

“*IN THIS WAY THE LOVE OF  
GOD WAS REVEALED*” (1  
JN 4:9): ATONEMENT AS A  
“PATROGENETIC” PROCESS  
(PART I)

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“God gives love in such a way that he not only leaves room for but also empowers his covenant partner to love reciprocally.”



1. THE MODERN AVERSION  
TO A THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

The Church’s Scripture, doctrine, and worship all sanction the faith-conviction that Christ by his Passion and death atoned for sin, once for all. Yet in spite of this threefold sanctioning, the idea that the Cross is a work of atonement<sup>1</sup> has largely fallen out

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1. We shall start with a fairly general notion of atonement as “a way of eliminating sin.” See Norbert Hoffmann, “Atonement and the Spirituality of the Sacred Heart,” in *Faith in Christ and the Worship of Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 146n25.

of favor. Among theologians, one can detect an unmistakable reserve—even embarrassment—with regard to the idea. And things are not hugely different in the world of parish faith formation. On most occasions when the Scripture readings at Mass testify expressly to the atoning purpose of Christ's Cross, the priest or deacon proves masterful in avoiding the subject.

Benedict XVI is aware of this tendency and challenges it in his masterwork, *Jesus of Nazareth*. He observes, "The idea that God allowed the forgiveness of sins to cost him the death of his Son" is seen as theologically repugnant. One reason for this, according to Benedict, is "the trivialization of evil."<sup>2</sup> We seem to have a very small estimate of human guilt, the menace of sin, and the damage it causes. We presume that we sinners know all about sin. After all, we are its perpetrators. Insofar as the trivialization of evil holds sway, the message that Christ's Passion and death is a work of atonement cannot but strike us as an overreaction on God's part.

Another reason for the modern aversion to the idea of atonement is a reaction to the portrayal of God the Father as a celestial child abuser vis-à-vis Christ crucified, as someone who unleashes violent fury on his Son for sins of which his Son is innocent. Such a portrayal gained a foothold in Catholic circles under the influence of Jansenism. Here is but one example in a sermon by a Catholic bishop, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet: "I see only an irritated God. . . . The man, Jesus, has been thrown under the multiple and redoubled blows of divine vengeance. . . . As it vented itself, so his [the Father's] anger diminished. . . . This is what passed on the Cross, until the Son of God read in the eyes of his Father that he was fully appeased. . . . When an avenging God waged war upon his Son, the mystery of our peace is accomplished."<sup>3</sup>

Closely coupled with this *misconception* of divine wrath is another mistaken view, one that fails to preserve the generative modality of the Father's love in relation to the work of atonement. In this view, the Son's role is to win back the Father's love for the human race. This, however, is at odds with the Johan-

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2. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 159.

3. Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Oeuvres oratoires de Bossuet*, vol. 3 (Lille: Desclée De Brouwer, 1891), 382–83.

nine proclamation that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16)<sup>4</sup> and the Pauline passage that declares, "It is precisely in this that God [the Father] proves his love for us: that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8; cf. 8:31–34). If we are to do justice to the biblical testimony, we must show that the Son's work of atonement is the result of the Father's love. It does not result *in* the Father's love being revived or jumpstarted, as it were.

At the opposite pole from these misconceptions are those readings of Christ's Passion that outright reject the idea that it achieved atonement. Typical of this stance are the remarks of Peter Fiedler: "Jesus had proclaimed the Father's unconditional will to forgive. Was the Father's grace, then, insufficiently bountiful . . . that he had to insist on the Son's atonement all the same?"<sup>5</sup> Theologians and preachers in this camp are unable or unwilling to make understandable St. John's claim that we have come to know that God is love *precisely in view* of God's sending his Son as atonement. "God is love. *In this way* the love of God was revealed to us. . . . *In this* is God's love . . . that he sent his Son as expiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4:8–10, emphasis added). To the sensibility of many like Fiedler, the two prongs of this claim (God is love *and* the Cross is atonement) are mutually exclusive.<sup>6</sup> An adequate response to this camp must appreciate the weight of questions like these: "Is God really so 'manifest' as love in the Cross of his Son? Can this 'manifestly' be love, when it has something so terrible, not only as its symbol, but also as the locus of its fulfillment?"<sup>7</sup>

Enough has been said to show that there are problems associated with the idea of Christ's Cross as atonement for sin.

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4. Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural quotations are from the NABRE (New American Bible, Revised Edition).

5. Peter Fiedler, "Sünde und Vergebung im Christentum" in *Concilium* 10 (1974): 568–71, at 569. Other positions in this category interpret the Cross event as the historical manifestation of God's unqualified will to forgive (see Karl Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith* [New York: Crossroad, 1987], 282ff.), or as the unmasking of the scapegoat mechanism (see Raymund Schwager's *Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock* [Munich: Kosel-Verlag, 1978], 143ff., 211–12), or as mere "solidarity" (see Edward Schillebeeckx's *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* [New York: Crossroad, 1981], 310).

6. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 144.

7. *Ibid.*, 143.

In our judgment, the nub of the problem lies in the heart of the mystery of God, the Holy Trinity. For this reason, we will bypass such preliminary areas as the history of religion and culture, philosophical ethics, and related juridical categories. We will focus instead on uncovering the hidden “theo-logic”<sup>8</sup> of atonement in sacred Scripture. Our aim is to make the mystery of atonement sufficiently transparent to the mystery of God, and, in the first place, to the mystery of God *the Father* (1 Jn 4:8–10).<sup>9</sup> In endeavoring to do so, we are taking seriously the declaration of the Catechism that “the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life . . . the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them” (§234). This warrants our earnest efforts to illuminate the mystery of atonement chiefly against the backdrop of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup>

Since the ground to be covered against this backdrop spans both the Old and the New Testaments, we will develop a theology of atonement in a series of two articles. In the current article, we will discuss three factors integral to the process of atonement in the Old Testament and explain how these factors fit together. Along the way, we will highlight the “patrogenetic”<sup>11</sup> structure of this process. In the second article (forthcoming in the next issue of *Communio*), we will discuss how, in the Cross

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8. By the term “theo-logic” we mean an intelligibility, purposefulness, and meaningfulness that derives from the mystery of God, the Holy Trinity.

9. See Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 144–45.

10. Balthasar, in one of his earliest works, expressed the permanently valid concern that “all the theological tractates be given a Trinitarian form” (*Razing the Bastions: On the Church in this Age* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 29).

11. We use the term “patrogen(n)etic” as defined by Raphael Schulte in “Die Heilstat des Vaters in Christus,” in *Mysterium Salutis*, vol. 3/1 (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967), 49–84. “In view of the trinitarian and christological structure of the entire order of creation and salvation . . . it is helpful to use the dual term ‘genetic/gennetic,’ familiar to us from the trinitarian controversies, and to apply it, albeit now in a reverse direction, i.e., from the point of view of God *the Father*, to all things as proceeding from him, the *ex quo omnia*: God the Father is the source of the Word, the Son, whom he begets (*gennao*) . . . and thus the Son’s relation to him is seen to be ‘patrogenetic.’ . . . But since God the Father is always the *ex quo omnia* with regard to creation (and its maintenance), it follows that all created reality must be seen and understood in a ‘theogenetic,’ indeed ‘patrogenetic’ way. . . . Clearly, then, every person and thing must be held to be patrogen(n)etic (*ad intra* as well as *ad extra*), dependent on God the Father as their origin and originator” (ibid., 53).

event, the Old Testament process of atonement is "raised to the height of a 'Trinitarian event.'"<sup>12</sup> The mystery of the Son's mission from the Father to bear away the sin of the world will become more coherent when we see the paths that converge upon it from the old covenant.

Despite its two-part length, the theology of atonement presented here can be nothing more than a sketch. This sketch is inspired by a cadre of theologians who, over the last fifty years, put forth substantial insights into the mystery of atonement, namely Norbert Hoffmann, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, and Pope St. John Paul II. Naturally, the sketch that results from a synthesis of their principal ideas must yet undergo testing by the Church and its Magisterium. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that key positions elaborated here are found in the encyclicals and catechetical audiences of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. These claims will be demonstrated in what follows.

## 2. TOWARD A BIBLICAL—AND TRINITARIAN— THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

First of all, we espouse the conviction that redemption from sin is essentially a mystery that ultimately must be interpreted by God—or, as the Catechism insists, illuminated by the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Hence, in order to arrive at an adequate understanding, we must allow the triune God's self-revelation in biblical history to shed light on this mystery. And since the Old and New Testaments form an indissoluble unity, we will take as our basis the New Testament interpretation of the Cross together with its presuppositions in the Old Testament. The event of Christ's Cross did not irrupt suddenly and altogether abruptly into biblical history. There was a preparation for it in Israel's covenant history with God. Indeed, the New Testament sees the Cross event as the historical *culmination* of God's redemptive action, which should prompt us to look back to the Old Testament

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12. International Theological Commission [= ITC], "Select Questions on Christology [1979]," in *International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents, 1969–1985* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 200.

to identify precursors to the Cross of Christ.<sup>13</sup> If, in combing through the Old Testament, we can identify constant factors in connection with the process of cleansing from sin, these factors may enable us “to go beyond the mere fact of the Cross, subject as it is to a variety of interpretations, to see what is actually going on deep down within it.”<sup>14</sup>

### 3. THE OLD TESTAMENT: THREE FACTORS INTEGRAL TO THE PROCESS OF ATONEMENT

When Hoffmann and Balthasar examine the way in which cleansing from sin is concretely portrayed in the Old Testament, they find three constant factors in a process that involves the interplay of freedom between God and his covenant partner.<sup>15</sup> Two factors are found on God’s side; a third factor lies on the side of God’s covenant partner.

