

## THE ATONEMENT IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

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In some quarters today the title of this article would seem a misnomer, for there are many who would agree with R. Bultmann, "the thought of Jesus' death as an atonement for sin has no place in John,"<sup>1</sup> a view that apparently arises out of an undue emphasis on the place John gives to revelation. There can, of course, be no doubt that for John revelation is very important, nor that the giving of revelation is an important function of Jesus. But to assert that John finds "no place" for "Jesus' death as an atonement for sin" runs clean counter to the evidence.

It takes no notice, for example, of the structure of this Gospel. In the form in which we have it, it consists of 21 chapters with the completion of Jesus' public ministry recorded in chap 12. The whole of the rest of the book is given over to the events in the Upper Room that prepared for the cross, and in the account of the crucifixion and resurrection. Clearly John has put special emphasis on his story of the death of Jesus. And this is not because he has found this emphasis in the Synoptic Gospels, for his account is independent of them.<sup>2</sup> Right from the beginning he makes it clear that the death of Jesus is very important.<sup>3</sup> Thus he has the Baptist speak of Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin" (1:29) and in his account of

<sup>1</sup> R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; London: SCM, 1952-55) 2.54. Bultmann can also say, "In John, Jesus' death has no preeminent importance for salvation" (p. 52); "The common Christian *interpretation* of Jesus' death as an atonement for sins. . . is not, therefore, what determines John's view of it" (p. 53).

<sup>2</sup> I have given reasons for seeing the Fourth Gospel as independent of the Synoptists in *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 49-52.

<sup>3</sup> P. Gardner-Smith could say "In a sense the whole Gospel is a passion narrative, for the Fourth Evangelist has the great consummation always in mind" (*Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* [Cambridge: University Press, 1938] 42).

Jesus' first miracle he includes Jesus' words to his mother, "Not yet has my hour come" (2:4). This is the first of a series of statements about the "hour" or the "time" of Jesus. Throughout the ministry they are like this first reference: the "hour" or the "time" has not yet come (7:6, 8, 30; 8:20). But when the ministry is at its end and the cross lies in the immediate future. Jesus says, "The hour has come" (12:23; cf. 12:27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1). No attention is drawn to these passages as though they needed special emphasis. They simply lie there bearing their witness to the truth that everything in the life of Jesus moves inevitably to the climax, the death and resurrection that lay before him from the beginning. And as he died John tells us that Jesus cried *τετελεσται*, "It is finished!" (19:30); his death for sinners was the completion of the work he came to do. The evidence makes it very difficult to contest the view that in this Gospel the cross is the climax of the whole story, that to which everything else leads up. It remains to ask what significance John attaches to the cross, but that his whole Gospel is written in such a way as to make the cross supremely important seems beyond reasonable doubt.

### I. *Sin*

John sees the human problem as due to sin. He uses the noun *ἁμαρτία* 17 times, which compares with 7 in Matthew, 6 in Mark and 11 in Luke (no book in the NT has it more times except Romans and Hebrews). We have already noticed that in the opening of the Gospel John tells us that the Baptist greeted Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin" (1:29). The Lamb that takes away sin is surely a lamb offered in sacrifice (how else would a lamb take sin away?). But John does not stay to dwell on this. He makes his point right at the beginning that Jesus would be the sacrifice that effectively deals with the world's sin, but thereafter when he speaks explicitly of sin it is mostly in order to underline the seriousness of the sin (and the sins) that people took so lightly.

Thus sinners generally hold that they can leave their sin when they will, but Jesus says that whoever commits sin is sin's slave (8:34). This ability to misunderstand the place and the power of sin comes out in a conversation with the Pharisees after Jesus had given sight to the man born blind. They apparently thought that Jesus regarded them as blind and this evoked his retort: "If you were blind, you would not have sin; but now you say, 'We see'; your sin remains" (9:40-41). The Pharisees had had no difficulty in seeing the sin of the blind man: they tell him that he was "altogether born in sins" (9:34). But their own sin was another matter. They could not see that. Jesus

is bringing out the truth that the sins of the religious are very serious. They claim to have sight and they will be judged on their claim. To claim sight and yet do the deeds of darkness is to invite condemnation.<sup>4</sup>

