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Clement of Alexandria and penal substitutionary atonement

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Key Terms: Clement of Alexandria, the Cross, Penal Substitution

1. Introduction

In a recent edition of the *Evangelical Quarterly*, I defended the view that the 2nd century apologist Justin Martyr believed in penal substitutionary atonement.¹ I did so partly because of the tendency among some historians of the Christian doctrine of the atonement to assert that the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement was invented at the time of the Reformation, and partly because some of those who have written specifically about Justin Martyr's atonement theology have denied that he held this particular understanding of it.² In this article I hope to be able to demonstrate that this understanding of the atonement is also to be found in the writings of Clement of Alexandria.³

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- 1 P.W. Ensor, 'Justin Martyr and penal substitutionary atonement', *EQ* 83.3 (2011), 217–232.
 - 2 See n.1 of that article for references to those who have asserted that this understanding of the atonement originated at the time of the Reformation, and n.5 for references to those who have denied that Justin Martyr taught it.
 - 3 In this article the English text of Clement's works will be that of A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrikson Publishers Inc., 2004), vol. 2. For this reason I have retained ANF's title of the third work of Clement's great trilogy as *Stromata*, even though the Greek word Clement himself uses in transliterated form is *Stromateis*. Where his Greek words are cited, the Migne text is used. For general introductions to the life, works and theology of Clement of Alexandria see C. Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886); H. von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (London: A. and C. Black, 1963), ch.3; H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), ch.2; F.W. Farrer, *Lives of the Fathers* (London: A. and C. Black, 1907), 350–90; J. Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1974); T. R. Glover, *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire* (London: Methuen and co., 1909²), 262–304; F. R. M. Hitchcock, *Clement of Alexandria* (London: SPCK, 1899); H. Kraft, *Early Christian Thinkers* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964), 32–46; A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York and London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1932), vol. 1 ch.10; J. Patrick, *Clement of Alexandria* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1914); and R. B. Tollinton, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Liberalism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914) 2 vols.

The writings of Clement of Alexandria might seem, at first sight, to be an unlikely place in which to find this doctrine. There are at least four reasons why this is so:

(i) Atonement theology was clearly not among Clement's main areas of interest. His extant works are much more concerned with opposing pagan religion, setting out an understanding of Christian ethics, advocating a synthesis between Christian Faith and Greek philosophy, showing how his readers can become 'true Gnostics', and explaining the meaning of individual passages of Scripture. Clement makes only occasional passing references to the atoning work of Christ on the cross.

(ii) While Clement speaks of God as 'punishing' people for their sins, he never makes any explicit connection between this action and the work of Christ on the cross. God's 'punishments' are for him God's way of bringing sinners to repentance (a process which he regards as continuing even after death), so that thereby they might find pardon.⁴

(iii) Clement fails to mention some texts which have traditionally been seen as of key importance to the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement.⁵ Moreover, he sometimes fails to mention the cross of Christ when he might well have been expected to do so,⁶ and sometimes speaks of salvation in such a way as to suggest that atonement is not needed at all.⁷

(iv) Clement's writings are notoriously unsystematic. Despite his promise at the beginning of the second work of his trilogy that he will give teaching which will 'guide the soul to all requisite knowledge',⁸ the third work, the *Stromata*, as its

4 See especially *Protrepticus* 2, 9, 10, *Paedagogus* 1.8, 10, 3.8, *Stromata* 1.27, 2.15, 3.8, 18, 4.3, 12, 23, 24, 5.14, 6.6, 12, 7.3, 10, *Fragments*, Comments on the Epistle of Jude. Despite these references to 'punishment', in *Stromata* 7.16 Clement seems to want to correct himself by saying 'God does not punish, for punishment is retaliation for evil. He chastises, however, for good to those who are chastised, collectively and individually'. Similarly, in *Paedagogus* 1.8 Clement distinguishes carefully between 'punishment', on the one hand, and 'vengeance' and 'retribution' on the other. These passages help to explain what he means by 'punishment' in the other places where the word is found.

5 E.g. Rom. 3:25, 5:6-11; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Col. 2:13-15; 1 Tim. 2:6.

6 E.g. in *Paedagogus* 1.8, where he quotes Isa. 53.6, but interprets the verse to refer to Jesus' role as 'a corrector and reformer of our sins' rather than as a sin-bearer; and in his comment on 1 John 1.7, preserved in Cassiodorus' Latin translation, where the cleansing 'blood of Jesus' is said to represent his 'doctrine'.

7 E.g. in *Paedagogus* 3.7, where he quotes Prov. 13.8 'the true riches of the soul are a man's ransom', and comments 'that is, if he is rich, he will be saved by distributing it'; and in *Stromata* 6.14, where he speaks of 'punishments' ceasing in the after-life 'in the course of the completion of the expiation [ἐκτίσεως] and purification [ἀποκαθάρσεως] of each one'.