#### 3.1. *God’s sovereign initiative*

*On God’s side*, atonement for sin is the result of (1) *his own sovereign initiative*. God is the one whose actions are decisive, not only in making atonement possible, but in originating the covenant itself.<sup>16</sup> A brief glance at Deuteronomy perceives that the covenant derives from God’s election of this particular people, “for which no reason can be given (Dt 7:6–7), without any merit on the people’s part (9:6; 8:17), on the basis of love alone (7:8;

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13. As Balthasar puts it, “that which brings fulfilment can be understood only together with *what it fulfils*” (*Theology: The Old Covenant*, vol. 6 of *The Glory of the Lord* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], 402 [hereafter cited as *GL6*]).

14. Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 147.

15. See *ibid.*, 147–48, 156. Balthasar says as much in *The Action*, vol. 4 of *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 229 (hereafter cited as *TD4*).

16. See F. Maass, “Sühnen,” in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* [Concise Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament], vol. 1 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1984), 842–57.

10:15)."<sup>17</sup> It is a love that, in initiating the covenant, focuses on mutuality with an unswerving commitment (Dt 6:5; cf. Ex 6:7; Lv 26:11–12). Consequently, the relationship that God establishes can live only by the dynamic process of "word and answer, love and reciprocating love, directive and obedience."<sup>18</sup>

When the answer of obedient love is not given, God himself provides the means for the restoration of the covenant relationship. Joseph Ratzinger highlights this factor as follows: "In other world religions, expiation usually means the restoration of the damaged relationship with God by means of expiatory actions initiated on the part of men. . . . [In the Bible, however,] *God restores the damaged relationship on the initiative of his own power to love*, by making unjust man just again, . . . through his own creative mercy."<sup>19</sup>

Presupposed here is that sin is not simply excused or passed over by God; it is not forgiven in unilateral fashion without making right that which went wrong. Rather, God initiates a process involving atonement as the means whereby sins shall be forgiven (cf. Ex 29:35–37; Lv 1:3–4; Heb 9:22).<sup>20</sup> This process, moreover, has a "patrogenetic" structure: the work of atonement will ultimately originate from and be engendered by God's own power to love.

### 3.2. *God's passionate involvement*

In addition, *on God's side* atonement for sin entails (2) *his passionate involvement* with his covenant partner. The fact that God, out of a free initiative, guarantees the covenant as the utterly sovereign covenant Lord does not contradict the fact that he "courts the trust of the people with living warmth of feeling and looks

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17. Balthasar, *GL6*, 155.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 214 (emphasis added).

20. See Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae: The Person of Christ*, vol. 3 of *Theodrama* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 118 (hereafter cited as *TD3*). See also Hoffmann, "Atonement," 157–58.

for a response that is spontaneous and from the heart.”<sup>21</sup> The covenant relationship is the privileged place where God reveals his profound passion of love—his “burning and tender love”<sup>22</sup>—for his chosen partner.

According to Jon Levenson, Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University, the language of God’s passion of love pervades the Hebrew Scriptures. Of special import is Deuteronomy 7:7–8: “The LORD set his heart on you and chose you . . . it was because the LORD loved you.” The verb translated here as “set his heart on” is *ḥašaq* in Hebrew. This verb (and its associated noun *ḥešeq*) can be reasonably interpreted as “indicating a love of a particularly intense and passionate character.”<sup>23</sup> Thus Israel’s status as God’s covenant partner “is owing to God’s love for them, the fact that he conceived a passion (*ḥašaq*) for them, as it were.”<sup>24</sup>

This already indicates in what sense suffering can be attributed to God. For if a lover truly values another, any “inaccessibility” of the beloved will be painful. Inasmuch as God freely gets involved with creatures whose hearts can be far from and even hardened against him, he takes on the hurt of rejection.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, when God’s love is rebuffed or betrayed, the Old Testament tells us that God is “affected by sin, hurt by it.”<sup>26</sup> He suffers

21. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961), 52.

22. Balthasar, *GL6*, 240. See also Balthasar’s *Engagement with God: The Drama of Christian Discipleship* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 13–15.

23. Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 176; see also 91–92.

24. *Ibid.*, 48.

25. See Robert Barron, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 1998), 147–48, 205.

26. Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 149. The ITC affirms that “God loves us with the love of friendship, and he wishes to be loved by us in return. When this love is offended, Sacred Scripture speaks of suffering on the part of God” (in the 1981 document “Theology, Christology, Anthropology,” II.B.4.2, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1982\\_tologia-cristologia-antropologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1982_tologia-cristologia-antropologia_en.html)). See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 295; Alfons Deissler, “Gottes Selbstoffenbarung im Alten Testament,” in *Mysterium Salutis*, vol. 2 (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1967), 226–71.



the passion of an injured love, comparable to a husband abandoned by his unfaithful wife (Hos 2), and to a father in the face of his disobedient and ungrateful children (Is 1:2, 30:9). Isaiah 63:9–10 tells us that "in all their affliction he [YHWH] was afflicted, . . . yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit." The eleventh chapter of Hosea is particularly poignant in this regard (see Hos 11:1–8).

God's passionate involvement, moreover, takes the form of anger at the injustices, wickedness, and hardness of heart on man's part (Dt 4:25, 6:15; Is 33:14; Zeph 1:18; Zech 8:2). Israel's infidelity "provokes" the Lord, "stirs him up": "a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol" (Dt 32:16).<sup>27</sup> This anger on God's part, however, is not an irrational, blameworthy, or ego-driven emotion, but identical with God's fundamental character of love and righteousness.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, God's affective involvement with his covenant partner is expressed also as joy and delight (Is 62:4–5). As we read in the Book of Jeremiah, "Is not Ephraim a precious son to me, a delightful child? Though I often speak against him, I remember him lovingly still. This is why I yearn for him, why I have great compassion for him," declares the LORD" (Jer 31:20). With good reason, therefore, Hoffmann concludes that God's passion of love stands at the "innermost center of the testimony intended in the Old Testament."<sup>29</sup>

At first glance these characteristics of God—love, compassion, kindness, long-suffering and zealous commitment (among others)—may seem to eliminate God's exalted otherness, since they are found in the sphere of human relationships. Yet it must not be forgotten that they are attributed to the absolute subject, that is, the one who as the only Lord is not a being in the world alongside other beings (whose influence he therefore would have to endure involuntarily). God's sublime transcendence, in the eyes of Israel's faith, is seen primarily in the incomprehensible fact that he, the only one (Is 43:10–12) who is

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27. See Balthasar, *GL6*, 48. See also Deissler, "Gottes Selbstoffenbarung im Alten Testament," 267ff.

28. See Balthasar, *TD4*, 344; Heschel, *The Prophets*, 219.

29. Hoffmann, *Kreuz und Trinität: Zur Theologie der Sühne* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1982), 22. See Balthasar, *GL6*, 234, 257.

absolutely free and sovereign, deigns to become wholly involved with his covenant partner without being changed, either for the better or for the worse, by that involvement. Indeed, God, in stooping to communicate himself, aims to draw his covenant beloved into the sphere of his transcendent holiness—“into a ‘land’ that belongs to God, and all the creature’s concepts are transformed thereby.”<sup>30</sup>

Inevitably this raises the theological question about God’s capacity to suffer on our account. Since God’s passionate involvement is an essential factor in the theology of atonement under development here, we will pause to clarify inadequate and adequate ways in which it can be understood.

The first thing to note is the seriousness with which the tradition takes the idea of God suffering: the Second Council of Constantinople (533 AD) says, “he who was crucified in the flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ, is . . . one of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>31</sup> To be sure, the Church’s Magisterium has not endorsed as normative a single explanatory model of the mystery of God’s involvement in suffering, but it has decidedly rejected the views that lie at opposite extremes: that God is aloof from and indifferent to his creatures’ plight (on the one hand) and that God is overwhelmed by and enmeshed in the suffering of the world (on the other).<sup>32</sup>

In our day, the papacy has begun to flesh out the middle ground between these two extremes. Pope John Paul II, for instance, agrees that God, in the sovereign freedom of his passion of love, allows himself to be pained by sin. The pontiff asserts this boldly and unambiguously in his encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* (On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World).

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30. Balthasar, *GL6*, 177.

31. Second Council of Constantinople, “Canon 10” (Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012], 432). In the years leading up to this Council, the criterion of an orthodox interpretation of the Chalcedonian definition is acceptance of theopaschite formulas, e.g., “one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh.” See John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Thought* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 70–72.

32. See Paul L. Gavrilyuk’s essay, “God’s Impassible Suffering in the Flesh: The Promise of Paradoxical Christology,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, eds. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, OP (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 149.