The thought that sin can arise through the rejection of the light comes out again in the farewell discourse. In warning the disciples of the dangers they are in from "the world" Jesus goes on to say "If I had not come and spoken to them they would not have had sin; but now they have no excuse<sup>5</sup> for their sin" (15:22). Jesus has brought teaching from God and has shown them by his life how they should live. Had they taken notice of him they would not have been guilty of the sin they have now committed in their rejection of the truth from God. This is further brought out in the reference to "the works" Jesus had done among them, works "which no other person did" (15:24). Jesus' teaching was backed up by his deeds, but these people were blind to both. Their rejection of what God was doing in Jesus meant that they were committing a horrible sin. Perhaps we should notice here that appreciating sin for the evil thing it is is never a human discovery. Jesus told the disciples that when the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, comes he will convict the world of sin (16:8). Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit the world does not know what sin is and it certainly does not see itself as sinful. In recording these words of Jesus John is bringing home to his readers the truth that believers will always find themselves in the position of offering a great salvation to a world that does not realize that it needs it. Persuading the world that it is sinful is so difficult a task that it can be accomplished only by the Holy Spirit. And the world's sin is connected with the fact that the world does not believe in Jesus (16:9).<sup>6</sup> The sending of the Son is God's greatest gift to the people of this world and to reject him accordingly is the most

<sup>4</sup> Cf. L. Newbigin, their "very security is their undoing, for it leads them to reject with furious anger the offer of freedom as a gift. The freedom of which they are proud is their own possession. They will defend it even to the extent of bloodshed--not only their own, but the blood of the one who offers freedom as a gift from above. And in the fact that they are bent on destroying Jesus (as the sequel will show) lies the proof that they are not free: they are under the power of sin. The man who is not able to receive his freedom as a gift of pure grace is not yet free" (*The Light Has Come*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 109-10).

<sup>5</sup> *πρόφασις* means that which is put forward to justify an action. It may denote the real reason, a valid excuse, or a pretext, a pretence (see BAGD).

<sup>6</sup> This verse may mean that the world's sin consists in the fact that it does not believe in Jesus, or that the world has wrong ideas about what sin is (understanding *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* in the sense "with regard to sin"), or that the world's unbelief is a clear illustration of its sinfulness. Or, as happens often in this Gospel, the words may be taken in more than one sense.

serious of sins. But a work of the Holy Spirit is necessary if people are to come to see this.

Another important passage for our understanding of John's view of sin is that in which he records Jesus' words: "I am going away and you will look for me and you will die in your sin." His hearers pick on his words "where I am going you cannot come" and ask whether he plans to kill himself. This leads Jesus to say "You are of this world, am not of this world. Therefore I told you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that *I AM* you will die in your sins" (8:21-24). The dreadful words about dying in sin are not explained and indeed there is no real need for an explanation. We may not be certain as to the details of what this means but it is obvious to us all that to go into the presence of God with all our sins about us is the most terrible of all disasters. And this, Jesus says, will happen to those who do not believe. His "I AM" is in the style of deity: it fits the picture given of Jesus throughout this Gospel and the constantly repeated demand that people believe in him.<sup>7</sup> The thought is that God has acted in Christ so that those who refuse to put their trust in him are guilty of sin against God, sin of the utmost seriousness.

## II. *Judgment*

With the fact of sin we must take the fact of judgment, another of John's important concepts. He has the noun κρίσις 11 times and the verb κρίνειν 19 times (the total of 30 times for the two words is exceeded by no one in the NT). Twice he has the thought that Jesus did not come to judge the world (3:17; 12:47) and once that he did (9:39). The contradiction between these statements is, of course, only apparent. This whole Gospel makes it clear that Jesus' mission was one of salvation. He came to deliver people from sin and to bring sinners back to God and this is apparent throughout. But the reverse side of this is that those who harden themselves and resist what God is doing in his Son are destined for judgment.<sup>8</sup> We are not to see

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Marsh, "the words are evidently meant to bring into the focus of the reader's attention the claim that Jesus made for himself, and that the Christian Church still makes for him, that he stands in relation to the New Israel precisely in the position of 'I am', Jehovah, to the old Israel" (*The Gospel of St John* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968] 359).

<sup>8</sup> W. Hendriksen says of Jesus that "his coming into this world has two diametrically opposed effects. Some receive him with joy and are rewarded. Others reject him and are punished. This reward and this punishment is his judgment. . . upon those who come in contact with him. . . . He came with the very purpose of pronouncing and carrying into effect this authoritative verdict upon these two sharply contrasted groups"

Christ's mission of salvation as though it were dealing with a mock peril. John makes it clear that judgment is a reality and that those who claim to have spiritual insight and yet deny their claim by their self-centered lives are in great peril. Indeed it is part of the purpose of Christ's coming to bring such self-seeking to judgment. It cannot go unpunished.