8 *Paedagogus* 1.1.

very name implies, turns out to be a disorganised patchwork of ideas rather than a systematic theology, and hardly fulfils this promise.⁹ In fact it is very difficult to establish exactly what Clement believed in many areas of doctrine, including his doctrine of the atonement.¹⁰

In view of these problems, it not surprising that Clement is not cited in a recent publication which illustrates the penal substitutionary understanding of the cross from the writings of the early church Fathers.¹¹ Nor is it surprising to find that scholars who give an account of Clement's teaching in general tend to skip over his teaching on the atonement. Some do not mention it at all.¹² Others give accounts which are wholly inadequate.¹³ Others again acknowledge that there are traces of an atonement theology which focuses on the cross, but fail to cite all the relevant evidence, give only a brief treatment of the evidence they do cite, and tend to minimise its importance.¹⁴ I know of only five authors who

- 9 H. von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* (London: A. and C. Black, 1963), 31, calls it 'a wide-ranging work really leading nowhere in particular'.
- 10 In *Stromata* 7.18 Clement even goes so far as to admit, with reference to that work, that 'the composition aims at concealment, on account of those that have the daring to pilfer and steal the ripe fruits'.
- 11 S. Jeffrey, M. Ovey, and A. Sach, (eds.), *Pierced for our Transgressions* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007). Consequently, the case of Clement is not treated in D. Flood's recent article 'Substitutionary atonement and the Church Fathers: A reply to the authors of *Pierced for Our Transgressions*' in *EQ* 82.2 (2010), 142-159, nor in G. J. Williams' subsequent response to Flood's article in 'Penal substitutionary atonement in the Church Fathers', *EQ* 83.3 (2011), 195-216.
- 12 Including H. von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, W. H. C. Frend *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), H. Kraft, *Early Christian Thinkers*, and A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*. It is also significant that J. F. Bethune-Baker in his book *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: Methuen and co., 1903) includes Clement's contribution to many doctrines, but leaves him out of his account of patristic teaching on the atonement, and that H. E. W. Turner in his book *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co., Ltd., 1952) mentions Clement in connection with Christ's role as teacher and as the one who grants incorruption, but makes no reference to Clement in connection with Christ's role as victor and victim.
- 13 J. S. Lidgett, *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (London: C. H. Kelly, 1898), 427, cites a single passage on the subject and concludes that Clement 'has no doctrine of Atonement, and, indeed, treats the death of Christ simply as the supreme example of a beneficial martyrdom', a judgment which is very wide of the mark, as this article will show. H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953³), 294, is similarly dismissive: 'He [Clement] regarded redemption as belonging to the sphere of the ethical will, and the effective power was the logos as the leader, and as the giver of spiritual gifts'. It is noticeable that Lietzmann does not speak of Clement's doctrine of redemption through the cross, despite the fact that there are many passages in Clement's writings which relate to this theme.
- 14 Scholars in this category include H. Cunliffe-Jones, (ed.), *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), 68; J. Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture: A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea*

express an awareness of the presence of a penal substitutionary understanding of the cross in Clement's writings.¹⁵

In the light of these general observations concerning Clement's works, and the tendency among modern scholars to minimize his atonement theology, give it scanty treatment, or ignore it altogether, we are justified in taking a fresh look at the evidence. As we shall see, there is more relevant material to review than the secondary sources cited suggest, material which reveals a rich understanding of the atoning work of Christ, including its penal substitutionary significance. We will therefore set out the evidence, summarize our findings, and comment on their relevance to the understanding of the meaning of the atoning work of Christ in the Church around the end of the 2nd century AD.

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- (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, ET 1973), vol.2, 183-86, who cites a few passages to illustrate Clement's belief in Jesus' victory over the demonic powers achieved by his death, but none of those passages which speak of Jesus' death as a ransom and a propitiation; R. S. Franks, *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ in its Ecclesiastical Development* (London etc.: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), 50-51, who admits that Clement repeats the Christian tradition of the sacrifice of Christ, but 'without any appropriation ... the Incarnate Logos is for us a teacher and an example only'; T. R. Glover, *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire*, cites only 3 passages; L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920), 26, who concludes a brief discussion by saying that Clement 'makes little allusion to the special meaning of the cross'; E. R. M. Hitchcock, *Clement of Alexandria*, 222-23, who omits to mention the crucially important evidence of *Quis Dives Salvetur*, and asserts that 'Clement regarded these benefits [of salvation] as coming to us from the Incarnation rather than from the Atonement of our Lord'; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968*) 183-84, who devotes less than one page to the subject, and concludes that 'Clement's soteriology issues in a Christ-mysticism in which the Lord's passion and death have little or no redemptive part to play'; B. J. Kidd, *History of the Christian Church to A.D. 461* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922) vol.1, 392-93, who says that Clement 'minimized the "reconciliation through his death"'; and H. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan and co. Ltd., 1919), 222-32, who says that Clement's references to the atoning work of Christ are 'always' intended to increase our sense of his goodness or to commend his example, because for Clement what we really need to escape sin is knowledge.
- 15 Both J. K. Mozley, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (London: Duckworth, 1915), 102, and R. B. Tollinton, *Clement of Alexandria*, vol.2.14, use the word 'vicarious' in this connection, but both cite only 2 passages which directly relate to the point, and neither explain what they mean by 'vicarious'. J. Patrick, *Clement of Alexandria*, 117-19, cites 11 passages, which he admits teach 'vicarious atonement', but he also says that Clement had 'an uncertain grasp of the sacrificial import of the work of Christ' (118); C. Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), 72-75, cites about 14 relevant passages and acknowledges that the forgiveness Christ procured for us through the cross included the 'cancelling of a penalty' (73 n2); and finally J. Rivière, *The Doctrine of the Atonement. A Historical Essay* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., Ltd., 1909, ET L. Cappadelta, 2 vols.), 154-57, cites nine relevant passages, and accepts that in *Quis Dives Salvetur* Clement 'lays stress on the substitutional character of the atonement' (156).

2. Clement of Alexandria's references to the cross

There are four extant works and a series of fragments which are attributed to Clement of Alexandria. We will note their references to the atoning work of Christ on the cross in the order in which they are given in the Ante-Nicene Fathers edition of his writings.