It is not possible to grasp the evil of sin in all its sad reality without "searching the depths of God." [If the world is to be convinced concerning sin (cf. Jn 16:8–9), it will] have to mean *revealing suffering*. *Revealing the pain*, unimaginable and inexpressible, on account of sin [which Scripture, notwithstanding certain anthropomorphic formulations] seems to glimpse in the "depths of God" and in a certain sense in the very heart of the Trinity. The Church, taking her inspiration from Revelation, believes and professes that sin is an offense against God. What corresponds, in the inscrutable intimacy of the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, to this "offense," this rejection of the Spirit who is gift and love? The concept of God as the necessarily most perfect being certainly excludes from God any pain deriving from deficiencies; but in the "depths of God" there is a Father's love that, faced with man's sin, in the language of the Bible reacts so very deeply. . . . [Furthermore,] the Sacred Book speaks to us of a Father who feels compassion for man, as though sharing his pain. In a word, this inscrutable and indescribable *fatherly "pain" will bring about* above all the wonderful economy of redemptive love in Jesus Christ . . . in whose humanity *the "suffering" of God is concretized*.<sup>33</sup>

*If sin caused suffering, now the pain of God in Christ crucified acquires through the Holy Spirit its full human expression.* Thus there is a paradoxical mystery of love: in Christ there *suffers a God who has been rejected by his own creature*: "They do not believe in me!"; but at the same time, *from the depth of this suffering . . . the Spirit draws a new measure of the gift made to man and to creation from the beginning.* In the depth of the mystery of the Cross, *[divine] love is at work*, that love which brings man back again to share in the life that is in God himself.<sup>34</sup>

Straightaway we must notice that John Paul II situates God's fatherly pain in the face of sin, understood as the rejection of God's love. Implicit here is the suggestion that the suffering of God that is "concretized" in his crucified Son is not only divine compassion in view of the miseries sin causes in the world of

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33. *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 4, 39 (emphasis original). Hoffmann concurs, "The 'consequences' of sin extend to the Heart of God" ("Atonement," 165). Barron, too, agrees: see *And Now I See*, 218.

34. *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 4, 41 (emphasis original).

men. It is also divine suffering on account of the separation that sin brings about in God's covenant relationship with men.

Next we note that John Paul II is careful to qualify the way in which God suffers in the face of sin. Clearly he does not limit this suffering to the human nature taken up by God the Son at his Incarnation but traces it back to "the depths of God," to the very heart of the Holy Trinity. At the same time, he is quick to insist that this divine manner of suffering does not derive from any deficiencies or imperfections of the divine nature. Instead it derives from God's nature as absolute trinitarian love; this love God graciously offers to men, and it remains unchangeably perfect even in the face of men's rejection. Indeed the God who *is* love proves he can suffer in such a way that, far from being incapacitated or weakened, his love is *actively at work* and in reality "reveals itself as stronger than sin. So that the 'gift' [of divine love] may prevail!"<sup>35</sup>

In yet another of his encyclicals, *Dives in misericordia* (Rich in Mercy), which is devoted to the mystery of God the Father, Pope John Paul II affirms that the Father suffers in a divine manner when his beloved children distance themselves from him. "In the parable of the prodigal son," he says, "the son had not only squandered the part of the inheritance belonging to him but had also *hurt and offended his father*. . . . It was bound to make him [the father] *suffer*. It was also bound to implicate him in some way. After all, it was his own son who was involved. . . . There is no doubt that in this simple but penetrating analogy the figure of the father reveals to us God as Father."<sup>36</sup>

Significantly, the pope envisions an analogical relation between human and divine modalities of suffering love. The suffering of love he highlights is much more a divine quality that we find echoed in man than a human quality projected onto God. This position is reinforced in *Dominum et vivificantem*, where he asserts that God's inscrutable "*fatherly 'pain'*" acquires "its full human expression"—indeed, is "concretized"—in the humanity of the crucified *Son*. Precisely here the scope of analogical relation expands to include, not only the likeness that reigns between

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35. *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 4, 39.

36. *Dives in misericordia*, IV, 5–6 (emphasis original).

the *divine* nature and *human* nature (the infinite ontological difference notwithstanding), but also the likeness that reigns between divine *fatherhood* and divine *sonship* (their difference as personal modes of divine existence notwithstanding). Because God *the Son*, who is the perfect reflection of the Father's being (cf. Heb 1:3; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), assumes a human nature, the *filial* "one of the Trinity [who] suffered in the flesh" reveals something of the mystery of the *Father's* passion of love for men without his divine nature undergoing change thereby.<sup>37</sup>

Noteworthy too is Ratzinger's position articulated in an essay on the Sacred Heart.

In the period of the Fathers it was doubtless Origen who grasped most profoundly the idea of the suffering God and made bold to say that it could not be restricted to the suffering humanity of Jesus but also affected the Christian picture of God. The Father suffers in allowing the Son to suffer, and the Spirit shares in this suffering . . . (Rom 8:26f). And it was Origen who gave the normative definition of the way in which the theme of the suffering God is to be interpreted: *When you hear someone speak of God's passions, always apply what is said to love. So God is a sufferer because he is a lover.* The entire theme of the suffering God flows from that of the loving God and always points back to it. The actual advance registered by the Christian idea of God over that of the ancient world lies in its recognition that God is *caritas*.<sup>38</sup>

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37. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §470; ITC, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," II.B.2–3; and Angela Franz Franks, "Trinitarian *Analogia Entis* in Hans Urs von Balthasar," *The Thomist* 62, no. 4 (October 1998): 533–59.

38. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Mystery of Easter: Substance and Foundation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart," in *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 57–58 (emphasis added). In note 11, Ratzinger refers to several Catholic thinkers whose treatment of the question of the suffering of God he recommends. Listed first is J. Galot's "important book," *Dieu souffre-t-il?* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1976). Next he recommends Balthasar's discussion in *The Last Act*, vol. 5 of *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 239–46 (hereafter cited as *TD5*). He mentions as well "a remarkable treatise" by Jacques Maritain entitled "Quelques réflexions sur le savoir théologique," *Revue Thomiste* 77 (1969): 5–27. Finally, he promotes John Paul II's encyclical *Dives in misericordia*.

Further on in the same essay, Ratzinger offers an interpretation of the eleventh chapter of the book of Hosea that provides light by which to understand his later remarks on Hosea in *Deus caritas est*. Here he describes Hosea 11 as “the Canticle of the Love of God,”<sup>39</sup> in which “the drama of the divine Heart” is revealed.<sup>40</sup> This drama is centered on “the pain felt by God’s Heart on account of the sins” of his people, which amount to their rejection of his love. In the face of this rejection, “God ought to revoke Israel’s election, . . . but ‘My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender’ [Hos 11:8].”<sup>41</sup> God’s love proves unfailing and irrevocable, despite being woundable. From this vantage point, Ratzinger directs us to see “the pierced Heart of the crucified Son as the literal fulfillment of the [Hosean] prophecy of the Heart of God.” Indeed, “here [in the Cross event] we see the upheaval in the Heart of God as God’s own genuine Passion. It consists in God himself in the person of his Son, suffering Israel’s rejection.” Hence, for Ratzinger, “we can only discern the full magnitude of the biblical message of the Heart of God in this continuity and harmony of Old and New Testament.”<sup>42</sup>

Decades later, Pope Benedict XVI makes the revelation of God’s heart—God’s passion of love—a central theme of his encyclical *Deus caritas est* (God is Love).

The one God in whom Israel believes . . . loves with a personal love. His love, moreover, is an elective love: among all the nations he chooses Israel and loves her. . . . God loves, and his love may certainly be called *eros*, yet it is also totally *agape*. . . .

We have seen that God’s *eros* for man is also totally *agape*. This is not only because it is bestowed in a completely gratuitous manner, without any previous merit, but also

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39. Ratzinger, “The Mystery of Easter,” 62, where he echoes the designation made by H. Gross in “Das Hohelied der Liebe Gottes: Zur Theologie von Hosea 11,” in *Mysterium der Gnade* (Festschrift für Johann Auer), eds. H. Rossman and J. Ratzinger (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1975), 83–91.

40. Ratzinger, “The Mystery of Easter,” 64.

41. *Ibid.*, 63.

42. *Ibid.*, 64. Cf. Balthasar, *Theology of the New Covenant*, vol. 7 of *Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 35 (hereafter cited as *GL7*).

because it is love which forgives. Hosea above all shows us that this *agape* dimension of God's love for man goes far beyond the aspect of gratuity. Israel has committed "adultery" and has broken the covenant; God should judge and repudiate her. . . . "How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! . . . My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" (Hos 11:8). God's *passionate* love for his people—for humanity—is at the same time a *forgiving* love. . . .

On the one hand we find ourselves before a metaphysical image of God: God is the absolute and ultimate source of all being; but . . . [God] is at the same time *a lover with all the passion of a true love*. *Eros* is thus supremely ennobled, yet at the same time it is so purified as to become one with *agape*.<sup>43</sup>

To be sure, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II want to preserve divine impassibility: the idea that God is not naturally subject to *pathos*.<sup>44</sup> Yet they are equally concerned to render it compatible with God's self-revelation in biblical history. For them, it is ultimately the Cross event that compels us to deepen our understanding of God's way of being impassible. A notion of God's impassibility that is not informed by the drama of salvation history would fail to present the *full* dimensions of this divine attribute. After all, God reveals himself in definitive fullness only in the unique event of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. If theological reflection is to do justice to God's self-revelation, it must let itself be governed by the christological narrative. This means that it will not suffice to define divine attributes (like impassibility) apart from the revelation of God in Christ Jesus.