An interesting feature of Johannine thought is the way John brings out the truth that the sinner is judged here and now.<sup>9</sup> He tells us that the person who believes in Jesus is not judged and goes on, "But he who does not believe has been judged already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." He explains, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world and men loved the darkness rather than the light" (3:18-19). In this passage we could, of course, understand "judgment" in the sense "negative judgment," "condemnation" (as RSV does, for example, with "condemned" in the earlier part of the quotation, though in v 19 it has "judgment"). What John is saying is that to love darkness rather than the light not only will bring condemnation one day, but that it is condemnation. To love darkness rather than the light is itself condemnation and that is an important part of the way life works out. We ought not to think that sinful people live riotously happy lives. They have their moments, but it is a sobering truth that the love of darkness cuts people off from the highest and best in life. No matter how they delude themselves, those who live in darkness have shut themselves up to an impoverished existence, to a life that is not worth calling life. John lets his readers be in no doubt about that.

But he also sees judgment as having its effect in the world to come. In a wonderful passage that speaks of the life to come John says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son in order that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have life eternal" (3:16). We are usually so taken up with the wonder of salvation offered in these words that we pass over the fact that John speaks of sinners perishing. He does not explain this, but it is obvious that it is a

*(New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to John [2 vols; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953-54] 2.94).*

<sup>9</sup> L. Goppelt concludes his examination of "The Distinctiveness of Johannine Eschatology" with these words: "The Gospel of John emphasized more emphatically than any other document of the New Testament that in Jesus' ministry the *eschaton* was present; whoever believed had already passed from death to life! Whoever did not believe was already condemned! This apologetic antithesis did not aim at a perfectionistic decision, but at the faith that found in Jesus everything that was called the salvation of God: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (14:6)" (*Theology of the New Testament* [2 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981-82] 2.305).

horrible fate, that it applies to the world to come, and that it is to be the lot of all who do not believe in Christ.<sup>10</sup> John is clear that in the end sin will be judged.

We see this in the further statement that "the wrath of God" abides on the person who "disobeys" (ὁ ἀπειθῶν) the Son (3:36). The word "wrath" points to the eschatological wrath, that divine hostility to evil that will be manifested at the end of time. The verb "abides" (μένει) indicates something that is permanent. John is telling us that the sinner who persists in rejecting the Son of God can look for nothing but continuing hostility from God: the "wrath" is not something transient that will soon pass away. It is probably something like this that is in mind when Jesus says to the lame man he had healed, "Sin no longer, lest something worse happen to you (5:14). It is possible to see this referring to some physical ailment worse than the one from which the man had been delivered but this is unlikely. Jesus did not see sin and sickness as necessarily connected (9:3) and it seems much more likely that he is saying that the man will find himself in trouble on Judgment Day."<sup>11</sup>

That the judgment is in the hands of the Son is given some emphasis in this Gospel. Thus we are told that the Father "has given all judgment to the Son" (5:22); he does not carry out the judgment in person. It accords with this that "an hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice (ie., that of the Son of man) and come out, those who. . . have done evil things to the resurrection of judgment" (5:28-29). Here it is final judgment, judgment at the last great day that is in mind and evil-doers face condemnation on that day. In another place Jesus says that it is the word that he has spoken that will judge-people on that day (12:48), where "word" stands for Jesus' whole teaching, more especially his teaching on salvation. On judgment day the fact that people have rejected him and his offer of salvation will be seen to be the significant fact.

All this means that for John sin is a dreadful reality and judgment its necessary consequence. In one sense that judgment takes place here and now, for John sees the sinful life as cutting the sinner off from the light of God's presence. And in another sense the rejection of

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Newbigin, Nicodemus "is left--and the reader is left--face to face with the final judgment, with the alternatives of life and death, of light and darkness, and with the final reminder that it is only he who 'does the truth' who comes to the light. "Theology is, after all, serious business" (*The Light Has Come*, 44).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. C. K. Barrett, "The χεῖρόν τι can hardly be anything other than the Judgement (cf. v. 29)" (*The Gospel according to St. John* [2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978] 255).

God's offer of salvation means that the sinner suffers the lasting consequences of what he has done.

