

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Tertullian and penal substitutionary atonement

Peter Ensor

Dr Ensor is a Senior Lecturer at the Kenya Methodist University.

Keywords: Cross, Penal Substitution, Tertullian.

I. Introduction

In two recent articles I argued that the penal substitutionary understanding of Christ's atoning work on the cross was present in the post-apostolic Church, as evidenced by the works of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria.¹ In this article I propose to strengthen this argument still further by examining references to the cross in the writings of the first great Church Father who wrote in Latin, Tertullian, and by arguing that he also held this view.²

As with other Fathers of his time, Tertullian did not write books on the cross of Christ or the meaning of the atonement. His thoughts were taken up with more pressing matters, such as his dialogue with pagan despisers and persecutors of the Church, his critique of Judaism, his battles with various types of Gnostic teaching, such as those of Marcion, Hermogenes, and the Valentinians, his crystallisation of the doctrine of the Trinity in opposition to the teaching of Praxeas, and matters to do with Christian behaviour, in which he showed increasingly Montanist leanings towards the end of his life. There are no less than 31 extant treatises altogether which deal with these issues.

Nevertheless, despite these more immediate concerns, Tertullian, like Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, found that he could not avoid talking about

1 'Justin Martyr and penal substitutionary atonement' in *EQ* 83.3 (2011), 217–32; 'Clement of Alexandria and penal substitutionary atonement' in *EQ* 85.1 (2013), 19–35. This article was written in response to the assertion that this particular understanding of the cross was not held prior to the Reformation, for which references may be found in *EQ* 83.3, 217, n1.

2 For general introductions to the life and thought of Tertullian, see especially T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, revised); G. D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); F. W. Farrar, *Lives of the Fathers* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889), vol. 1, ch. 5; T. R. Glover, *The Conflict of Religions in the Early Roman Empire* (London: Methuen and Co., 1909), ch. 10; J. Lebreton and J. Zeiller, *The History of the Primitive Church* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1946), vol. 3, 663–89; J. Morgan, *The Importance of Tertullian in the Development of Christian Dogma* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1928); E. Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997); R. E. Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian* (London: Epworth, 1924); H. von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Latin Church* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1964), ch. 1.

the cross, because he regarded it, as Justin Martyr did, as a central element of the faith which he had received, and which he professed. In the death of Christ, Tertullian says, 'lies the whole weight and fruit of the Christian name... [it is] the very foundation of the gospel'.³ Indeed, he claims, Christ came to the earth for the very purpose of being crucified.⁴ It is in conformity with this belief in the centrality of the cross of Christ for the Christian faith that Tertullian always includes a reference to Jesus's crucifixion in his statements of the Christian 'Rule of Faith'.⁵

Tertullian has not been well served by modern scholarship in this area of his thought. Some treatments of early church doctrine fail even to mention Tertullian's doctrine of the cross,⁶ while others are cursory in the extreme.⁷ A few have

-
- 3 *Against Marcion*, 3.8. All quotations are taken from the ANF text. Where Tertullian's original Latin words are given they are taken from the *Corpus Christianum, Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954).
 - 4 *Of Patience*, 3. Cf. Christ was 'sent to die' in *On the Flesh of Christ*, 6; and he was born 'that he might die' in *Against Marcion*, 3.9. H. Rashdall (*The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* [London: Macmillan and Co., 1919], 249–50) remarks that Tertullian was perhaps the first Christian writer to represent the death of Christ as the chief purpose of his coming.
 - 5 *The Prescription Against Heretics*, 13; *Against Praxeas*, 2; *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 1.
 - 6 E.g. F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: G. Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1960); J. Daniélou and H. Marrou, *The First Six Hundred Years* (London: DLT, 1964); Glover, *Conflict of Religions*; H. Lietzmann, *The Founding of the Universal Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1953³); A. C. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought, vol. 2: The West, from Tertullian to Erasmus* (New York and London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1933); von Campenhausen, *Fathers of the Latin Church*, ch.1.
 - 7 None of the following devote more than a few pages at most to Tertullian's doctrine of atonement through the cross of Christ: A. D'Alès, *La Théologie de Tertullien* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne and Co., 1905³); G. Aulén, *Christus Victor* (London: SPCK, 1931), 54, 97; J. F. Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1903), 333; H. Cunliffe-Jones (ed.), *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1978), 60–61; G. P. Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1896), 92–93; R. S. Franks, *The Work of Christ: A Historical Study of Christian Doctrine* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1962), 76–77; L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester University Press, 1919), 28–30, which includes the extraordinary statement that 'It is only in the reply to Marcion and in the short treatise "Against the Jews", amid all his voluminous works, that there is any very definite reference to the passion of Christ', 28, an assertion which will be amply refuted in this article; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968⁴), 177; B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church to AD 461, vol.1: to AD 313* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 331; J. S. Lidgett, *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (London: Epworth, 1907⁴), 428; J. K. Mozley, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (London: Duckworth, 1915), 118–19; H. N. Oxenham, *The Catholic Doctrine of the Atonement: An Historical Enquiry into its Development* (London: Longman, Green, and Roberts, 1865), 25; J.-M. Prieur, *La Croix chez les Pères* (Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2006), 163–67; H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co. Ltd., 1952) 54–55, 102–04.