Consider, for instance, how Pope Benedict takes his stand beneath the Cross and, in beholding the pierced one, discerns that

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43. *Deus caritas est*, 9–10 (emphasis added). See also Levenson, *The Love of God*, 172–78. In the patristic era, Pseudo-Dionysius observed that there are places in Scripture where the biblical writers regard *agape* and *eros* as equivalent: "To those who listen carefully to divine things, the term *agape* is used by the sacred writers in divine revelation with the exact same meaning as the term *eros*" (*Divine Names* 4.11–12).

44. "The Fathers underline (against the pagan mythologies) the '*apatheia*' of God. . . . For them the term '*apatheia*' indicates the opposite of '*pathos*,' a word that means involuntary suffering imposed from the outside or as a consequence of fallen nature" (ITC, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," II.B.3).

God's true omnipotence is manifest in his omnipotent suffering of love. "In the Face of the Crucified Christ, we see *God* and we see true omnipotence, not the myth of omnipotence. . . . In him *true omnipotence is loving to the point that God can suffer*: here *his true omnipotence is revealed*, which can even go as far as *a love that suffers* for us. And *thus we see that he is the true God*."<sup>45</sup> For Benedict, just as omnipotence is an attribute of divinity, so too its authenticating characteristic "as a love that suffers for us" is here attributed to divinity. In his view (shared with John Paul II), this capacity—to love to the point of suffering on our account—belongs to the divine nature and not only to the human nature assumed by God the Son. Indeed, the latter is the consummate manifestation of the former.<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly, both Benedict XVI and John Paul II go beyond the question of *whether* God is impassible to the question of the *character* of God's impassibility. Seen in the light of the crucified Son, divine impassibility is manifest as God's omnipotent passion of love: the strength of divine love to freely endure all things without failing; and what the loving God endures includes the hurt of rejection. This characterization perceives the consistency of the Passion of Christ with the general biblical character of God's passionate love for humanity. If Christ, the Son of God, assumed the role of the Suffering Servant, this was done in accordance with his divine existence as the Image of the Father. Indeed, for these popes, the Cross event sets forth *both* the humanity *and* the divinity of Christ. It sets forth the *humanity* inasmuch as it was enacted by the Son through his human nature: the Son *as man* handed himself over to sinners, was crucified, and died as expiation for our sins. But the Cross event also sets forth the *divinity* of the Son inasmuch as it characterizes the power of love

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45. Benedict XVI, Visit to the Pontifical Roman Major Seminary in Honour of the Memorial of Our Lady of Trust (Rome, 12 February 2010), [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100212\\_seminario-romano-mag.html#](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100212_seminario-romano-mag.html#) (emphasis added).

46. This view, too, is held by John Paul II: "God's omnipotence is manifested precisely in the fact that he freely accepted suffering. . . . The Man of Sufferings is the revelation of that [divine] love which 'endures all things' (1 Cor 13:7)" (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994], 65–66).



to freely bear all things (1 Cor 13:7–8) as consistent with *God's* all-powerful passion of love.<sup>47</sup>

In yet another of his works, Ratzinger vigorously underlines "the newness of the Christian concept of God," which perceives "an intimate passion in God . . . that even constitutes his true essence: *love*."<sup>48</sup> Admittedly, he spends little time spelling out a metaphysical explanation of the mystery of God's impassible way of being passionate. For him, what matters most is to meditate on the mystery of God by gazing on Christ crucified, and in the light of christological revelation to re-envision the divine attributes.<sup>49</sup>

Plainly, both of these popes (as well as Hoffmann and Balthasar) advance a notion of divine impassibility that is thought anew in light of God's self-revelation in biblical history, and consequently is understood in a qualified sense. For them, God is capable of "suffering" insofar as the term signifies the *passion of love* (*passio caritatis*) and *compassion*, so long as we stress that God preserves his sovereignly free initiative of pure charity (in which eros and agape coincide) and remains active in and unhampered by suffering. God demonstrates his impassible passion in that God's love is all-powerful and unfailing through whatever suffering God would freely endure. And since God's passion of love in the face of sin is a voluntary modality of the pure *actio* of absolute *caritas* that constitutes God's essence, then God's essential perfection is not damaged or diminished on that account.<sup>50</sup> To reconcile the immutability

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47. Discernible in the theology of these popes is an application of patristic thought as it unfolds the covenantal logic at work in the wondrous exchange and reversal that the triune God accomplished through the Cross event. See Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 123.

48. Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at Its Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 77.

49. In our judgment, Pope Benedict XVI's theological method and aims resemble those of St. Gregory of Nyssa. See Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 196–98.

50. The patristic literature supports this view. Tertullian ascribes to God such passions as long-suffering, mercy, and anger, in accordance with the biblical revelation of God and of man created in the image of God. Yet God undergoes these passions in a divine way, in the manner appropriate to him; see Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 2.16.4–7. Origen famously articulated the

of the biblical God with his capacity to suffer impassibly, we must distinguish between the absolute necessity and eternal perfection of God's trinitarian life, on the one hand, and the sovereign and omnipotent freedom out of which God creates, redeems, and deifies human beings, on the other. The sins of men do not render God's nature less perfect. Nonetheless, God, in full control of his passion of love, freely lets his almighty love take on the hurt of rejection.<sup>51</sup>

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stance that divine impassibility does not denote the absence of affectivity; rather, it denotes God's perfect control over his affectivity, such that it is expressive only of pure selfless love. Hence Origen can say, "In his love for man, the Impassible One suffered merciful compassion" (see Origen's *Homilies on Ezekiel* 6.6; *Commentary on Matthew* 17.20; *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 8.9; *On the First Principles* 4.4.4). Lactantius follows suit; he attributes both impassibility and passions to God (love, patience, mercy, anger) without contradiction. For, assuredly, God's passions are different from those of men, since they remain under "God's complete control" (see *De ira Dei* [On the Anger of God] 21.7–8). Novatian for his part teaches that passions are possible in God, inasmuch as they are completely harmonious with divine reason; see *De Trinitatis* 5. For these Christian writers, passions, when pure and blameless, are perfections of the human spirit and can therefore be attributed analogously to God in an eminent degree and without any imperfection. Yet this sort of impassibility is not the only kind that the Fathers attribute to God. For them, God's impassible way of being passionate is a perfection not only morally, as it were, but also ontologically. In this regard, the *negation* embedded in the notion of divine *impassibility* is meant to protect the reality and radicality of God's involvement with us while distinguishing it from the involvement proper to mere men who, being natural parts of the fallen world, are subject to external misfortunes and internal (mental and emotional) disturbances contrary to their personal will. What is *positively* indicated is (1) that God's affective involvement is based on God's wholly un-needy initiative, and (2) that God remains active in and unhampered by suffering—like a salamander passes unharmed through fire. Most of these points are made by St. Gregory Thaumaturgus in his treatise *On the Impassibility and Passibility of God*. See also St. Maximus the Confessor, *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love* 1.2, 1.81, 4.91. In addition, see ITC, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," II.B.3; Michael Figura, "The Suffering of God in Patristic Theology," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 366–85, at 373; Gavriilyuk, "God's Impassible Suffering in the Flesh," 127–49; and H. Crouzel, "La Passion de l'Impassible: Un essai apologétique et polémique du IIIe siècle," in *L'Homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac*, vol. 1, coll. Théologie, 56 (Paris: Aubier, 1963), 269–79. For Balthasar's treatment of the notion of the "*apatheia*" of God as found in the Fathers, see *TD5*, 216–23.

51. See Margaret M. Turek, "The Paternal Affectivity of the Immutable God," in *Towards a Theology of God the Father: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theodramatic Approach* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001), 167–88.

### 3.3. *Man's willing collaboration in the process of atonement*

The third constant factor in the Old Testament process of eliminating sin lies on the side of God's covenant partner. Atonement for sin requires (3) *man's participation and willing collaboration*.

As we have seen, in the vision of the Old Testament God's love for Israel is utterly gratuitous; it is given without any previous merit on Israel's side. But as Levenson observes, gratuitousness "does not mean normlessness." While covenantal love may originate on God's side as sheer gratuity, "it must also harbor moral expectations within it. . . . One obvious expectation of genuine love [is] that it be reciprocal."<sup>52</sup> So although God remains faithful to Israel even when his beloved breaks the covenant, God's fidelity includes his firm insistence that Israel live up to the terms of the alliance—terms that define the concrete shape of reciprocal love. Thus the covenant relationship is both unconditional and conditional. It is unconditional in that God's love comes into and remains at play even when nothing has been done to earn it. "But the relationship is also conditional," says Levenson, "in that it involves expectations and stipulations,"<sup>53</sup> all of which boil down to the chief commandment of unreserved love for God (Dt 6:4–9).<sup>54</sup>

Yet we would be wrong to think that, once God initiates this interplay of love, his covenant partner is on his own as to his appropriate response. For God gives love in such a way that he not only leaves room for but also empowers his covenant partner to love reciprocally. Hence, the covenant is two-sided only because of the generative nature and aim of God's love. It is a love intent on engendering mutuality already in its self-donation.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the love the beloved gives to God in return is always *God-engendered* love, *filial* love—love that depends on and derives from the love it has first been shown.