2.1 *The Protrepticus*

Clement's *Protrepticus*, written c.190, stands in the tradition of the Christian apologies of the 2nd century. It is an appeal to the educated polytheists of the time to abandon their traditional gods and listen to the one true God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ.

Clement devotes much of this work to the task of exposing the absurdities of pagan mythology, the cruelties of pagan sacrifices, and the idolatry and immorality of pagan religion in general (chs.1-4). He acknowledges that the writings of the philosophers and poets contain some truth, but argues that the truth they express comes partly from divine inspiration, and partly as a result of borrowing ideas from Jewish writings (chs.5-7). This leads to a string of quotations, mainly drawn from the Old Testament, by which Clement seeks to introduce his readers to the one true God. On this basis he encourages them to abandon their ancestral beliefs and customs, listen to God's voice, and respond to his call by repenting, believing, and receiving the salvation offered in Christ (chs.8-10). Already in ch.10 Christ is called 'the expiator of sin' ('expiator' translating καθάρσιος a word with sacrificial connotations).¹⁶ It is in the final two chapters of the work, however, that Clement explicitly connects the blessings of salvation with the work of Christ on the cross.

The first reference comes near the beginning of ch.11. The first man, Clement says, 'succumbed to pleasure' (the allegorical meaning which he gives here to the 'serpent') in paradise. By 'disobeying his Father' the man 'dishonoured God' and was 'fettered to sins'. Clement continues:

The Lord then wished to release him from his bonds, and clothing himself with flesh – O divine mystery! – vanquished the serpent, and enslaved the tyrant death; and, most marvellous of all, man that had been deceived by pleasure [ἡδονῆ], and bound fast by corruption [φθορᾶ], had his hands unloosed, and was set free. O mystic wonder! The Lord was laid low [κέκλιται], and man rose up; and he that fell from Paradise receives as the reward of obedience something greater ... – namely, heaven itself.

The 'laying low' of the Lord must surely include a reference to the cross. By his obedience to the Father, Clement says, Christ 'vanquished the serpent' (i.e., in this context, 'pleasure'), overcame death and thereby enabled man to be freed from corruption, rise up, and gain heaven. How this was achieved we are not told, but there can be no doubt from this passage that Clement saw the cross as

16 H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, (eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968⁹), 851a.

an essential means of human salvation.

Later in the same chapter we find the following words:

He ... through the cross brought death [θάνατον] to life; and having wrenched man from destruction [ἀπωλείας], He hath raised him to the skies, transplanting mortality into immortality [ἀφθαρσίαν], and translating earth to heaven.

The same type of blessings are mentioned here as in the previous passage, namely life, freedom from death, destruction, and corruption, and a heavenly inheritance.

Later still in ch.11 Clement uses a military metaphor to illustrate the work of Christ:

Shall not Christ ... gather together His own soldiers, the soldiers of peace? Well, by His blood, and by the word, He has gathered the bloodless host of peace, and assigned to them the kingdom of heaven.

It is noteworthy that Clement speaks of the 'blood' of Christ as being a necessary instrument, along with the 'word' of the gospel, in the creation of the Church, the 'bloodless' host of 'soldiers' who peacefully fight against the forces of evil. The blessings of salvation mentioned in this context as available through the cross are the blessings of peace and of the kingdom of heaven.

In ch.12 Clement uses two other images which refer to the cross in passing. Firstly, exhorting his readers to turn a deaf ear to the siren voices of pleasure as they sail through the sea of life (alluding to the experience of Odysseus in Homer's poem, the *Odyssey*), he assures them that 'bound to the wood of the cross, thou shalt be freed from destruction [φθορᾶς]'. Secondly, he addresses an imaginary old man among his readers and says to him 'I give thee the staff [ξύλον, 'wood', clearly alluding to the cross] on which to lean'.

In sum, the *Protrepticus* presents the cross of Christ as an essential element of the saving work of God in Christ. It confers on believers cleansing from sin, freedom from the 'serpent' of 'pleasure', and freedom from the power of death, destruction and corruption. Positively, it confers life and peace, and all the blessings of the (kingdom) of heaven. How the cross achieves these results is not, however, spelt out in this work.

2.2 *The Paedagogus*

This work, written c.190-95, is addressed primarily to new converts to Christianity and seeks to guide them in ethical matters.

In book 1, Clement introduces his readers to Christ as the perfect instructor, who can cure the passions of the soul and enable believers, who are described as his 'children', to attain Christian maturity. In books 2 and 3, he turns his attention to a host of practical matters, such as eating and drinking, dress and adornments, relationships between the sexes and behaviour in public places, and seeks to guide his readers to adopt appropriate ways of behaving in all these areas of life. His general approach in these matters is to avoid the extremes of moral laxity and asceticism, and to advocate moderation in all things.

It might seem that such a subject matter would not be conducive to references to the atoning work of Christ on the cross, but in fact there are several references to the subject, as we shall now see.

In book 1 ch.5, in the context of speaking of the incarnation, ‘the flesh by which He was manifested’, Clement draws a parallel between Christ and Isaac. Just as Isaac carried wood to the place of sacrifice, so Christ, the true sacrifice, ‘bore ... the wood of the cross’, and just as Isaac later ‘laughed’, so Christ has filled us with joy ‘who have been redeemed from corruption [ἐκ φθορᾶς λελυτρωμένους] by the blood of the Lord’. Later in the same chapter Clement twice calls Christ ‘the Lamb of God’, though it is his relative youth that he wishes to illustrate rather than the significance of his death.