written more,⁸ but even they fail to mention all the relevant evidence and consequently reach inadequate and unsatisfactory conclusions, as will be shown in this article.

An analysis of the secondary literature reveals that there is a general agreement that Tertullian saw the cross of Christ as (1) a sign that Christ's flesh was real (as opposed to Marcion's docetism), (2) a fulfilment of Old Testament Prophecy, (3) a work of recapitulation (in the Irenaeus sense), and (4) a work of redemption. These points are uncontroversial and will be confirmed in the evidence to be presented below. However, there is no agreement over the question whether the cross of Christ in Tertullian's thought was also a work of penal substitutionary atonement.⁹ This division of opinion provides an extra reason for a fresh examination of the evidence.

-
- 8 E.g. R. Braun, *Deus Christianorum: Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullian* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977²), 500–23; Morgan, *Importance of Tertullian*, 112–13, 145, 158–9; Rashdall, *Idea of Atonement*, 249–54; J. Rivière, *The Doctrine of the Atonement: A Historical Essay* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co. Ltd., 1909), vol.1, 251–55, Roberts, *Theology of Tertullian*, 175–82.
- 9 On the one hand, Rashdall (*Idea of Atonement*, 251) says of Tertullian's teaching in this area: 'The death of Christ is now practically treated as a punishment borne by the innocent for the guilty ... the idea of substitution is usually expressed in language borrowed from the Old Testament or from St. Paul'; G. Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979), 88, says that 'Tertullian saw no objection to penal substitution' (though he also says that 'he did not accept that it was a complete satisfaction'); Kelly (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 331) more cautiously, says of Tertullian's statements on the atoning work of Christ that they 'may well contain the germ of a doctrine of substitution'; Rivière (*Doctrine of the Atonement*, 1.251) similarly says that Tertullian's words 'hint at, if indeed they do not express, the idea of substitution'; K. Wölfl (*Das Heilswirken Gottes durch den Sohn nach Tertullian* [Rome: Gregorian University, 1960], 252) implies this understanding when he writes: 'Gott wollte Genugtuung', and quotes with approval the words of K. Adam in n42: 'Tertullian [bestimmte] den Tod Jesus als satisfaction gegenüber der göttlichen Gerechtigkeit'. On the other hand, Lidgett (*Spiritual Principle*, 428) says that Tertullian's writings 'contain no attempt to explain the death of Christ' and that his use of the word 'satisfaction' for human penance 'rules out the idea of Christ making satisfaction to God by his death'; similarly Roberts (*Theology of Tertullian*, 182) regards the same usage as 'incompatible with the conception of vicarious satisfaction of the divine justice by Christ'; Braun (*Deus Christianorum*, 510), Oxenham (*Doctrine of the Atonement*, 25) and A. Viciano ('Grundzüge der Soteriologie Tertullians' in *Theologie und Glaube*, [79] 1989, 147–61) also find no 'juridical' theories in Tertullian's atonement theology. Tertullian, says Viciano ('Grundzüge', 155), 'behauptet auch nicht, nicht einmal als Andeutung, dass Christus stellvertretend für die Sünder gestorben ist, indem er deren Sünden auf sich geladen hat'. Others send mixed signals: Mozley (*Doctrine of the Atonement*, 119) says that we are not justified in saying that Tertullian conceived of 'an expiation provided by Jesus Christ dying for us' yet he also says that 'we cannot rule out entirely from his meaning the idea of substitution', while Osborn (*First Theologian*, 18) contrariwise, says that, for Tertullian, 'His [Christ's] voluntary death is a propitiation but not a vicarious satisfaction for sin!'

Since Tertullian's works are so voluminous, it would be tedious to trawl through his writings one by one, picking up references to the cross. Instead the evidence will be presented in a systematic way, though due notice will be taken, where necessary, of the contexts in which the various references to the cross appear. We will then consider an objection to the view that he understood the cross in terms of penal substitution before reaching our conclusion.