### III. *The Death of Jesus*

John has his own way of bringing out the significance of Jesus' death. A striking and unusual way of doing this is to refer to Jesus as being "lifted up" which means "lifted up on a cross." Thus quite early John reports Jesus as saying, "As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up so that every one who believes may have in him life eternal" (3:14-15).<sup>12</sup> "Lifting up" is not self-explanatory but the comparison to Moses's lifting up of the snake on the pole certainly points to the cross. In any case John gives us an explanation of this unusual manner of speaking when he reports the words of Jesus: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" and adds his own explanation, "He said this, signifying by what death he would die" (12:32-33).<sup>13</sup> There is a further occurrence of "lifting up" in 8:28 which must, of course, also be understood as referring to the cross. In this remarkable series of passages John is bringing out the centrality of Jesus' death on the cross in the process of salvation. It is because he is "lifted up" that the way is open for believers to enter life eternal.

The verb ὑψόω translated "lift up" in the passages just noted is the normal word for "exalt" and it is used for example of the person who "exalts himself" (Matt 23:12). Jesus uses it in a question about Capernaum, "Will you be exalted to heaven?" (Luke 10:15), and it is found in passages speaking of God exalting lowly people (Luke 1:52; Jas 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6). It is used of Jesus being exalted at God's right hand (Acts 2:33; 5:31). It is thus a striking word to be used of crucifixion; it points to a complete reversal of human values. We see this also in the way John uses the concept of glory. Early in his Gospel he says "we saw his glory" (1:14). This can scarcely be held to be a reference to the transfiguration because John does not record this. Nor can it be said to refer to splendor in the usual sense of the term,

<sup>12</sup> Some take ἐν αὐτῷ with πιστεύω but this construction is not found elsewhere in John. This Evangelist however does use πιστεύειν absolutely and this is surely what we should see here.

<sup>13</sup> E. Haenchen connects the lifting up with the preceding words about the casting out of "the ruler of this world": "Now, in the moment when Jesus is glorified, crucified, the judgment of the world takes place: the ruler of this world will now be cast out. When Jesus goes to the cross and to death, there is the victory of divine love" (*A Commentary on the Gospel of John* [2 vols; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 2.98).

because John does not record this either. He tells us of a Jesus who lived in lowliness among ordinary people in a backwater. He sometimes went up to Jerusalem, but we should bear in mind that Jerusalem was not one of the Roman world's great cities. John has the interesting concept of what Origen called "humble glory." When someone who has every right to the highest place leaves the high place and takes a position of lowly service, that, John is saying, is real glory.

This glory is seen outstandingly in the cross.<sup>14</sup> When his public ministry had come to an end and the cross was in immediate prospect Jesus said, "The hour has come that the Son of man be glorified" (12:23). The position is complicated a little by the fact that in some passages it is possible that Jesus is looking beyond the cross to the splendor that would follow in heaven but it does seem that in a number of places "glorify" points to this concept of humble glory. This seems to be the case in the somewhat complicated series of references to being glorified in 13:31-32 and elsewhere. The point is that for John it is the cross that is supremely significant and in it we see the culmination of the humble glory that is to be discerned throughout Jesus' lowly life.

There is apparently another reference to Jesus' words in 12:32 during the trial before Pilate, when the Jews refuse to take Jesus and judge him according to their own law on the grounds that "it is not lawful for us to put anyone to death." John adds an explanation, "so that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled that he spoke, signifying by what death he would die" (18:31-32). The exact words "signifying by what death he would die" are also given in explanation in 12:33, which reinforces the view that both passages refer to the same thing. That John inserts this explanation into the story of Pilate shows that he saw it as important. The Jews' insistence that Pilate should sentence Jesus to death points to a demand that he be crucified, for only the Romans could execute Jesus in this way. Evidently the Jews wanted crucifixion for that would be interpreted in the light of the curse: "a hanged man is accused by God" (Deut 21:23). John includes their demand for the same reason, but where they saw the curse as discrediting Jesus John saw it as pointing to the lengths to which Jesus would go and the suffering he would bear in order to bring salvation.

We may miss the significance of another important passage in John because we tend to engage in discussions of whether there was

<sup>14</sup> R. H. Strachan says, "The 'glorifying' of Jesus always means His dying (xiii.31). It is God Who thus glorifies Him, and in His dying God Himself is glorified. The Cross is the complete manifestation of God's glory, revealing His goodness or love to the utmost. . ." (*The Fourth Gospel* [London: SCM, 1941] 106).

one cleansing of the temple or two and if one whether it took place early (as in John) or late (as in the Synoptists). Such discussions are not unimportant, but for our present purpose the important points are that John records the cleansing as early as his second chapter and that he informs his readers that it led to a discussion with the Jews in which Jesus said "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it" (2:19). The Jews thought this referred to a temple building, but John explains that Jesus "was speaking about the temple of his body" (2:21).<sup>15</sup> There is still vigorous discussion about the whole passage and there are those, for example, who see a reference to the church as the body of Christ. But whatever truth there may be in such interpretations clearly John was referring to Jesus' death and his subsequent rising from the dead. This was before Jesus from the earliest time in his ministry.