In book 1 ch.6, in the context of speaking of the ‘milk’ of God’s Word, which nourishes the believer, Clement introduces John 6:55 (‘... my blood is drink indeed’) into his discussion, and traces connections between these words and similar words in Scripture and in ordinary life: ‘Thus in many ways the Word is figuratively described as meat, and flesh, and food, and bread, and blood, and milk’, he says. The blood of Christ particularly nourishes us through its salvific effects: ‘The Word Himself ... our nourisher, hath shed His own blood for us, to save [σώζων] humanity’; ‘We are brought into union [προσσκειώμεθα] with Christ, into relationship [συγγένειαν] through His blood, by which we are redeemed [λυτρούμεθα]’.

In book 1 ch.8, in the context of discussing the ways in which Christ intends good for us even when he rebukes us, Clement supports his argument by reminding his readers how ‘He Himself suffered for us, whom he might have destroyed [ἀπολέσαι] for our faults’. The cross is thus taken as a sign of his love. There is also a hint here that we are not destroyed precisely *because* Christ suffered for us, though Clement does not make this explicit. Similarly, later in the same chapter, Clement quotes Isa. 53:6: ‘The Lord has assigned [παρέδωκεν] Him to our sins’, but does not draw out an explicit reference to the atonement from this verse. While assuredly deducing Christ’s capacity to forgive our sins in this context, his main point is that Christ has been made ‘a corrector and reformer of sins’.

In book 1 ch.9, which continues the theme of the loving discipline of Christ, Clement once again refers to the cross as a sure sign of his love. He came ‘to give His life a ransom [λύτρον] for many’ (quoting Matt. 20:28 par.) ... he ‘gives for us the greatest of all gifts, His own life ... so good was He that He died for us’. Once again Clement does not explain how Christ’s death saves us, but there can be no doubt from passages such as this that he believed that it does.

In book 1 ch.11, Clement describes Jesus as the Son and Word of the Father, our divine Instructor, who is himself God and Creator, adorned with knowledge, benevolence and authority. His benevolence is demonstrated by the fact that ‘He alone gave Himself a sacrifice [ιερείον] for us: “For the good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep”’ (quoting John 10:11). Once again, Clement turns to the cross as the chief example of Christ’s love.

In book 2 ch.2, in his treatment of the subject of drinking, Clement meditates on the symbolism of wine. The ‘great cluster [of grapes] the Word’, he says, was

bruised for us. For the blood of the grape – that is, the Word – desired to be mixed with water, as His blood is mingled with salvation [σωτηριᾱ]. And the blood of the Lord is twofold. For there is the blood of his flesh, by which we are redeemed from corruption [τῆς φθορᾶς λελυτρῶμεθα]; and the spiritual, that by which we are anointed. And to drink the blood of Jesus, is to become partaker of the Lord's immortality [ἀφθαρσίας]; the Spirit being the energetic principle of the Word, as blood is of flesh.

Here again, in a passage which seems to have been influenced by a combination of Num. 13:23, Gen. 49:11, and John 6:53-58, 63, we find that the blessings which flow from the death of Christ (and which Clement regarded as made available through the sacrament of the Eucharist, as the context makes clear) include salvation and redemption from corruption (or immortality). Later on in the same chapter he recalls the Eucharistic words of Jesus: 'He blessed the wine, saying 'Take, drink: this is my blood ... shed for many for the remission of sins [εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν]' – the holy stream of gladness', thus adding forgiveness and joy to the blessings which flow from the cross.

In book 2 ch.8, in speaking about the use of ointments, Clement alludes to the ointment with which Christ was anointed prior to his passion and says that at the Last Supper 'the ointment breathed on them its fragrance, and the work of sweet savour reaching to all was proclaimed; for the passion of the Lord has filled us with sweet fragrance [εὐωδίᾱς], and the Hebrews with guilt'. He then goes on to cite 2 Cor. 2:14-16 in support of this allegorical interpretation.

Later in the same chapter, in the context of discussing the wearing of crowns, Clement alludes to the crown of thorns which Jesus wore in his 'sacred passion'. 'Him whom they crucified as a malefactor they crowned as a king', he says. This then becomes the occasion for further reflection on the meaning of the cross:

It is a symbol, too, of the Lord's successful work, He having borne [βαστάσαντος] on His head, the princely part of his body, all our iniquities by which we were pierced. For He by His own passion rescued [ῥυσάμενος] us from offences, and sins, and such like thorns; and having destroyed the devil, deservedly said in triumph, 'O Death, where is thy sting?'

The 'bearing' of sins may allude to Isa. 53:11, 12, Heb. 9:28 or 1 Pet. 2:24 and clearly carries sacrificial connotations. The final quotation clearly comes from 1 Cor. 15:55. The passage shows us that Clement believed that Christ through his death on the cross delivered us from our sins, and overcame the devil and death in the process.

Finally, in book 3 ch.12, there are two brief references to the cross, in which some key scriptures are quoted. Firstly, to back up his moral exhortations, Clement quotes 1 Pet. 1:17-19: 'we were ... redeemed [ἐλυτρώθημεν]¹⁷ ... with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot'. This is followed by a quotation of 1 Pet. 4:3, and the following comment on the sig-

17 This is the Greek word in the Migne text. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2.291b, like 1 Pet. 1.18, uses the second person at this point.

nificance of the cross: ‘We have as a limit the cross of the Lord, by which we are fenced and hedged about from our former sins. Therefore, being regenerated, let us fix ourselves on it in truth, and return to sobriety, and sanctify ourselves’. He clearly regards the cross as central to Christian living, and the means by which we are given new life and the ability to avoid falling back into past sinful practices.