II. Tertullian's understanding of the cross

2.1 *The general contexts in which the cross is mentioned*

As already stated, Tertullian wrote no works on the significance of the cross or on the subject of salvation as such. Tertullian's many references to the saving efficacy of the cross are all incidental to the other subjects about which he writes. We will approach his teaching on the significance of the cross, therefore, by noting the general contexts in which references to it occur. In doing so, we will incidentally confirm the first two of the points mentioned above – the cross of Christ is a sign that Christ's flesh was real, and a fulfilment of Old Testament Prophecy – about which all scholars agree.

Firstly, there is the context of Tertullian's polemic against the docetism of Marcion. Tertullian wrote five books against Marcion, which take up 208 pages in the ANF text, representing about a quarter of Tertullian's extant writings. Marcion taught that because matter in his view was intrinsically evil, Jesus, as the emissary of the good God and the Saviour of the elect, could not possibly have shared in the same flesh and blood as that of the human beings he had come to save. He only *appeared* to be human. Against such Docetism, Tertullian repeatedly cites the cross. The New Testament, he affirms, including those parts which Marcion regarded as canonical,¹⁰ unanimously present a Jesus who really died on the cross in flesh and blood. The cross, therefore, for Tertullian, was one of the main planks of his argument against the heresy of Marcion as a whole. The use of the cross to combat Docetism is also prominent in Tertullian's work *On the Flesh of Christ*.¹¹

Secondly, there is the context of the theme of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. Tertullian saw this to be relevant not only for Marcion, who regarded the Old Testament as containing the words of the evil creator god, not the Father of Jesus Christ, but also to the Jews to whom Tertullian addressed a separate book, entitled *An Answer to the Jews*. Tertullian cites many texts for this purpose: the story of Isaac in Gen. 22,¹² the story of Joseph in Gen. 37–50, the figure of the bullock in Gen. 49:6 and Deut. 33:17, the one who 'washed his garments in wine,

10 Marcion's canon included 10 of Paul's letters (the present 13 minus the Pastoral Letters) and Luke's Gospel, all rigorously edited to suit his doctrines.

11 *On the Flesh of Christ*, 5f, 9, 15, 17, 24.

12 Except where indicated otherwise, the key examples are found in *Answer to the Jews*, 8–13 and/or *Against Marcion* 3.18–19.

and his clothes in the blood of grapes' in Gen. 49:11,¹³ the Passover lamb in Exod. 12:1–11, the wood which makes the water sweet in Exod. 15:22–26, the hands of Moses in Exod. 17:8–13, the sacrificial goats of Lev. 16,¹⁴ the brazen serpent in Num. 21:4–9,¹⁵ the curse on the one 'hung from a tree' in Deut. 21:23, the wood which makes the axe-head float in 2 Kings 6:1–7, the one 'made a little lower than the angels' in Ps. 8.5,¹⁶ the righteous sufferer in Pss. 22:6,¹⁷ 16–18,¹⁸ 21; 35:12; 69:4, 21, the one who has 'reigned from the tree' in Ps. 96:10,¹⁹ the 'cry' of Isa. 5:7,²⁰ the rock which one stumbles over in Isa. 8:14,²¹ the suffering servant in Isa. 42:2–3; 50:6;²² 52:13–14;²³ 53:1–12,²⁴ the burial mentioned in the LXX of Isa. 57:2, the one whose garments are 'dyed in red' in Isa. 63:1,²⁵ the victim in Jer. 11:19,²⁶ the 'tau' in Ezek. 8:12–9:6,²⁷ the coming leader who is 'exterminated' in Dan. 9:26, the tree in Joel 2:22, and the pierced one in Zech. 12:10.²⁸

Other contexts in which references to the cross appear include the following: a general account of Jesus' person, life, death and resurrection;²⁹ a defence against the assertion that the brazen serpent in Num. 21:4–9, as a type of Christ on the cross, is a case of idolatry;³⁰ a discussion of baptism, which derives its efficacy from the cross;³¹ an encouragement to Christian discipleship, since Christians have been 'bought' by Christ and therefore owe their lives to him;³² a discussion of the virtue of patience, of which Jesus set the supreme example in his death on the cross;³³ and a discussion of the virtue of martyrdom, which, Tertullian

13 *Against Marcion*, 4.40.

14 *Answer to the Jews*, 14; *Against Marcion*, 3.7.

15 See also *On Idolatry*, 5.

16 *Answer to the Jews*, 14; *Against Marcion*, 3.7, 4.21; *On the Flesh of Christ*, 15.

17 *Answer to the Jews*, 14; *Against Marcion*, 3.7, 17, 19, 4.21; *On the Flesh of Christ*, 15.

18 *Answer to the Jews*, 8, 10, 13; *Against Marcion*, 3.19, 4.42; *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 20.