John has a good deal to say about the voluntary nature of the death Jesus would die. This is emphasized, for example, in the "Good Shepherd" passages. The Palestinian shepherd was a well-known figure and perhaps we should notice in passing that shepherds in general were despised. The nature of their calling kept them on the move and evidently they were not averse to having their flocks eat up other people's pastures if they could get away with it. They had a reputation for pilfering and in general they were not seen as trustworthy. It accords with this that the testimony of a shepherd was not acceptable in a court of law. That Jesus likens himself to a shepherd may accordingly be part of the way he took the lowly place. But when we reflect that there were good shepherds as well as bad ones and that in the OT the shepherd is sometimes used to teach people about the care God gives his people perhaps we should not press this too hard.

What is certainly significant is that a shepherd might run into danger. His work took him into the wilderness and there were wild beasts there that have since died out in Palestine. Wolves might be encountered, and the rule was laid down that a hired shepherd must defend a flock against one wolf but "two wolves count as unavoidable accident."<sup>16</sup> It was recognized that there might be danger in being a shepherd but nothing is more certain than that the average shepherd was confident that he would be able to cope with any situation he

<sup>15</sup> "This must refer to some kind of violent death and it would not have been difficult for the disciples after the passion to see the force of the saying. They recognized it as a fulfilment of scripture as well as of the prediction of Jesus" (D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* [London: InterVarsity, 1981] 457).

<sup>16</sup> Mishnah, B.M.7:9. We see the responsibility of the hired man in another regulation: "a paid guardian or a hirer may take an oath if the beast was lamed or driven away or dead, but he must make restitution if it was lost or stolen" (B.M.7:8).

would encounter. He reckoned that he would come out on top. He planned to live for his sheep not die in their defence. But Jesus brings out the distinctiveness of his shepherding in that he planned to die for his sheep.<sup>17</sup> The Good Shepherd differs from earthly shepherds no matter how caring and how efficient they might be. That the point is important is seen in the fourfold repetition that Jesus would die (10:11, 15, 17,18). It is his death and moreover his death for the sheep that is emphasized. That is what matters and from another angle we see the importance of Jesus' saving death.

This is to be seen in other passages also, for example, in Jesus' dealing with Judas. John makes it clear that the Master knew what was going on, for he told the assembled disciples that one of their number would betray him (13:21) and in the giving of the morsel showed that he knew who it was (13:26). Apparently the others had no inkling that any such thing was afoot and their reaction makes it quite clear that had Jesus told them who it was they would have prevented Judas from carrying through his plan. But he did not. He had come to die for sinners, and this was the way the process would work out. The whole incident shows that Jesus knew what was ahead of him but he deliberately chose to walk the path that led him to the cross.

The same essential truth is brought out in John's reporting of the words of Caiaphas: "You know nothing at all, nor do you work it out that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people and that the whole nation should not perish" (11:49-50). Caiaphas, of course, is not consciously enunciating a truth about atonement. From the standpoint of a cynical politician he is voicing his conviction that it is better that one Galilean (whether he was guilty of a crime or whether he was completely innocent) should die than that his activities should put the whole nation at risk. But John is recording the words because they express a spiritual truth that far transcends the politics of men like Caiaphas. Jesus would die and the people who trusted in him would not perish. That this was important for the writer is seen in the fact that later in his narrative he characterizes Caiaphas as the man "who counselled the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people" (18:14). The words should not be forgotten.

Sometimes there is the thought of the inevitability of Jesus' death in view of what he had come to do. Thus John reports the words,

<sup>17</sup> The expression usually rendered "lay down his life" is unusual, "τὴν ψυχὴν τιθέναι" not being found outside this Gospel and I John in the NT. It occurs a few times in LXX (though with a different meaning) and apparently it is not classical (it is not cited in LSJ apart from Johannine passages).