But there is still more to it. Israel's return of love is not only derivative; it is also *imitative*. The response that God engenders

52. Levenson, *The Love of God*, 54–55.

53. *Ibid.*, 61. See Balthasar, *TD4*, 228.

54. See also Dt 10:12–13, 11:13; Mt 22:37–38; Mk 12:28–34; Lk 10:27.

55. See Balthasar, *GL6*, 109.

is filial love that *mirrors* or *imitates* God's paternal love.<sup>56</sup> Consider, for instance, that it is because God elects Israel out of love without motive (Dt 7:7–9)—which bespeaks the selflessness proper to the transcendent Lord—that Israel is summoned to a response of love without reserve (Dt 6:5)—the mode of selflessness proper to God's chosen beloved. More precisely, the filial love to which Israel is summoned consists above all in obedience. As Balthasar observes, “The response ‘I will’ resounds through all its songs of praise,”<sup>57</sup> professing Israel's willingness to glorify God through a life of filial obedience. With this we arrive at the heart of Israel's vocational identity: “By giving back his glory to God, Israel fulfills itself *as God's image*, and also understands why it is not permitted to make for itself any carved image of God.”<sup>58</sup> For God's self-revelation in word and action intends to elicit from his beloved a manner of loving that obediently imitates and thereby glorifies the God and Father of Israel. Consequently, “sin,” in the biblical sense, bears a weight that goes beyond the tragic self-ruination of the covenant partner, for sin opposes God's self-glorification in the world through the life-testimonial of the one elected to be his revelatory image.<sup>59</sup>

All the same, sin need not finally thwart God's aim to engender in his covenant partner a filial love that mirrors and thus reveals the true character of the all-powerful God. Biblical history shows that when Israel sins, God remains faithful to his covenant love but also respectful of the freedom of his beloved. There must be an *interplay*—evincing *reciprocal* love—in the redemption of his beloved from sin: between *divine* freedom, on whose side lies the initiative and ultimate power over sin, and *human* freedom—a

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56. On the imitative character of Israel's covenant love, cf. Dt 5:15, 10:17–19, 15:14–15, 16:11–12; Lv 11:4, 44–45, 19:2; in the New Testament, see Mt 5:48; 1 Pt 1:15–16; Eph 5:1.

57. Balthasar, *GL6*, 204.

58. *Ibid.*, 211. In *GL6*, 15, Balthasar states, “It belongs to God's lordliness to be able to set an image of himself over against himself. . . . The image is to resemble the archetype. . . . The ‘Ten Words’ (Dt 4:13; 5:22) . . . are an instruction of how human life must be shaped to be considered ‘godly.’ . . . [Indeed,] the whole movement of revelation has as its goal to make image and godliness coincide.” See also *ibid.*, 89–91.

59. *Ibid.*, 64: “It is by making room for grace that man obediently contributes to God's self-sanctification and self-glorification in the world.” See also *ibid.*, 16; and cf. Nm 27:14; Dt 32:51; Is 29:23.

freedom that has been impaired but not eradicated by sin. As we shall see, God indeed has the initiative in what concerns the work of atonement, yet what God initiates is a process whereby *he engenders his beloved's willing collaboration* in wiping sin away.<sup>60</sup> And in so doing, the beloved on his side *reveals God's power to "father" his filial image under the conditions of a sin-marred relationship.*

#### 4. THE OLD TESTAMENT NOTION OF SIN

According to the Old Testament, sin is not simply an ethical fault. It is not simply a failure to act according to the natural law inscribed in every conscience. There is more to it. *Sin* concerns transgressions (deeds) that bespeak a deliberate turning away from God.<sup>61</sup> Sin is fundamentally a refusal to see and mirror the character of God whose action shows his paternal presence and benevolence (Ex 4:22–23; Dt 4:37, 7:8). It is a refusal to listen and live according to the words that God personally addresses to his chosen beloved (2 Sam 12:7–9; Bar 1:15–22). As Balthasar points out, "The particular transgressions against the commandments . . . are only the results of a fundamental evil, namely, a falling away from the covenant relationship, betrayal, disobedience, culpable forgetfulness of God, the sinful failure to 'know God.'"<sup>62</sup> Sin as deed is thus unmasked as a refusal to exist in intimate coexistence with God. Sin indicates a spurning of God's love; it is a forsaking of YHWH (Hos 1:2, 9; 4:10).<sup>63</sup>

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60. See Balthasar, *TD4*, 318; Hoffmann, "Atonement," 148–49; and Levenson, *The Love of God*, 97, 108.

61. Hence Thomas Aquinas says, "The essence of guilt consists in voluntarily turning away from God" (*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 34, a. 2 [hereafter cited as *ST*]). See also *ST* I-II, q. 84, a. 2).

62. Balthasar, *TD4*, 174. See also *GL6*, 215–16; *TD5*, 275; and *Engagement with God*, 20–21. Levenson agrees: "Good deeds become acts of personal fidelity, faithfulness to the personal God, and not simply the right things to do within some universal code of ethics. Conversely, bad deeds become acts of betrayal. . . . They wrong the divine covenant partner" (*The Love of God*, 14); see also *ibid.*, 26, 59. See John Paul II, "The Demanding Love of God the Father" (General Audience, April 7, 1999), in *The Trinity's Embrace: Our Salvation History*, vol. 6, Catechesis on Salvation History (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2002), 94.

63. See Hos 2, 11:1–11; Is 63:16, 64:7; Jer 31:9; Dt 32:6, 18; Mal 2:10. See also Levenson, *The Love of God*, 101; and the *Catechism*, §386.

Moreover, sin is committed by someone whom God regards as his beloved son/child. “I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first-born son” (Jer 31:9).<sup>64</sup> Sinners are “sons who do not wish to listen” (Is 30:9); their “hearts are far from” God (Is 29:13); indeed, sinners “hide” themselves from YHWH (Is 29:15); they rebel against and “desert” God (Hos 7:13; Dan 3:29). “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth, for YHWH speaks: Sons I have raised and reared, but they have disowned me! . . . They have forsaken YHWH, spurned the Holy One of Israel” (Is 1:2, 4; cf. Hos 8:3).

As a *consequence* of persistent sin, the covenant relationship is ruptured, and sinners exist in a state of estrangement from God—and God, on his side, is forsaken.<sup>65</sup> If the primary sinful *deed* is idolatry, the primary *effect* of sin is distance from God, alienation from God.<sup>66</sup> To be sure, other (worldly) effects are acknowledged: exile, hardships, and innumerable ways in which sinners suffer alienation internally and externally. Undeniably, the baneful effects of sin are not limited to the time span of the deed itself. Sin’s effects do not simply disappear once the sinful conduct ceases, but the effects perdure. The biblical scholar Gary Anderson observes that “the act of wrongdoing has put in motion consequences that not even contrition can wholly undo.”<sup>67</sup> In any case, the effects or consequences of sin extend beyond the sinner and beyond the power of the sinner to correct.<sup>68</sup>

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64. In addition, see Ex 4:22; Dt 14:1, 32:1–43; Is 43:6, 45:11. Levenson, *The Love of God*, 20: “It is worthy of note that the metaphor of father and son . . . is very much present in Deuteronomy, the book containing the Shema and its commandment to ‘love the LORD your God with all your heart’ (6:5; 11:13).”

65. See Balthasar, *GL6*, 165; Levenson, *The Love of God*, 112; and Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 432.

66. *ST I-II*, q. 86, a. 2, ad 3: “*Actus peccati facit distantiam a Deo.*”

67. Gary Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 119. Anderson adds in note 11, “The reach of sin is long indeed. Not even contrition is sufficient to wipe away its effects completely.”

68. Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 150: “Of course the deed is done and cannot be undone. But what has been perpetrated and set in motion by it transcends both the deed and the doer and has somehow acquired an existence of its own, so that, whether or not the perpetrator’s subjective will has undergone a change, it is *there* now and is continuing to exert a ‘power proper to it’ in the

Let us note here what the new *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* has to say about the effects of sin.

In the theological reflection of exilic and post-exilic prophecy, . . . the suffering of man, whether it be the individual or the nation, is ultimately and properly separation from God. In affliction at the hand of enemies, in sickness, and in nearness to death, he experiences remoteness from God and abandonment by him at the deepest level. The prophets recognize that the reason for this is sin. . . . [They recognize too that] only God's free intervention (Is 65:18; Ez 36:26–28) can overcome the intolerable situation of man's separation from God through sin and renew the heart of man.<sup>69</sup>

We may summarize the Old Testament notion of sin as follows. Sin is a complex reality consisting of three dimensions: (1) the evil deed (the transgression); (2) the inner disposition of the doer (turning away, disobedience, infidelity, callous indifference); and (3) the effects or consequent punishments (chiefly, distance from God).<sup>70</sup>

#### 5. ATONEMENT AS THE BEARING OF SIN IN FILIAL LOVE-SUFFERING

As noted above, the distance brought about by sin is not eliminated simply by ceasing to sin. Something must be *done*. Nearness to God must be restored. This work of transforming distance into nearness is of the essence of atonement.