19 The words 'from the tree' are not found in any current versions of this text.

20 *Against Marcion*, 3.23.

21 *Answer to the Jews*, 14; *Against Marcion*, 3.7, 5.5.

22 *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 20.

23 *Against Marcion*, 3.7, 17.

24 *Answer to the Jews*, 9, 10, 13, 14; *Against Marcion*, 3.7, 17, 19, 4.10, 21, 40, 42; *On the Flesh of Christ*, 15; *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 20; *Against Praxeas*, 30; *Of Patience*, 3; *De Fuga*, 12.

25 *Against Marcion*, 4.40.

26 *Answer to the Jews*, 10; *Against Marcion*, 3.19, 4.40.

27 *Answer to the Jews*, 11; *Against Marcion*, 3.22.

28 *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 26. As T. P. O'Malley has remarked: 'He sees the cross everywhere', *Tertullian and the Bible: Language-Imagery-Exegesis* (Nijmegen-Utrecht: Dekker and Van de Vegt, 1967), 88.

29 *Apology*, 21.

30 *On Idolatry*, 5.

31 *On Baptism*, 11, 16.

32 *The Chaplet*, 13–14; *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 8; *To his Wife*, 2.3; *On Modesty*, 6, 11, 16; *De Fuga*, 12.

33 *Of Patience*, 3, 8.

argues, God may purpose for a good end, as the cross of Christ demonstrates.³⁴

Given the fact that none of Tertullian's books are devoted to the subject of the atoning work of Christ on the cross, it is remarkable that there are so many references to the cross in so many different contexts.

2.2 *The saving benefits of the cross*

In a passage already noted, Tertullian says that the cross is not only 'the very foundation of the gospel', but also 'the very foundation of... salvation'.³⁵ This raises the question of the precise content of that salvation which the death of Christ has procured. Tertullian answers this question in a variety of ways in his writings, of which the chief ways will now be given. In the process we will be confirming the second pair of points made above – the cross of Christ is a work of recapitulation (in the Irenaean sense), and a work of redemption – over which modern scholars are agreed.

Firstly, Tertullian uses the language of sacrifice. Christ is the 'propitiation [placatio] for our sins', Tertullian writes.³⁶ He 'died for our sins'.³⁷ As a result, our sins are 'deleted' [deleta],³⁸ 'remitted' [dimissa],³⁹ 'taken',⁴⁰ or 'washed' away.⁴¹ He is the 'Lamb of God' who takes away the sin of the world,⁴² 'our Passover... sacrificed for us'.⁴³ This understanding of the meaning of the cross is reinforced through reference to the offering of the goats on the Day of Atonement, in which Tertullian sees types of Christ in his first and second comings, providing 'expiation of all sins [delictis omnibus expiatis]' and an enjoyment of 'the Lord's grace'.⁴⁴ Tertullian also uses the image of the crown of thorns which Jesus wore on the cross. The thorns and thistles are 'a figure of the sins which the soil of the flesh brought forth for us, but which the power of the cross removed, blunting,

34 *Scorpiace*, 1, 7.

35 n3 above.

36 *On Modesty*, 19, quoting 1 Jn. 2:2.

37 *Against Marcion*. 3.8, quoting 1 Cor. 15:3.

38 *On Modesty*, 19.

39 *Answer to the Jews*, 8; similarly in *Against Marcion*, 4.10, Tertullian writes: 'in plurimis dimittet delicta eorum'.

40 *Against Marcion*, 4.10, 'delicta nostra ipse auferat'; *On Modesty*, 19, 'ille manifestatus sit, ut auferat delicta'.

41 Tertullian says that 'the sinner ... [is] washed [diluendi] through the grace of Christ, who once for all has suffered death for our sins' (*On Modesty*, 18), and in *ibid.*, 19, he quotes 1 Jn. 1:7: 'The blood of His Son purifies [emundat] us utterly from every sin'. *On Baptism*, 16, likewise speaks of being 'bathed' [lavarentur] through the cross, even when the outward rite of baptism 'has not been received'. The reference to sins being 'washed away' in the ANF text of *Answer to the Jews*, 8, is textually uncertain.

42 *Answer to the Jews*, 9. The context makes clear that Jn. 1:29 and 36 are in mind, and that Jesus's fulfilment of this role involved suffering.

43 *Against Marcion*, 5.7.