"Truly, truly I tell you, unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains by itself, alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit" (12:24).<sup>18</sup> The solemn introduction shows that these words are important and the parallel with the seed brings out the complete necessity of the death. With the seed unburied there can be no crop and the implication is that without the death of Jesus there can be no spiritual harvest. John is drawing attention to the indispensability of Jesus' death if people are to be saved. He did this also in the account of the arrest when in response to Peter's attempt at sword play Jesus said, "the cup that my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?" (18:11). This time there is the thought that the Father is involved in the process and if he has given the cup, then there is no possibility that Jesus will not drink it. The death is not some accident that Jesus could not avoid, but the divinely appointed way whereby he would bring about the salvation of sinners. We should see this also in the fact that Scripture was fulfilled in the crucifixion (e.g., 19:36-37). What God has caused to be written in Scripture cannot fail of its fulfilment.

The thought that Jesus had come to earth in order to die for his people underlies much of what is said in this Gospel. Take, for example, his words on the occasion when the chief priests and the Pharisees sent men to arrest him: "Yet a little while I am with you and I go to him that sent me. You will look for me and you won't find me and where I am you cannot come" (7:33-34). There are no specific words about death, but the saying clearly means that evil people like those confronting him did not and could not say the decisive word about him. He had come on a mission from the Father and his death would in due course take place in the fulfilment of that mission. It was that, and not the plotting of men, that would determine his departure from this life. We should notice such words as "While I am in the world. . ." (9:5), Mary kept the unguent "for my burial" (12:7), "where I am going you cannot come" (13:3), "I am going away" (14:28) and others. Such passages do not specifically mention death and are certainly no part of any systematic treatment of the atonement, but, dropped more or less casually into the narrative as they are, they show us that throughout the period Jesus was conscious of the fact that he was going to his death, a death that was in line with the will of the Father. He would not die the way other people die; his death would be a death with a special significance.

<sup>18</sup> G. E. Ladd characterizes this as "a brief parable that is not unlike the Synoptic parables" and gives its meaning in these terms: "Jesus' mission of salvation involves his death. The gift of eternal life is mediated through his death" (*A Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 249).

That Jesus is "the Lamb of God" (1:29, 36) is a further indication that his death is important, especially since on the first occasion there is the addition "that takes away the sin of the world." There has been a good deal of discussion of the precise meaning of this expression and some curious explanations have been given.<sup>19</sup> But, whatever the precise meaning that John has in mind, I do not see how we can avoid the conclusion that he is using the imagery of sacrifice. Throughout the ancient world lambs were often used in the various sacrificial systems and the fact that this lamb takes away sin is surely conclusive. What the ancient sacrifices foreshadowed, that Jesus would completely fulfil. His death would be the definitive offering that really dealt with sin.

There is a very important passage in which Jesus speaks of giving his flesh "for the life of the world" (6:51) and goes on to say, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood you have no life in yourselves. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal and I will raise him up at the last day" (6:53-54). It is a commonly held scholarly opinion these days that the words refer to the Holy Communion, but the view fails to take account of the strength of the words used. Jesus says that without the eating and drinking in question "you have no life." But is anyone prepared to say that the one thing that brings us eternal life is the reception of the Holy Communion? Surely that is an impossible position. Neither in chap 6 nor anywhere else in John's Gospel is the Holy Communion mentioned and it is an impossibly sacramentarian position that makes the possession of eternal life dependent on eating bread and drinking wine.

The mention of flesh and blood in separation clearly points to death, so that Jesus is speaking, as he does elsewhere, of the death he would die. And throughout John 6 he refers to the spiritual food that he would bring. I do not see how the conclusion is to be avoided that at this point he is referring to the importance of receiving him by faith and specifically to receiving him in his capacity as the Savior who died for sinners.<sup>20</sup> The language used certainly has eucharistic overtones, but this should not be exaggerated. For example, Jesus speaks of eating his "flesh," a term not normally used of the eucharist (and possibly never so used in the early church). The term for the sacrament is "body" and no one seems to have given a convincing reason

<sup>19</sup> I have examined nine possible explanations in my *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 143-48) and have concluded that the author "is making a general allusion to sacrifice" (p. 147).