Secondly, as part of his summing up the whole work, Clement quotes 1 John 2:2-6: “And He is the propitiation [ἰλασμός] for our sins”, as John says; Jesus, who heals [ὁ ἰώμενος] both our body and soul – which are the proper man. “And not for our sins only, but also for the whole world ...”. Clement does not elaborate on his understanding of the word ‘propitiation’, as used by the author of 1 John. There can be little doubt that he took it in a sacrificial sense, but whether he thought that the word connoted the removing of the defilement of sin,¹⁸ or both that and the averting of the wrath of God as the same time,¹⁹ he does not say. One specific result of Jesus’ self-sacrifice mentioned here, however, is the ‘healing’ of the whole person.

In sum, the *Paedagogus* gives us a yet richer understanding of the efficacy of the cross of Christ in Clement’s thought. It shows us that Clement believed that Christ loved us so much that he was willing to suffer and die for us, to be bruised for us, give his life and have his blood shed for us, as a ‘sacrifice’, a ‘sin bearer’, a ‘ransom for many’, a ‘lamb without blemish or spot’ and a ‘propitiation for our sins’. Through his death believers may find forgiveness, union with Christ, new life, healing, joy, a ‘sweet fragrance’, redemption from corruption, rescue from a life of sin, and deliverance from the power of the devil and the sting of death. In a word, they find salvation. Yet still Clement does not reveal explicitly how he thinks the cross procures these benefits for us. Very often he is content to quote scripture, or summarise the achievement of the cross, without elaborating his understanding of how exactly Christ, through the cross, made atonement for sin.

2.3 *The Stromata*

Written in c. 200-02, this work is the longest and, in many ways, the most important, of all Clement’s writings. It is aimed at those who are already well established in the Christian life, and is more doctrinal than the former two works, though all its 8 books lack a clear structure. Its chief significance lies in the fact that Clement seeks to steer a middle path between those who had a simple, traditional faith and shunned all association with Greek philosophy, on the one hand, and those ‘Gnostic’ Christians who, in their eagerness to syncretise Christianity with other streams of thought outside the Christian tradition, had fallen into heresy, on the other. Clement himself seeks to maintain a traditional faith, yet at the same time to incorporate what he deems to be good in Greek philoso-

18 As understood, e.g., by C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), 25-27.

19 As understood, e.g., by S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (Milton Keynes etc.: Word Publishing, 1991), 38-40.

phy. In the process he encourages ordinary Christians to become ‘true Gnostics’, and so gain a deeper appreciation of God’s self-revelation through his Word, wherever that revelation may be found, a closer fellowship with God himself, and a greater conformity to his character.

Once again, Christ’s atoning work does not take centre stage in this work, but there are nevertheless several occasional references to the cross which will now be noted:

In book 1 ch.18, Clement, having commended what is positive about Greek philosophy, illustrates its inadequacy by quoting Paul’s words from 1 Cor.1:

‘... we preach Jesus Christ crucified; to the Jews a stumbling-block,’ because, though knowing prophecy, they did not believe the event: ‘to the Greeks, foolishness;’ for those who in their own estimation are wise, consider it fabulous that the Son of God should speak by man and that God should have a Son, and especially that that Son should have suffered ... ‘But to them who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God, and the wisdom of God.’

This passage well illustrates the fact that, for all Clement’s appreciation of value of Greek thought, he was still committed to the heart of the gospel as traditionally conceived.

In book 1 ch.24, Clement is meditating on the significance of the pillar of fire by which, according to Exodus, God led the Israelites through the desert at night (Exod. 13:21-22; 40:38). In this context he finds a symbolical reference to Jesus and the cross:

Well, then, that fire like a pillar, and the fire in the desert, is the symbol of the holy light which passed through from earth and returned again to heaven, by the wood [ξύλον], by which also the gift of intellectual vision [τὸ βλέπειν ... νοητῶς] was bestowed on us.

For Clement the fire represents Jesus, who returned to heaven at the end of his earthly life by means of the cross. Here he adds an effect of the cross which we have not yet met, but which suits Clement’s thesis in the *Stromata* regarding the value of philosophy, namely ‘the gift of intellectual vision’, though he does not elaborate on what precisely this means,²⁰ nor on how it is achieved.

In book 1 ch.26, Clement quotes John 10:11: ‘The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep’. In the context he is talking about the virtues of Moses as a legislator, leader and ‘shepherd’ for the people of Israel, and he introduces this text as an illustration of the care of a shepherd, though, of course, its primary reference is to the self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

In book 2 ch.15, Clement speaks about the voluntary nature of sins, and in this context quotes Isa. 53:5: ‘By his stripes we were healed [ἰάθημεν]’. The par-

20 The word νοητός in Clement’s thought can refer to spiritual as well as intellectual qualities. Cf. G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 917a.

ticular 'healing' he has in mind seems to be that of freedom from the dominion of sins, since this quotation follows a quotation of Rom. 6:14, but very shortly after Clement also refers to forgiveness as offered to those who are 'chosen by God through Jesus Christ our Lord'.