44 *Answer to the Jews*, 14, *Against Marcion*, 3.7, referring to Lev. 16. For an exposition of these types in the former passage, see G. D. Dunn, 'Two Goats, Two Advents and Tertullian's *adversus Ioudaios*' in *Augustinianum*, (39) 1999, 245–64.

in its endurance by the head of our Lord, death's every sting'.⁴⁵

This reference to death naturally leads on to the second way in which the saving work of the cross is seen, namely as the conquest of death. Death is regularly seen in Tertullian's works as the penal consequence of sin,⁴⁶ but through the cross this consequence is overcome: Christ became incarnate that 'he might... by his death... dissolve [dissolveret] our death';⁴⁷ he 'overcame death by his suffering on the cross';⁴⁸ 'with the last enemy death did he fight, and through the trophy of the cross he triumphed'.⁴⁹ The result is that, if we believe in Christ, we are freed from the 'prison house of death',⁵⁰ and have life instead of death. 'God spared not his own Son... to bring back the others [i.e. the other sons] also into life';⁵¹ we are 'revived' through the "'tree" of the passion of Christ';⁵² and we are 'tossed' or 'borne away' from earth to heaven, as by the horns of a bull.⁵³ Thus 'what had formerly perished through the "tree" in Adam' has now been 'restored through the "tree" in Christ'.⁵⁴

Thirdly, the cross brings freedom from the grip of the devil and his angels. Explaining the incident of the brazen serpent, Tertullian claims that Moses intended 'to show the power of our Lord's cross, whereby that old serpent the devil was vanquished'.⁵⁵ Elsewhere, he claims that 'that effigy of the serpent of bronze... denoted that shape of the Lord's cross, which was to free us from serpents – that is, from the devil's angels – while through itself it hanged up the devil slain'.⁵⁶ Tertullian refers again to the defeat of the devil when quoting 1 Jn. 3:8: 'Unto this end was manifested the Son of God, to undo the works of the devil ...'.⁵⁷ That he has the cross in mind as he quotes these words is confirmed by the allusion to Col. 2:12–15 which follows.⁵⁸

45 *The Chaplet*, 14.

46 E.g. *Treatise on the Soul*, 52; *Against Marcion*, 1.22, 2.4; *On Repentance*, 2; *Exhortation to Chastity*, 2.

47 *Against Marcion*, 3.9, cf. *On Baptism*, 11, 'neither can our death see dissolution [dissolui posset] except by the Lord's passion'.

48 *Against Marcion*, 3.19.

49 *Against Marcion*, 4.20.

50 *Against Marcion*, 3.20.

51 *Scorpiace*, 7.

52 *Answer to the Jews*, 13.

53 *Answer to the Jews*, 10; *Against Marcion*, 3.18. The two horns of the bulls (Gen. 49:6 and Deut. 33:17) are taken by Tertullian to represent the extremities of the cross.

54 *Answer to the Jews*, 13.

55 *Against Marcion*, 3.18.

56 *On Idolatry*, 5. A similar passage may be found in *Answer to the Jews*, 10.

57 *On Modesty*, 19.

58 It is in these last two points, the defeat of death and of the devil, that we have the closest parallels to Irenaeus's recapitulation motif, which is well summarised in Aulén's classic *Christus Victor*, ch. 2, and shown to be an underlying motif in Tertullian's soteriology by Braun (*Deus Christianorum*, 517–22) and Viciano ('Grundzüge', 151–54). With regard to the defeat of the devil, Rashdall (*Idea of Atonement*, 251, n5) finds in Tertullian's treatise *On the Flesh of Christ*, 17, a hint of the later idea of the 'pious

Fourthly, the cross brings redemption. This is the image which can speak either of deliverance from some sort of bondage through the payment of a sum of money, or of a change of ownership whereby someone, or something, passes from one owner to another by the same means. In spiritual terms, Tertullian clearly has the latter picture in mind, as the following quotations show: 'You have been ransomed [redemptus] by Christ, and that at a great price... as ransomed [redemptus] by Christ... you are the servant of Christ'.⁵⁹ 'He has redeemed [redemit], at a great price, these bodies of ours'.⁶⁰ "We are not our own, but bought with a price;" and what kind of price? The blood of God.⁶¹ Speaking of fallen human 'flesh' Tertullian says that it 'was "redeemed [redempta] with a great price" – "the blood... of the Lord and Lamb"'.⁶² 'The Son was sent... that he might redeem [redimeret] this sinful flesh'.⁶³