<sup>20</sup> He says that his flesh is "for the life of the world" (6:51). This can scarcely refer to the sacrament, for whatever gift is given there is a gift for the communicants. It was on Calvary that Jesus gave himself "for the life of the world."

for taking "flesh" here in a eucharistic sense. This term is not used in any of the NT accounts of the Holy Communion.<sup>21</sup> Once it is seen that the passage speaks of the way we should receive Christ and his atoning work there is no reason why we should not say, "This is the way we should receive Christ in the sacrament." But the evidence does not allow us to see simply a reference to Holy Communion.<sup>22</sup>

It is more important to see a reference to sacrifice than to the eucharist; flesh and blood in separation mean death and in this context the death means life for the world. D. Guthrie points out that the passage "brings out both the vicarious nature of Christ's death and its universal relevance. It is further evidence that Jesus was conscious of moving on towards an event which would result in the separation of flesh and blood, i.e., in death."<sup>23</sup>

John closes his account of Jesus' meeting with the woman at the well and his subsequent contact with the Samaritan villagers with the words of people who came to believe: "We know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (4:42). The expression "the Savior of the world" is found again in the NT only in 1 John 4:14. It is thus an unusual and expressive way "of bringing out the breadth of Jesus' saving work. He had come to bring salvation not to a few individuals here and there, but to believers the world over. While John does not say this explicitly in many passages it underlies his whole Gospel. Jesus is not to be understood simply as a teacher or as our perfect example. He came to bring salvation to people who could never accomplish it of themselves.

#### IV. *Life Eternal*

John tells us that the love of God was such "that he gave his only Son in order that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have life eternal" (3:16). The love of God in Christ means a lot to John. He tells us that Jesus loved his own in the world and loved them to the end (or utterly). Jesus said "no one has greater love than this that one lay down his life for his friends" (15:13), which, of course,

<sup>21</sup> I have examined the use in Ignatius and others in my *The Gospel according to John* (p. 375, n. 118).

<sup>22</sup> F. D. Maurice has a valuable comment: "If you ask me, then, whether he is speaking of the Eucharist here, I should say, 'No.' If you ask me where I can learn the meaning of the eucharist, I should say, 'Nowhere so well as here'" (cited in C. J. Wright, *Jesus the Revelation of God* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950] 180).

<sup>23</sup> *New Testament Theology*, 452. He goes on to say that this passage "differentiates the coming sacrifice of Christ from all Jewish sacrificial offerings: it is a self-giving. What is even more important is that the giving up of life by Jesus is seen as the basis of life for the world."

Jesus was about to do when he spoke the words. That the atonement proceeded from the divine love is made plain.<sup>24</sup>

The "giving" of the Son in 3:16 clearly refers to Calvary and the result of the giving is that every believer has life eternal. This is set over against perishing and points us to the life of the world to come. Eternal life is set over against judgment in 5:24 which gives us much the same thought. In the life to come we face perishing or condemnation on the one hand and the life that is appropriate to that age on the other. The word αἰώνιος which we translate as "eternal" properly means "pertaining to an age" and theoretically might refer to the age before creation or the present age. But it came to be used of the age to come: the term has eschatological significance. As the age to come never ends, the word sometimes means "everlasting" but it seems that John uses it characteristically to denote life of a special quality rather than life of outstanding quantity. He thinks of the life that Jesus brings as life that is proper to the age to come and of which believers have a foretaste in the here and now.

The expression "life eternal" occurs in John 17 times and "life" 36 times, but mostly there is no great difference between the two. Thus we read "He who believes in the Son has life eternal, but he who disobeys the Son will not see life" (3:36). It is impossible to hold that eternal life is in view in the first part of the sentence and some other kind of life in the second. It is important to see that the two do not differ greatly for some of the passages which speak only of "life" are significant for our understanding of eternal life. The life that Christ gives is eternal life and we are to see eternal life as obtained as a gift of Christ and in no other way. Several times we are told that this life is Christ's gift (e.g., 6:33; 10:28; 17:2).<sup>25</sup> It is described as the knowledge of the Father and of Christ (17:3). We get life when we come to Christ (6:35) whereas if we do not come to him we do not get life (5:40). Life is connected also with hearing him (5:24) and with seeing him (6:40). That it is Christ's gift comes out in other ways. Thus Jesus said to the woman at the well "If you knew God's free gift and who it is who says to you 'Give me something to drink' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (4:10). A few

<sup>24</sup> M. Hengel says, "In the last resort, in the man Jesus of Nazareth God took death upon himself"; "For Paul and John--and not only for them--the voluntary self-sacrifice of the sinless Son of God which took place once and for all for the unsurpassable expression of God's free love" (*The Atonement* [London: SCM, 1981] 74).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. W. G. Kummel, "As men's lost condition in the world is most clearly discernible for John in their mortality, so also salvation is to be seen above all in the gift of life. For John, Christ is 'the life,' because he bestows life" (*The Theology of the New Testament* [London: SCM, 1974] 292).

verses later we read "The water that I will give him will be in him a fountain of water leaping up into life eternal" (4:14). It is clear that John means us to see that eternal life is the gift of Jesus. We should possibly link this with the later statement that links "living water" to the Spirit who would be received in due course, "for it was not yet Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (7:38-39). This surely points us to the cross with its atonement and its gift of life.