In book 3 ch.4, in the context of a discussion of sexual purity, Clement quotes Eph. 5:1-4, which contains the words 'live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up [παρέδωκεν ἑαυτὸν] up for us, a fragrant offering [προσφορὰν ... εἰς ὄσμην] and sacrifice [θυσίαν] to God'. Shortly afterwards, he quotes 1 John 1:6-7, which contains the words 'if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses [καθαρίζει] us from all sin.' Clement does not expound these texts, but his quotation of them clearly shows that he regarded the work of Christ on the cross as both a source of cleansing and an example of love which we are called to imitate.

In book 4 ch.17, Clement quotes from the letter written to the Corinthians by his Roman namesake, in which Clement of Rome speaks of Jesus as one 'whose blood was consecrated [ἡγιασθη] for us'. Clement of Rome had actually used the word ἐδόθη (given), but Clement of Alexandria changes it to ἡγιασθη, perhaps under the influence of John 17:19.

In book 5 there are some passing references to the cross: in ch.5 in a quotation of 1 Cor. 2:8 – 'had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory'; in ch.10 in a quotation of 1 Cor. 5:7 – 'Christ our passover was sacrificed [ἐτύθη] for us', followed by the comment 'a sacrifice hard to procure [ἄπορον ... θῦμα], in truth, the Son of God consecrated for us'; and in ch.11 in the words 'a whole burnt-offering [λόκοάρπωμα] and rare sacrifice [ἄπορον θῦμα] for us is Christ'. Otherwise there is this passage in ch.14:

Plato, all but predicting the economy [οἰκονομίαν] of salvation, says ...
"Thus he who is constituted just shall be scourged, shall be stretched on the rack, shall be bound, have his eyes put out; and at last, having suffered all evils, shall be crucified."

It is interesting to note that Clement implicitly describes the work of Christ on the cross as the 'economy' (plan or dispensation) 'of salvation'.

In book 6 ch.15, Clement writes of the evangelistic task in the following terms:

the whole economy which prophesied of the Lord appears indeed a parable to those who know not the truth, when one speaks and the rest hear that the Son of God – of Him who made the universe – assumed flesh, and was conceived in the virgin's womb (as His material body was produced), and subsequently, as was the case, suffered and rose again, being "to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness," as the apostle says. But on the Scriptures being opened up, and declaring the truth to those who have ears, they proclaim the very suffering endured by the flesh, which the Lord assumed, to be "the power and wisdom of God."

As can be seen once again from this passage, Clement clearly regards the cross of Christ as central to the message which needs to be communicated to unbelievers for their salvation.

In book 7 ch.3, Clement is explaining why Christians do not offer sacrifices: We rightly do not sacrifice to God, who, needing nothing, supplies all men with all things; but we glorify Him who gave Himself in sacrifice for us, we also sacrificing ourselves ... For in our salvation alone God delights.

Clement appears to mean that the supreme sacrifice of Christ makes all other sacrifices redundant. He did what we cannot do for ourselves, and the believer's sacrificing of himself to God is a response of gratitude rather than an attempt to win God's favour. Clement clearly regards the sacrifice of Christ himself as necessary for our salvation.

In sum, the *Stromata* uses some of the language we have already met in describing the meaning of the cross: Christ gave his life as a sacrifice that we might be cleansed and healed. But it also introduces new terms. Christ crucified is described as the 'power and wisdom of God', the 'passover', a 'whole burnt offering', who, by his death, gives us 'intellectual vision', and sets us an example to follow. Moreover the work of Christ on the cross is implicitly described as central to God's plan of salvation. Once again, however, Clement does not elaborate his doctrine of the atonement.

2.4 *The Fragments*

The fragments of Clement are found in various works, including the mostly lost work of Clement known as the *Hypotyposes*. The fragments contain some references to Christ's atoning work, though none which give an explanation of his understanding of the atonement. They may be listed as follows.

In comments on 1 Peter preserved in Cassiodorus' Latin translation, Clement quotes 1 Pet. 1:19 – 'By precious blood ... as of a lamb without blemish and without spot' – and 3:18 – 'Christ ... hath once suffered for our sins, the just for the unjust, that he might present us to God'. In comments on 1 John preserved in the same source, there are several quotations: 1:7, 'And the blood of Jesus Christ His Son ... cleanses us' (though his blood is interpreted here as referring to his 'doctrine'); 2:2, the Lord is the 'propitiator ... for the whole world' (the comment says that he 'saves all' though some have to be saved by 'punishments', i.e. brought to repentance by experiencing the consequences of their misdeeds, while others 'follow voluntarily'); 3:16, 'He Himself laid down His life for us'; and 5:6, 8, 'He ... came by water and blood ... For there are three that bear witness, the spirit ... and the water ... and the blood' (though here again 'the blood' in v.8 is interpreted to mean 'knowledge').

In comments on the Passover preserved in the Paschal Chronicle, Christ is described as 'the Passover, the Lamb of God, led as a sheep to the slaughter' (an allusion to Isa. 53:7) ... 'our Saviour suffered, He who was the Passover, propitiously sacrificed [καλιερευθεις] by the Jews'.

In comments on the parable of the prodigal son preserved in the works of Macarius Chrysocephalus, the reference to the 'fatted calf' prompts Clement to see an allegorical allusion to our spiritual food which is 'the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world' (John 1:29) and who 'was led as a sheep to the

slaughter' (Isa. 53:7) ... for 'He is both flesh and bread, and has given Himself as both to us to be eaten'.

Apart from the quotations of 1 Pet. 3:18, 1 John 3:16, 5:6, 8, and the allusion to Isa. 53:7, there is nothing here which we have not met already in Clement's writings.

