this is the way demanded by His Holy Love. The Evangelist tells us what God has done in Christ; it is from His acts in history that the character of God is known, and if the record of those acts shows that He sent His Son to bear the penalty of sin instead of us then

we must frame both our conception of God's character and our ethical theory upon that foundation.

J. P. HICKINBOTHAM