Indeed if the atonement of sin is to be achieved, sin must be "converted" in all three of its dimensions. The sinner must

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sinner and in his world, affecting God too. This is the sin that must be . . . 'carried away.'" See also Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 158; and John Paul II, "The Demanding Love of God the Father," 194.

69. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–75), 207. See John Paul II, "Fight Evil and Sin" (General Audience, August 18, 1999), in *The Trinity's Embrace: Our Salvation History*, 242–43.

70. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 149; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 265; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1967), 426.

(1) turn *away* from the evil deed, (2) turn *back* his heart toward God, and (3) turn *round* the effects of sin. This threefold process hinges on the disposition of the heart, which turns back to God with the inducement of God's grace. Then, due to his change of heart, the sinner willingly ceases to commit the sinful deed(s). But more needs to be done. The converted sinner still has to bring his regenerated love to bear on the effects of his sin. It is not enough for the sinner to cease his wrongdoing. Sin is not merely walked away from; sin must be "*borne away*."<sup>71</sup> Indeed the image of "*bearing away*" sin (*nasa awon* in Hebrew) is central in the Old Testament.<sup>72</sup> We must note that the "original meaning of *nasa awon* is not to 'take away' or 'remove' guilt, but . . . to take it *upon* oneself and 'carry' it," to *endure* its effects or consequent punishments (Hos 13:16; Ez 4:1–8).<sup>73</sup> Insofar as one is animated by the love of God in bearing the effects of sin, this suffering brings about the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God.

In all this, the disposition of the heart is crucial. Only someone whose heart has turned back to God can bear sin's effects in a manner different from that of an unconverted sinner. For, the repentant person bears sin with filial love, in virtue of which he bears sin away—eliminates it, turns *round* its effects. What makes the suffering of sin's effects to have atoning efficacy and value is regenerated *love* as the motive power. Only someone converted *from* sin can suffer sin *through* to its elimination.<sup>74</sup> God indeed insists upon conversion, yet not only in the sense of a

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71. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 150. See Hoffmann, *Sühne*, 23. See Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, 423n8.

72. See Christian Mihut's essay, "Bearing Burdens and the Character of God in the Hebrew Bible," in *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 369.

73. Deissler, "Hingegeben für die Vielen," in *Mysterium Salutis*, vol. 2, 341. See von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 271; Hoffmann, "Atonement," 150. *Siphre Deuteronomy* 32, cited in Levenson, *The Love of God*, 76: "Precious is suffering [or chastisement: *yissurin*] . . . as it is said, 'the LORD your God disciplines [chastises] you (*meyasserekkā*; Dt 8:5).'" According to the midrash on the love of God in *Siphre Deuteronomy* 32, without expiatory suffering (*yissurin*, also rendered "chastisement"), "no sin will be forgiven." The theological message of this (and similar) midrash, says Levenson, "is to give suffering, and even death, a positive role in the love of God commanded in the Shema" (Levenson, *The Love of God*, 78).

74. See Hoffmann, *Kreuz und Trinität*, 24.



"re-turning" of the heart toward him, and not simply in terms of ceasing the misdeeds, but *sin (its effects) must also be transformed into a condition for the expression of filial love.*<sup>75</sup>

Here we need to recall that the principal effect of sin is *distance from God*. This effect must be transformed into *a condition for the expression of filial love*. Suffering through this effect of sin can be called "filial love-suffering": when distance from God is experienced as heartache. Only a heart inspired with a renewed love for God will bear God's distance as painful. Take note that *filial love-suffering is engendered love*—love that is mobilized as a result of being loved by a paternally devoted God.

Let us pause to consider Daniel 3:29–42, which affirms that such love-suffering would carry the same atoning efficacy as sin-offerings. Scholars point to this text as one in which a sequence of steps, moving from sin to reconciliation, is laid out clearly and in concentrated form.<sup>76</sup> The steps can be identified as follows. (1) The grave sins committed by God's covenant partner result in (2) a state of separation from God (for individuals or for the nation). Suffering this state (which includes numerous external "worldly" effects and penalties) conduces to (3) repentance for sin. Repentance, in turn, is the precondition of (4) atonement, which completes the process of (5) forgiveness and restoration.<sup>77</sup> Especially striking is how this text portrays sin as deserting the Lord, which results in a state of God-estrangement; on the Lord's side, he responds to sin by concealing his face (an allusion to his wrath) such that he must be sought once more; the renewed desire to seek the Lord indicates repentance, which takes shape as the willingness to endure sin's consequences with contrite love; and precisely this love-suffering would have the same efficacy as sin-offerings and thus would serve to atone.

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75. See Hoffmann, *Sühne*, 26; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 164.

76. See Jacob Neusner, *Judaism When Christianity Began* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Martin Hengel, *Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1981); and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 576–77.

77. See Neusner, *Judaism When Christianity Began*, 154; Levenson, *The Love of God*, 28, 78–79; Anderson, *Charity*, 132.

- (1) Yes, *we have sinned and transgressed by deserting you*, . . . we have not done what we were told to do for our own good.
- (2) . . . *You have delivered us* into the power of our enemies. . . . Do not *abandon* us forever, for the sake of your name. . . . LORD, now we are the least of all the nations, despised everywhere in the world today, *because of our sins*. We have at this time no leader, no prophet, no prince, no holocaust, no sacrifice, no oblation. . . .
- (3) But may the *contrite* [*repentant*] soul, the *humbled* spirit be as acceptable to you as
- (4) *holocausts* of rams and bullocks, as thousands of fatted lambs: such let our sacrifice be to you today [= our *spiritual sin-offering*]. . . .  
*And now we put our whole heart into . . . seeking your face once more* [= now we endure our state of God-estrangement (or God's wrath/concealment) with regenerated love].
- (5) . . . Grant us *deliverance*. (Dan 3:29–42, emphasis added)

Consequently, a perspective is discernible in the Old Testament that regards the sinner's God-forsakenness not merely as a state *from* which the beloved would be delivered, but also paradoxically as a means *by* which that deliverance would be accomplished.<sup>78</sup>

In short, atonement involves "conversion," not simply in the sense of turning away *from* sin, but also as the "conversion" *of* sin itself.<sup>79</sup> The sinner turns back to God with filial love (regenerated by God; in this respect God is *near*), such that now he endures the effects of sin (principally *distance* from God) as a condition that pains him, and *by lovingly bearing this sin-wrought distance, he turns sin round: away from a refusal of filiation to an occasion of it*. Sin is effaced in being converted into its opposite: *nearness* to God in the filial love-suffering of God's *distance*.

## 6. ATONEMENT AS A PROCESS ENGENDERED BY GOD

Atonement, as already noted, is a process initiated and enabled by God. In order to adequately appreciate this, we need to recall the first two factors integral to the process by which sin is effaced.

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78. See Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 577, 581, 591; Hoffmann, "Atonement," 152–53; and Balthasar, *GL7*, 45.

79. Hoffmann, *Sühne*, 31. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 152–55.

(1) *God's sovereign initiative*: While sin is atoned for by one who has turned back to God, nonetheless this initial conversion can occur only by virtue of God's antecedent gift of love, which regenerates love in the sinner's heart. According to Deuteronomy, "Then the LORD your God will open your heart . . . to love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul" (30:6; cf. Ez 36:26–28; Ps 80:19–20). Where God is concerned, the sinner's repentance does not occur merely as a result of some self-initiated "natural" reflection on the idea of a lenient God. "It results," says Balthasar, "from faith in a God who graciously communicates himself. Repentance itself is due to the effective power of God's grace."<sup>80</sup> Hence it is prevenient ("fore-given") divine love that enables the sinner to return to God, in order that sin can be borne under the power of filial love.<sup>81</sup>

(2) *God's passionate involvement (as paternal love-suffering)*: Within the covenant relationship, God freely exposes his ardent passion to suffering in the face of his beloved's disobedience and infidelity. "God suffers under Israel's false love-affairs."<sup>82</sup> Certainly there is no damage to the perfection of the divine nature, but here we are in the order of moral offense and an affective wounding of God's passion of love. Hence it is God who is first to willingly suffer in love the absence of his beloved. It is God who is first to let himself be forsaken in the mode of a (paternal) love-suffering. "When Israel was a child, I loved him; out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the farther they went from me. . . . How could I give you up, O Ephraim, or deliver you up, O Israel? . . . My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred" (Hos 11:1–2, 8).

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80. Balthasar, *TD4*, 166. Elsewhere he states that the sinner's conversion, "which God does not force, only comes about because of a preceding intervention on God's part, by which [God] causes the hardened heart to melt" (*TD4*, 176). See also the *Catechism*, §1432; and Levenson, *The Love of God*, 26–27.

81. "It is only because of the love the sinner has received in the (initial) forgiveness, and in virtue of the 'initial conversion' wrought by it, that he is able to 'bear' his sin under the form of [love-]suffering" (Hoffmann, "Atonement," 155).

82. Hans Walter Wolff, *Dodekapropheten 1: Hosea*, *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 14/1* (Neukirchen, Germany: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), 53, cited in Balthasar, *GL6*, 244.