2.5 *Quis Dives Salvetur?*

This homily on the story of the rich young ruler was written some time after the *Stromata* (cf. Strom. 4.1, *Quis Dives* 26.8), and advocates the view that it is the love, not the possession, of riches which is evil. Clement thus rejects the ascetic ideal and instead commends the principles of moderation and good stewardship of what God has entrusted to us.

Once again the theme of atonement through the cross of Christ is not central to this short work, but it nevertheless appears from time to time, and is unfolded in a clearer way than in the works already surveyed, as we shall now see.

In the first reference to the cross in section 8, Clement argues that the Law of Moses was not sufficient to confer eternal life. Otherwise, the Saviour would not have 'come and suffered for us, accomplishing the course of human life from His birth to His cross'. We learn, then, from this that for Clement the cross of Christ was necessary for us to receive eternal life.

In section 23 there is a remarkable passage in which Clement pictures Christ as saying the following:

I regenerated thee ... I emancipated [ἠλευθέρωσα], healed [ἰασάμην], ransomed [ἐλυτρῶσάμην] thee. I will show thee the face of the good Father God ... I will bring thee to a rest of ineffable and unutterable blessings, which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of men ... I am He who feeds thee, giving Myself as bread, of which he who has tasted experiences death no more, and supplying day by day the drink of immortality [ἀθανασίας]... For thee I contended with Death, and paid thy death [τὸν σὸν ἐξέτισα θάνατον], which thou owedst [ὄφειλες] for thy former sins and thy unbelief towards God.

This passage is remarkable not merely because of the catalogue of blessings which are described as coming from Christ, but also because there is a clearly substitutionary element in Clement's exposition of the meaning of the atonement brought about through the cross of Christ. He pictures sinners as 'owing death', i.e. as deserving to die, or as being liable to death, on account of their sins. But Jesus is presented as saying that he had assumed that liability, and had paid their debt by means of his own death, with the result that they might enjoy eternal life instead. In other words, Jesus endured that death which sinners deserved to endure, so that they might be freed from death and have life instead. Since death is treated as a penal consequence of sin, Clement's picture at this point may be said to express a penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement, providing the ground for the other blessings flowing from the cross about which we have learnt from Clement's other writings.

In sections 33 and 34 there is a beautiful description of believers, no matter how destitute in terms of this world's goods, being indwelt by (33) 'the hidden Father, and His Son, who died for us and rose with us' and (34) a treasure in an earthen vessel ... protected ... by the power of God the Father, and the blood of God the Son, and the dew of the Holy Spirit'.

Section 37 contains another description of God's work of salvation in Christ, all motivated by love:

For this also He came down. For this He clothed Himself with man. For this He voluntarily subjected Himself to the experiences of men, that by bringing Himself to the measure of our weakness whom He loved, He might correspondingly bring us to the measure of his own strength. And about to be offered up and giving Himself a ransom [λύτρον], He left for us a new Covenant-testament: My love I give unto you. And what and how great is it? For each He gave His life, – the equivalent [την ἀντάξιαν] for all.

Clement goes on to show that we are called to love others as Christ loved us, but of course there was something unique about the death of Christ, in that through the ransom price that was paid in the giving of his life for us in death on the cross, which was sufficient for all, we have been set free. The use of the word translated 'equivalent' again suggests that the idea of 'ransoming' for Clement does not just include the idea being set free, but also the idea of being set free by the payment of a price, the price being both necessary and sufficient to secure our release. He never develops the image further by suggesting that the ransom price was paid to the devil, an idea which was to have a long history in the exposition of the doctrine of the atonement in the patristic era, but he does develop the image far enough to imply a substitutionary theory of the atonement. Christ's death was 'equivalent' to the death of us all. Because he died, we do not. He died for us, on our behalf and in our place.²¹

In section 39 Clement describes true repentance as not being 'bound in the same sins for which He [God] denounced [κατέγνων] death against Himself, but to eradicate them completely from the soul.' Here we are given a rare insight into Clement's understanding of the atonement. The word καταγγιγνώσκω has strong legal connotations and can mean 'lay a charge against', 'pronounce a verdict against', or 'give a judgment, or sentence, against'.²² What he seems to be saying, therefore, is that God condemned our sins, but instead of requiring us to endure that condemnation ourselves, took it upon himself and endured that

21 Of course, believers still experience physical death, but for Clement ἀφθαρσία means the possession of a life which physical death cannot destroy and which assures us of something better than physical life, namely resurrection life in the world to come.

22 Liddell and Scott, 886b, cf. W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000³, ed. F. W. Danker), 515b, 'condemn, convict'; E. A. Sophocles, *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 634b, 'charge, accuse'. The verb is not cited in Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*.

death which is the penalty for sin. A penal substitutionary understanding of the cross here satisfies Clement's language more than any other.

Finally, in section 42, Clement tells the story of John the apostle after his release from Patmos entrusting a young man into the hands of a local presbyter who reared, kept, cherished and baptized him. In the course of time the youth fell into bad company, drifted away from the Christian life, and began to engage in criminal activities. Some time later John returned and enquired after the man. On learning about his fall from grace, he went after him, found him and pleaded with him to turn back to Christ. 'I will give account to Christ for thee [ἐγὼ Χριστῷ δῶσω λόγον ὑπὲρ σοῦ]', he says. 'If need be, I will willingly endure thy death [τὸν σὸν θάνατον ἐκὼν ὑπομενῶ], as the Lord did death for us. For thee I will surrender my life'. On hearing this, the young man repents and is forgiven. What concerns us here is not the story's historicity or teaching on forgiveness, but the fact that, in telling the story, Clement is implying that, just as John offered to 'endure' the young man's 'death' for him so that he might not have to die himself, but be restored and forgiven, so Christ actually died for us so that we might not 'die', but rather be restored and forgiven. That is to say, he died in our place, that we might live. The penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement surely best expresses Clement's thought at this point.