The cross is linked with eternal life when we read that God gave his Son so that believers may obtain this life (3:16). This is also to be deduced from the fact that people get life from eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood (6:54); "eating" him (6:57) amounts to much the same thing. The separation of flesh and blood points to death, so clearly in these passages Jesus is saying that his death would bring life to believers. The Good Shepherd discourse emphasizes the place of that death. The essential thing about the Good Shepherd is that he gives his life for the sheep. And we should not forget that Jesus brought out the necessity for his death in the words "unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains by itself, alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit" (12:24).<sup>26</sup> Life is linked with Jesus' death also in the words in which Jesus reminds us of Moses lifting up the snake in the wilderness (3:14-15). Such passages make it clear that it is through the death of Jesus that life is brought to believers.

That it is believers who receive life is also important. It means that life does not come as a result of any work the pious may accomplish. It is not our good lives or our religious observances that avail; this Gospel makes it clear that nothing in the way of human merit can to produce life eternal. That is always the gift of God and it becomes ours when we receive it in humble faith.

#### *V. Christ Our Substitute*

John does not outline a theory of the way atonement is brought about, but he has a number of expressions that show that Christ died in our stead. We have already had occasion to notice the words of Caiaphas in which he laid it down "that it is expedient that one man should die for the people" (11:50; cf. 18:14). His "for" is ὑπέρ which often means no more than "on behalf of" in a general way. But it is

<sup>26</sup> J. C. Ryle sees in this verse "the great principle of the Gospel. . . once more exhibited,--that Christ's vicarious death (not His life, or miracles, or teaching, but His death) was to bring forth fruit to the praise of God, and to provide redemption for a lost world" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John* [3 vols; London: James Clarke, 1957] 2.376-77).

agreed that in some contexts it means "in the place of,"<sup>27</sup> and this will surely be its meaning here. In place of the death of the people Caiaphas wants to see the death of Jesus. Substitution is inherent in what he says.

This will be the case also with "Greater love than this no one has, that one should lay down his life for (ὕπέρ) his friends" (15:13). While this is expressed in the form of a general proposition there can be no doubt that it applies first and foremost to Christ's laying down of his life. People's sins put them in a hazardous position, but Jesus laid down his life in their behalf and they are free. With this we should take the words from Jesus' great prayer, "I sanctify myself on their behalf (ὕπέρ αὐτῶν)" (17:19). The verb is used in the language of sacrifice<sup>28</sup> and the saying points to the truth that Jesus set himself apart as a sacrifice on behalf of his people. This will also be in mind with the "Lamb of God" sayings in 1:29, 36. We have already noticed that they have a sacrificial force and that means Jesus taking the place of sinners in order to bring them salvation. Substitution is not a strand that is given strong emphasis in John, but it is there and we should take notice of it.

John then puts a great deal of emphasis on Jesus' atoning work. He never works out a theory of atonement but then this is the case with all the other New Testament writers as well. What he does do is to show us that we are sinners who stand under judgment and that left to ourselves we will never escape. But we are not left to ourselves. The point of Jesus' coming to earth is that he came to deal with the problem of our sin, to reveal to us something of the nature of God and by his death to bring to believers the precious gift of everlasting life. This may not be a theory of atonement, but it is the underlining of a very important truth and one that we neglect at our peril.

<sup>27</sup> A. T. Robertson cites Winer, "In most cases one who acts in behalf of another takes his place" and comments, "Whether he does or not depends on the nature of the action, not on ἀντί or ὑπέρ and proceeds to cite a number of classical passages where ὑπέρ conveys a substitutionary meaning. He finds this meaning also in a number of New Testament passages including this one (*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.] 630). Cf. E. A. Abbott, "In almost all the Johannine instances it refers to the death of one for the many" (*Johannine Grammar* [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906] 276).

<sup>28</sup> "Here the sense demands that we take it to mean 'offer myself as a sacrifice on their behalf'" (B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* [London: Oliphants, 1972] 529).

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