Finally, we may put together passing allusions which appear in his writings. Quoting Eph. 2:13, 'ye ... are made nigh [facti estis prope] by His blood', Tertullian names the blessings to which believers have been 'made nigh': the Christ of the Creator, the commonwealth of Israel, the covenants, the hope of the promise, and God himself.⁶⁴ Reconciliation is another blessing conferred through the cross: God's purpose was 'that he might reconcile [reconciliet] both [Jew and Gentile] unto God... in one body... having in it slain the enmity by the cross'.⁶⁵ In another place Jesus is called 'that most faithful "Mediator between God and man, ... Jesus Christ", who shall reconcile both God to man, and man to God [homini deum et hominem deo reddet]'.⁶⁶ Other blessings procured by the cross are the establishment of God's kingdom,⁶⁷ peace,⁶⁸ healing,⁶⁹ and the sealing of the 'new testament' (i.e. covenant).⁷⁰

fraud' whereby God through Christ tricked the devil into letting go of his captives, just as the devil tricked Eve into taking the forbidden fruit, but the words 'aemula operatione' in this chapter mean simply 'converse (or contrary) operation' and do not necessarily imply that God used the same tactics. Cf. Turner (*Patristic Doctrine*, 55) and Wöfl (*Heilswirken Gottes*, 254).

59 *The Chaplet*, 13.

60 *Against Marcion*, 5.7.

61 *To His Wife*, 2.3, quoting 1 Cor. 6:19–20.

62 *On Modesty*, 6, similarly in *ibid.*, 16. Redemption also figures in *ibid.*, 10, 11.

63 *Against Marcion*, 5.14. For other references see the lengthy quotation from *De Fuga*, 12, below, just before the conclusion.

64 *Against Marcion*, 5.17.

65 *Ibid.* Similarly Col. 1:20, 22, with their references to reconciliation, are quoted in *ibid.*, 5.19.

66 *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 63, quoting 1 Tim. 2:5, which is also quoted to illustrate the mediatorial work of Christ in *On the Flesh of Christ*, 15, and *Against Praxeas*, 27.

67 *Against Marcion*, 3.21.

68 *Against Marcion*, 3.21, 5.19.

69 *Ibid.*, 4.21, quoting Isa. 53:5.

70 *Ibid.*, 4.40, alluding to Jesus's eucharistic words, Lk. 22:20, par. 1 Cor. 11:25.

2.3 Penal Substitution

So far we have described the importance of the doctrine of atonement through the cross of Christ in Tertullian's works, the kind of contexts in which expressions of the doctrine are found, and the blessings which he believed flow from the cross. There remains the question whether Tertullian implicitly subscribes to the notion of penal substitution as an integral aspect of Christ's atoning work on the cross. There can be no doubt that Tertullian believed in a God of judgment and that sin merited condemnation, death, and hell.⁷¹ The question now is whether he also believed that Christ bore those penalties in our stead.

It may, of course, be held that some of the passages Tertullian quotes from the Scriptures, and are referred to above, implicitly contain this doctrine, and that he therefore shows his agreement with it simply by quoting them, but since these passages have been variously interpreted by different scholars further evidence needs to be sought if the view that Tertullian subscribed to the idea of penal substitution is to be more firmly established.

One indirect piece of evidence in favour of this view can be found in the work known as *Scorpiace*. The book is about martyrdom, and in the first chapter Tertullian mentions the fact that some Gnostic Valentinians were weakening the resolve of some Christians by arguing against the necessity of martyrdom. Tertullian quotes the arguments used by the Valentinians as follows:

To die for God, is, since He preserves me, not even artlessness, but folly, nay madness. If He kills me, how will it be his duty to preserve me? Once for all Christ died for us, once for all He was slain that we might not be slain. If He demands the like from me in return, does He also look for salvation from my death by violence? Or does God importune for the blood of men, especially if He refuses that of bulls and goats? Assuredly He had rather have the repentance than the death of the sinner. And how is He eager for the death of those who are not sinners?⁷²

The words which are particularly relevant for our purposes are: 'Once for all Christ died for us, once for all He was slain that we might not be slain'. Clearly the Valentinians, whose views Tertullian is quoting, believed that Christ died as a substitute for sinners, and Tertullian has no quarrel with them on that score in this work, or anywhere else. He only denies that Christ's death for us means that Christians can never be called upon to die as martyrs on account of their faith in him.

More direct evidence is found in those passages in which Tertullian handles Deut. 21:23 and Gal. 3:13 (in which Deut. 21:23 is cited), which are singly or together cited in no less than seven passages in Tertullian's extant works. Tertullian's understanding of these verses may be unfolded under five headings.

71 See, e.g., *The Chaplet*, 6; *Treatise on the Soul*, 52; *Against Marcion*, 1.22, 27, 2.4, 8, 11, 13, 4.28–30, 35, 5.12, 16; *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 17, 35; *On Repentance*, 2; *Exhortation to Chastity*, 2; *On Modesty*, 2.

72 *Scorpiace*, 1.