Now inasmuch as God's love for Israel is *paternal*, it possesses a *generative* or *evocative capacity*: that is, a *power to engender or produce a mirroring response*. It is crucial to understand that what God "fathers" is a living image of his manner of loving. This generative work involves God revealing to his filial partner a divine love sufficiently powerful to be unchangeable, despite being woundable.<sup>83</sup> Indeed the disclosure of God's paternal love-suffering proves to have a potent capacity to provoke repentance, ignite filial love, and empower his partner to imitate and reproduce it willingly in turn<sup>84</sup>—unto sin's atonement. The power of God's suffering love to engender a mirroring response is at the root of the paradoxical character of this mystery: in the one atoning, bearing sin as *distance from God* is transformed into a mode of *nearness to God*. For sin as *separation* is now borne in *union* with God, whose suffering love is the *model* and *source* of his partner's mirroring love-suffering as it bears sin away.<sup>85</sup>

We can summarize the role of God's generative love as follows: the grace-engendered initial conversion enables the beloved to atone for sin in such a way that he willingly (in the power of love) bears its essential consequence—separation from God. Since it is God who already endures a love-suffering on the sinner's account,<sup>86</sup> the repentant beloved's role in atoning for sin is an engendered filial image of God's role in delivering from sin. But let us be clear: if God aims to engender in his beloved a reciprocal willingness to suffer the separation wrought by sin, it is not a case of "tit-for-tat" (the vengeful infliction of suffering in return for what God suffers). Rather, it is a matter of God generating in his beloved a capacity to mirror his fatherly love by asserting filial love against sin, thereby bringing

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83. *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 4, 39; and Ratzinger, "The Mystery of Easter," 63.

84. See Levenson, *The Love of God*, 138.

85. In this light we can understand Hoffmann's words in "Atonement," 154: "Atonement is most closely correlated with YHWH's holy and injured love. It is this love that brings itself to bear on the sinner. . . . God's love, wounded by sin, corresponds in the sinner to atonement, seen as sin transformed into the suffering of love."

86. Assuredly, God loves in such a way that he remains utterly *free*, *unhindered*, and *active* in his mode of love-suffering.

about his beloved's perfection and sin's elimination. For indeed, the filial imaging of God's mode of love-suffering is integral to the perfection of the beloved ("Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" [Mt 5:48; 1 Pt 1:15–16; Lv 11:4, 19:2]; "Be imitators of God as his beloved children" [Eph 5:1])—this is the pattern of human freedom's greatest good!—albeit under the conditions of a sin-ruptured relationship. Thus, it would be myopic to regard atonement as simply a penalty; it is emphatically a saving event.<sup>87</sup>

### 7. GOD'S WRATH AS A MODALITY OF LOVE

We have already noted that a defective notion of divine wrath can get in the way of the biblical claim that God reveals himself to be love precisely in sending his Son as atonement for sin (1 Jn 4:8–10). Nonetheless, we may not simply ignore or cast aside the many biblical references to God's anger. As Balthasar recognizes,

The Old Testament perceptions of the divine "wrath" (Rom 5:9) . . . and "judgment" (Rom 8:3), which are taken up by Paul and the whole of the New Testament in speaking of the Cross, are not to be represented as superseded, anthropomorphic, and incompatible with the God of love who wills reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18; Col 1:20), for this reconciliation is to take place precisely "through the death of his Son" (Rom 5:10) . . . in his "offering for sin" (2 Cor 5:21).<sup>88</sup>

Both Hoffmann and Balthasar tackle head-on the subject of God's wrath while attempting to avoid two extremes: on one side, the stance that simply dismisses the biblical testimony to God's anger as primitive thinking; and, on the other, the view that imagines God's wrath along the lines of the punitive rage of a celestial child abuser.

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87. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 154; and von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 271.

88. Balthasar, *GL7*, 204. Neither does the ITC condone a facile exegetical dismissal of God's anger. "In the New Testament, . . . [Jesus'] anger (Mk 3:5) . . . [manifests] a certain way of behavior on God's part. In other places it is stated explicitly that God gets angry (Rom 1:18; 3:5; 9:22; Jn 3:36; Rev 15:1)" ("Theology, Christology, Anthropology," II.B.2).

The course to take, we suggest, is to regard divine anger as an aspect of the second of the three factors integral to the process of atonement: namely, God's *passionate involvement*. This will entail striving toward a superior harmony in which every aspect of God's involvement in man's redemption is ultimately explained by God's *passion of love*.

Straightaway we must insist that God's wrath in the face of sin is not an independent power of destruction separate from or set in opposition to God's love.<sup>89</sup> Rather, God's wrath is the form that God's love takes when it encounters whatever is opposed to and hardened against the designs of his love.<sup>90</sup> It is always exercised in the service of these designs. In Balthasar's usage, "anger," when ascribed to God, expresses a sovereign will controlled by love and righteousness, which is directed at abolishing all that is hostile to God's perfecting his beloved as his true filial image.

In agreement with Balthasar, yet with more consistency and explicitness, Hoffmann discerns that God's wrath and God's suffering love are two aspects of one and the same mystery of God's affective involvement with sinners.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, a progression can be detected in the Old Testament in which portrayals of God's wrath appear more and more clearly in association with

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89. God's anger is the "obverse of his love for Israel" (J. Fichtner, "Der Zorn göttes im Alten Testament," in *ThWNT* [= *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*], vol. 5 [1990], 410; see also 404, 408–10). See Eichrodt, "Zorn Gottes," in *RGG* [= *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*], vol. 6 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1930); and H. Brandt, "Zorn Gottes IV. Dogmatisch," in *RGG*, vol. 4, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1932).

90. "The wrath of God . . . is nothing other than an aspect of God's love" (Martin Bieler, "God and the Cross: The Doctrine of God in the Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42, no. 1 [Spring 2015]: 61–88, at 72).

91. In *TD4*, 328, Balthasar focuses on God's *suffering* in the face of sin: "This suffering occurs when the recklessness with which the Father gives away himself (and *all* that is his) encounters a freedom that, instead of responding in kind to this magnanimity, changes it into a calculating, cautious self-preservation." Elsewhere, he shifts his focus to God's *wrath* in the face of sin: "The covenant was designed as grace and salvation, yet it contained within it—since the people could not match up to a full response but continued to 'wrestle' with God—an element of wrath, something that called for an expiation" (*ibid.*, 217).

God's love-suffering for sinners.<sup>92</sup> It is a suffering that occurs when the recklessness of God's love encounters a created freedom that refuses to answer with a mirroring abandon, but instead stands rigidly calculating in its self-centeredness.

Now if indeed God's *wrath* is a modality of God's *love*, and if God's love is not revoked regardless of rejection,<sup>93</sup> it follows that the primary aim of God's wrath is to bring the sinner to conversion and reconciliation (as in Jer 33:5–10).<sup>94</sup> This notion is key to the book of Isaiah, where divine wrath and divine judgment are virtually synonymous: "I will turn my hand against you and refine your dross in the furnace, removing all your alloy. . . . Zion shall be redeemed by judgment" (Is 1:25, 27). According to Isaiah, redemption takes place *through* God's act of wrathful judgment; it "follow[s] on an event of divine judgment as its *telos*."<sup>95</sup> Redemption and wrathful judgment are not mutually exclusive categories here. Rather, redemption consists in the initiative of divine mercy, which operates *through* an event of divine judgment/wrath, an event that counters the obstacle of sin thrown into the path of God's love. God answers the sinner's refusal to abide in his covenant grace with his own refusal to tolerate sin, for it is impossible that God should be a "father" to sin—that is, the archetype and generative source of sin (1 Jn 3:9). Hence, God brings about redemption with an unwavering passion of commitment to the covenant.<sup>96</sup> The

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92. See Martin Bieler's biblical study of vicarious atonement, *Befreiung der Freiheit: Zur Theologie der stellvertretenden Sühne* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 1996), 155–72, 208–29. See also Balthasar, *TD4*, 55.

93. "Israel has . . . broken God's heart. Yet God does not revoke his love; he does not take his love back. Instead he freely suffers this rejection of his love" (*Deus caritas est*, 10).

94. God's wrath "is that righteousness that is essentially oriented to salvation" (Bernard Renaud, *Je suis un Dieu jaloux: Évolution sémantique et signification théologique de qineah* [Paris: Cerf, 1963], 148). "Even the severest punishment" serves "the purpose of conversion" (Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1967], 459). God rebukes and punishes only to persuade the sinner "to create on his side the conditions necessary for forgiveness" (J. Scharbert, "Vergebung," in *HThG* [= *Handbuch Theologischer Grundbegriffe*], vol. 2 [Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1963], 742).