In sum, therefore, *Quis Dives Salvetur?*, apart from echoing themes we have already met in his other works, brings out what they lack, a penal substitutionary understanding of the death of Christ which gives a satisfactory explanation of the ground of all the blessings which flow from the cross which Clement mentions elsewhere. We may speculate on why he does not mention this understanding in his other works, but it can scarcely be denied that it is present in this his latest extant work. Moreover the story recounted in section 42 must have reached Clement through 2nd century sources, whether written or oral, revealing that this understanding of the atonement was not his alone.

3. Conclusion

At the beginning of this article I mentioned four features of Clement of Alexandria's writings which seem to militate against any hope of finding a doctrine of atonement through the cross of Christ expressed in terms of penal substitution. Now that we have reviewed the evidence for such a doctrine in Clement's works, it is time to revisit those features and show how they should be understood in the light of the evidence.

(i) It remains the case that Clement places much greater emphasis on Christ as our teacher, guide and example than as our sin bearer, sacrificial lamb, ransom and propitiation, but the former aspect of Christ's ministry does not entirely squeeze out the latter in Clement's thought. As we have seen over and over again, Clement affirms that the cross of Christ plays an indispensable role in our salvation and that through what he did on the cross we have life, peace, joy, healing, vision, union with Christ, cleansing from sin, victory over Satan, and freedom from death, destruction and corruption. It is quite remarkable how such refer-

ences to Christ's atoning work through the cross crop up in contexts which deal with other subjects, as if it constantly lay at the back of his mind, ready to be brought forward when the opportunity presented itself. In the light of the evidence presented above, the view that Clement assigned no salvific value to the cross at all,²³ or that he did not 'appropriate' the Christian tradition of the sacrifice of Christ,²⁴ must surely be rejected.

(ii) It remains the case that Clement speaks often about God's 'punishment' of sin, but never connects the word with the cross of Christ. However, we need to see that in this area Clement actually reflects the teaching of the New Testament itself. Almost invariably, when Clement use the word 'punishment', which he carefully distinguishes from words such as 'vengeance' and 'retribution',²⁵ he is referring to the painful methods God sometimes uses to bring people (whether believers or unbelievers) to repentance, and thereby to faith and forgiveness, an idea for which there are New Testament parallels (see Heb. 12:3-11 for the case of believers, and Rev. 9:20-21, 16:8-11 for the case of unbelievers). Moreover the New Testament does not use the word 'punishment' in relation to the cross, even though it implies, as Clement does, that Christ through his death saved us from the penal consequences of our sins.

(iii) It remains the case that Clement fails to use verses which have traditionally been used to support the penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement, that he sometimes fails to mention the cross when he might have been expected to do so, and that sometimes he speaks as if salvation is by works. We can only speculate regarding the reasons which might lie behind the first two observations. The third at most concerns rare cases of apparent inconsistency. But there can be no doubt that Clement firmly believed in salvation by grace through faith,²⁶ that the cross of Christ is necessary for salvation (along with his work as teacher and enabler), and that the penal substitutionary understanding of the cross as the rationale for its salvific effects is clearly spelt out in *Quis Dives Salvetur?*²⁷

(iv) It remains the case that Clement's teaching is unsystematic and, in places, obscure, but we need to remind ourselves that he had his own special insights into the truths of Scripture concerning the saving work of Christ which he wanted to share with his contemporaries, that he had his own reasons for presenting his material in the way he does, and that he wrote what he did without the benefit of knowing, as we do, the next 1800 years of Christian reflection on the doctrine of the atonement. Given these conditions, it is remarkable that we have as clear a picture as we do in his writings of the significance of the atoning work

23 The view of J. S. Lidgett and H. Lietzmann, as cited in n.12 above.

24 The view of R. S. Franks, as cited in n. 13 above.

25 For which see n. 3 above.

26 In addition to passages already cited, see especially *Paedagogus* 1.6, *Stromata* 2.2-4, 12, 4.25, 5.1, 6.6, 14, and 7.2.

27 A point which is missed by all the scholars mentioned in n.13 above.

of Christ on the cross. Certainly at some points, Clement seems to use the 'conventional phrases' of his time,²⁸ but at other times his teaching seems to express a more personal and heartfelt conviction. Moreover his use of the story of the apostle John in *Quis Dives Salvetur* 42 shows that he was not alone in holding a belief in the penal substitutionary significance of Christ's self-sacrifice. Clement's writings, along with Justin Martyr's, bear witness to the presence of this particular understanding of the cross in the post-apostolic Church.

Abstract

The article analyses Clement of Alexandria's doctrine of the atonement, with special reference to the question whether it expresses a penal substitutionary understanding. Following mention of the problems associated with the task, and a survey of modern scholarship on the subject, the article identifies and comments on the relevant passages from Clement's extant works, and concludes that, while Clement's main theological interests lie elsewhere, there is clear evidence in his works for a penal substitutionary understanding of the atoning work of Christ on the cross. This evidence strengthens the view that this particular understanding of the cross was widely held in the Church during the post-apostolic period.

28 As J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968⁴), 183-84, puts it.

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