(i) Among the passages Tertullian quotes for his Jewish readers to show that Christ fulfils Old Testament prophecy is Deut. 21:23. In commenting on the words 'Cursed is every one who shall have hung on a tree', he says that Christ was exposed to that kind of death 'in order that what was predicted by the prophets as destined to come upon Him through your means might be fulfilled'.⁷³

(ii) Both the Father and the Son willed this 'cursing' to take place. Tertullian asserts both that 'the Creator delivered His own Son to His own curse',⁷⁴ and also that the Son 'brought on Himself the Creator's curse'.⁷⁵ The Father and the Son were therefore working in harmony to procure human salvation.⁷⁶ Such an understanding of the atonement is, of course, thoroughly in agreement with Tertullian's understanding of the Trinity, for which he is better known. While the Son is a distinct 'person', he shares in the Father's 'substance', and can therefore be called 'God' just as the Father is 'God'. Hence Tertullian can say: 'it is a part of the creed of Christians even to believe that God did die';⁷⁷ 'God was crucified';⁷⁸ Christ's dying is 'the very dying of God';⁷⁹ Christ is 'a crucified God'.⁸⁰

(iii) In the context of Deut. 21:23, the 'curse' which Christ bore is to be understood in penal terms, as the expression of God's judgment on human sin: God decided that 'whoever, in any sin, had incurred the judgment of death, and died suspended on a tree, he should be "cursed by God", because his own sins were the cause of his suspension on the tree'.⁸¹

(iv) Yet the Son was himself innocent of sin: Tertullian stresses the innocence of Christ in three passages: 'Christ who spake not guile from His mouth, and who exhibited all righteousness and humility... was not exposed to that kind of death for his own deserts [pro meritis suis]';⁸² 'when we assert that Christ was crucified, we do not malign Him with a curse; we only re-affirm the curse pronounced by

73 *Answer to the Jews*, 10. Cf. *Against Marcion*, 3.18: Deut. 21:23 is a 'simple prediction of the cross'.

74 *Against Marcion*, 5.3. In the context, Tertullian is contesting Marcion's denial of this possibility, but it is clear that Tertullian affirms it as the Creator's 'appointment'. Cf. *De Fuga*, 12: 'God ... spared not His own Son for you, that He might be made a curse for us'.

75 *Against Marcion*, 1.11. In the context, Tertullian is mocking Marcion's belief that Jesus was the son of a Superior God, not the son of the Creator, by asking why such a person, whose flesh was illusory anyway, would have wanted to submit to such a death at the hands of the Creator to make himself known. It is clear however, that Tertullian himself believed that Jesus, the son of the Creator, did bring on himself his Father's curse.

76 Cf. *Scorpiace*, 7, where the statement 'God spared not His own Son' is soon followed by 'Christ... gave Himself up for our offences'.

77 *Against Marcion*, 2.16.

78 *Against Marcion*, 2.27.

79 *Against Marcion*, 5.11.

80 *On the Flesh of Christ*, 5.

81 *Answer to the Jews*, 10.

82 *Answer to the Jews*, 10.

the law’;⁸³ ‘the Lord Himself was “cursed” in the eye of the law; and yet is He the only Blessed One’.⁸⁴

(v) The effects of the Son’s death under God’s curse are that we who believe in him are no longer under a curse ourselves. God has ‘provided blessing for man, through the curse of Christ... “We have received, therefore, the promise of the Spirit,” as the apostle says, “through faith”, even that faith by which the just man lives, in accordance with the Creator’s purpose.’⁸⁵

Putting these five strands of thought together,⁸⁶ we deduce that Tertullian believed that the innocent Christ, according to the Father’s purpose, voluntarily assumed the ‘curse’ we deserved for our own sins, so that we might no longer be under that ‘curse’, and instead, by faith, find favour with God. It is difficult to see how this understanding of the cross can fail to imply a penal substitutionary doctrine of the atonement.

We turn finally to three other passages which also imply a penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement:

Firstly, in his work *On the Apparel of Women* Tertullian begins by linking the original sin of Eve with the sins of women in general in his time:

You are the devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert [propter tuum meritum] – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.⁸⁷

We would question today whether Tertullian was right to infer that women inherit Eve’s sinful propensities more than men, but what takes our notice is that in the final sentence Tertullian implies (i) that the women he addresses deserve ‘death’ on account of the sins he has just enumerated and (ii) that the Son of God (who did not deserve death) died to free them from that ‘death’. That is, he took their penalty on himself for their sake.

Secondly, in his work *On Modesty*, Tertullian is condemning the practice whereby some sinners were pleading with those about to be martyred to ‘condone’ sins they had committed. It is in this context that he issues the following rebuke to those about to be martyred for giving way to such requests:

83 *Against Praxeas*, 29. In the context, Tertullian accuses Praxeas of blaspheming against the Father by teaching that the Father also suffered on the cross, because for him they were ultimately the same person.

84 *Of Patience*, 8. In the context, Tertullian is urging his readers to imitate the patience of Christ, exhibited in his death on the cross.

85 *Against Marcion*, 5.3. Later in the same chapter Tertullian mentions ‘imputed righteousness’ as another blessing which flows from the cross (‘ut credentes iustitiae deputer’).

86 Which Bethune-Baker (*Early History of Christian Doctrine*, 333) and Grensted (*Short History*, 28–29) both fail to do, restricting their comments on Tertullian’s handling of Deut. 21:23 to what he says about it in *Answer to the Jews*, 10, alone.

87 *On the Apparel of Women*, 1.

Who has redeemed another's death by his own [Quis alienam mortem sua solvit], but the Son of God alone? For even in His very passion He set the robber free. For to this end had He come, that, being Himself pure from sin, and in all respects holy, He might undergo death on behalf of sinners [pro peccatoribus obiret]. Similarly, you who emulate Him in condoning sins [donando delicta], if you yourself have done no sin, plainly suffer in my stead [plane patere pro me]. If, however, you are a sinner, how will the oil of your puny torch be able to suffer for you and for me?⁸⁸

Tertullian believed that a martyr's death could atone for all sins committed by him or her since baptism,⁸⁹ but because martyrs were also sinners, he did not believe that their death could atone for the sins of anyone else. Only one person could do that – the sinless Son of God. In saying this, of course, Tertullian is implying that the Son of God actually did die 'in our stead'.⁹⁰ Just as the 'robber', Barabbas, was freed from the death penalty because Jesus took his place on the cross, so, Tertullian implies, we are free from that death which is the penalty for sin because Jesus died in our place.

Thirdly, in his work *De Fuga in Persecutione*, Tertullian not only condemns flight in time of persecution, but also the paying of money to a persecuting authority in order that someone who is being persecuted might be protected from it. One of the reasons he cites is the fact that Christ died for us, and that we should be willing to die for him, if need be:

That you should ransom [redimas] with money a man whom Christ has ransomed [redemit] with His blood, how unworthy it is of God and His ways of acting, who spared not His own Son for you, that he might be made a curse for us... All this took place that He might redeem [lucraretur] us from our sins. The sun ceded to us the day of our redemption [emptionis]; hell re-transferred the right it had in us, and our covenant is in heaven; the everlasting gates were lifted up, that the King of Glory, the Lord of might, might enter in, after having redeemed [mercatus] man from earth, nay from hell, that he might attain to heaven. ... And the Lord indeed ransomed [redemit] him from the angelic powers which rule the world – from the spirits of wickedness, from the darkness of this life, from eternal judgment, from everlasting death.⁹¹

In this splendidly poetic passage, Tertullian emphasises the achievement of the cross. It is in some respects parallel to the case of money being handed over to a potential persecutor so that the persecution may not be inflicted. Similarly,

88 *On Modesty*, 22.

89 *Apology*, 50; *Treatise on the Soul*, 55; *Scorpiace*, 6; *On Modesty*, 9, 22.

90 It will be noticed that the same Latin preposition 'pro' lies behind the translations 'on behalf of' and 'instead of' in the ANF translation. The preposition can mean either (C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879], 1447c–48a). In the light of my comments, I believe the translation 'in my stead' would be appropriate here in both cases.

91 *De Fuga*, 12.

through the blood of Christ a price has been paid which frees us from the prospect of hell, eternal judgment and everlasting death. Because Christ died under God's curse, we do not. This surely amounts to saying that Christ died in our stead.

III. Conclusion

Tertullian implicitly bears witness, along with Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, to the understanding of the cross of Christ as a work of penal substitutionary atonement, and thereby to the existence of this understanding in the Church of his time. He believed not only that the cross of Christ is central to the Christian faith, and that it was the means of our salvation in general, but also, more specifically, that Jesus died in our place, taking on himself the penal consequences of sin, so that we might have eternal life.

Abstract

This article argues that the writings of Tertullian imply that Christ's atoning death on the cross was a work of penal substitution. Having noted the importance of the cross in Tertullian's thought, the contexts in which references to the cross are found in his writings, and the salvific effects which he attributes to the cross, the article examines some specific passages which are most naturally understood to imply a penal substitutionary understanding of the significance of the cross. The article therefore strengthens the view, already held on the grounds of similar studies of the atonement teaching of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, that the penal substitutionary understanding of the atoning work of Christ on the cross was widely held in the post-apostolic Church.