95. Balthasar, *GL6*, 249; see *TD4*, 176.

96. See Balthasar, *TD4*, 329.

crucial point here is that God's wrath coincides with his zeal to carry out the work of his paternal love even against sin: producing living images of his own forsaken "heart" while overcoming sin in all its consequences. This side of the eschaton, divine wrath serves his beloved's salvation.<sup>97</sup>

Moreover, if God's wrath is a modality of his love, and since God's love is always considerate of the freedom of his beloved, we can see why God's wrath can take the form of *letting his partner "be" to his choice of forsaking him*.<sup>98</sup> Inasmuch as God takes the freedom of his beloved seriously, God lets his partner "be" to suffer his absence: the state of godlessness that the beloved has chosen. The divine love that leaves the beloved free to respond, in the event that it encounters an obstinate "no," shows itself considerate of his creature's freedom by withdrawing and leaving the beloved alone (well, not quite). For God, who cannot be absent from any place, is able nonetheless to conceal his presence. Indeed, time and again in the Bible God's anger is indicated when he hides his face.

"For a brief moment I forsook you. . . . In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the LORD, your Redeemer. (Is 54:7–8; cf. 8:17, 59:2; Ps 80:4–5)

"I have hidden my face from this city because of all their wickedness. I am going to bring it recovery and healing. . . . I will cleanse them from all of the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me." (Jer 33:5–10)

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97. "God's anger only 'turns' or 'stands still' (2 Macc 7:38) when sin is overcome in all its consequences, when the sinner is finally 'cleansed' and 'healed' from sin, and forgiveness is fully achieved" (Hoffmann, "Atonement," 151). See Jer 31:31–34; Ez 36:24–26, 33. See also Scharbert, "Vergebung," 741; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 160; Fichtner, "Der Zorn Gottes im Alten Testament," 408 (cf. Is 51:17, 22).

98. See Psalm 27:9, where the psalmist associates God's anger with "hiding his face" and "forsaking" his servant. On YHWH's anger in the form of self-concealment, see Hoffmann, "Atonement," 154. On God's anger as the distancing of God from the sinner, see Hoffmann, *Sühne*, 59–60; Fichtner, "Der Zorn Gottes im Alten Testament," 402; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, 432.



In every case, observes Balthasar, "it is the sin of man which is the cause of the concealment. However, . . . God's turning away is not simply the 'result' of sin, but rather a personal decision of God (Is 57:17) that finally does indeed deliver the sinner over 'to the power of his sin' (Is 64:6b). In this active sense God 'turns his face away' from the sinner."<sup>99</sup> Thus says the Lord, "'I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage. I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies'" (Jer 12:7; cf. 7:29; Dan 9:16–19; Tob 13:6).

Now, just as God's *wrath* is a mode of God's *love* that serves the salvation of his beloved, so God's *self-concealment* is a mode of God's *accompaniment* that serves the atonement of sin. In the context of a sin-ruptured covenant, God can *remain near* his beloved while *under concealment*. Consider what occurs between YHWH and Israel in Hosea 2:12–22. Israel forsakes the Lord by running after idols. Indeed, "everything begins with God's statement . . . that 'the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD' . . . (1:2). . . . The people have 'abandoned' God (4:10) and 'rebelled' against him (7:13; 8:1); they have 'fled' from him (7:13) and 'turned to others' (3:1)."<sup>100</sup> On his side, YHWH lets the people endure the godforsaken state they have chosen for themselves. He, the forsaken God, lets his people suffer his absence. In concrete historical terms, God hands them over to the power of Assyria, where they are exiled in 722 BC. Yet if God *conceals* himself, he nonetheless *accompanies* Israel (indeed, "leads" his beloved) into the godforsaken state of exile (Hos 2:12). The chief point to grasp here is that God's withdrawal is itself a modality of generative love that operates in a hidden manner.<sup>101</sup> Though God's passionate love-as-wrath takes the form of self-withdrawal (hiding his face), God remains resolutely at work to regenerate love in the heart of his estranged partner, enabling

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99. Balthasar, *GL6*, 70. "God's face can be either uncovered or concealed, turned towards one or averted. . . . In times of grace, God's face is turned towards Israel; in times of anger, it is . . . turned away" (69). "[In] the old covenant, the real one who abandons is God, and his abandoning (above all, of Israel) is 'in each case an act of judgment, or an act of the divine wrath' (Popkes). The one who is handed over in this way is 'abandoned by God' . . . (cf. 1 Sam 24:5)" (*GL7*, 224). See Hoffmann, *Kreuz und Trinität*, 24–26.

100. Balthasar, *GL6*, 241.

101. See *ibid.*, 242–43, 274.

Israel to bear God's self-concealment as the pain of love, and in doing so, to atone.<sup>102</sup>

If it is true that God's wrath and God's suffering love are two aspects of God's passionate involvement, we may view them together, at one glance. (1) *God's love as hurt* is divine love in its *exposure* to the beloved's "no." This is God's love in the mode of letting *himself* bear the absence of his beloved, there being no limit to love's power to endure. (2) *God's love as wrath* is divine love in its *opposition* to the beloved's "no," for God cannot be a "father" to sin.<sup>103</sup> This is God's love in the mode of "hiding his face," withdrawing himself: letting his beloved bear *his* absence.

#### 8. FORGIVENESS AND ATONEMENT: TWO SIDES OF RECIPROCAL LOVE

In all this, the process of redemption is "patrogenetic": it originates from and is engendered by God's own power to love. God exercises his power against sin in such a way that human freedom is not merely bypassed or overridden by a one-sided forgiveness. God's power is a forgiving power, but it takes full effect in his covenant partner only by engendering a free response of contrite and obedient love that yields to the ardent passion of God's saving will. It is *God's* love at work in his beloved that empowers him to collaborate by atoning for sin. God's generative ("fore-giving") love aims to bring about a *union* between himself and his beloved that takes the form of a *shared willingness in love to suffer through and transform the separation wrought by sin*. As Hoffmann summarizes it,

When sin is changed into the pain of God's distance, then forgiveness and atonement are one and the same reality—it is called "atonement" insofar as it is found in the sinner (as his act and disposition), and it is called "forgiveness" insofar as it is obtained from God. . . . Under the influence of grace, [the sinner] achieves initial conversion . . . and then—by virtue of the love thus granted—the full conversion that embraces the sinner's whole personal being. Consequently, it is God who converts; he enables the sinner to atone.

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102. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 155.

103. See Balthasar, *GL7*, 206; as well as *The Threefold Garland* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 101.

. . . In this sense it is true that the sinner's conversion, which attains its radical fullness in atonement, is YHWH's energetic and sovereign response to sin.<sup>104</sup>

## 9. VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

Before crossing the threshold to the New Testament where the Passion and death of Jesus are understood as bringing about the *vicarious* atonement of sin once for all, we must note the shift that takes place within the Old Testament in the subject who undergoes redemptive suffering: from the suffering of *the nation* to the *representative* suffering of *individuals*. The history of Israel shows that the nation of Israel as God's covenant partner is not able to sustain an unreserved answer of obedient love in the long term. This is why, for Balthasar, "the true history of the covenant will be the history of individuals, of representatives."<sup>105</sup>

What concerns us here are the most significant instances of vicarious atonement leading up to Jesus Christ. Naturally, the mysterious figure of the Suffering Servant of YHWH (Is 53) immediately leaps to mind, but let us begin by examining the mission of a prophet, looking to highlight those aspects corresponding to the features of the process of cleansing from sin that we have discussed thus far. With this move, we turn our attention to the Holy Spirit, whom so far we have more or less neglected.

The God and Father of Israel, in sending a prophet, endows him with his Spirit. The prophet, on his side, is to make himself totally available to the Spirit so that "something like a *fellowship in attitude and destiny* becomes possible" between God and the prophet.<sup>106</sup>

In bringing about a fellowship in *attitude*, the Spirit that rests upon the prophet communicates to him God's passion of love (*passio caritatis*) in the face of sin. Balthasar brings forward von Rad's understanding that the prophet "became detached from himself and his own personal likes and dislikes,

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104. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 155–56.

105. Balthasar, *GL6*, 158.

106. *Ibid.*, 232 (emphasis added).

and was drawn into the emotions of the Deity himself. It was not only the knowledge of God's designs in history that was communicated to him, but also the feelings of God's heart: wrath, love, sorrow . . . (Hos 6:4; 11:8; Is 6:8; Jer 6:11)."<sup>107</sup> In this way, God enables the prophet to endure and reproduce the modalities of his fatherly love in its exposure and opposition to sin. Or, what amounts to the same, the Spirit inwardly fashions the prophet to serve as God's image in the confrontation with sin. Already here we are approaching the threshold to the New Testament, where, according to the International Theological Commission, "the tears of Jesus (Lk 19:41), his anger (Mk 3:5), and the sadness he feels are themselves also manifestations of a certain way of behavior on *God's* part."<sup>108</sup>

And just as God's original work of fashioning man in his image integrated the bodily sphere (Gn 1:26–27), so also the bodily sphere of the prophet "is taken decisively into God's service, . . . laid hold of as the sphere in which God's emotion and action are expressed. Ezekiel must eat the scroll, he and Hosea are expropriated in their married life so that they become parables of the relationship between God and the people."<sup>109</sup> Increasingly as the history of Israel unfolds, the prophet is called

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107. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, 63, cited in Balthasar, *GL6*, 234. In *TD4*, 344, Balthasar describes the prophet as "a man who is sympathetically open, by divine design, to God's *pathos* toward his world." These considerations may repay further investigation. See Emmanuel Durand, *OP*, *Les émotions de Dieu: Indices d'engagement* (Paris: Cerf, 2019).

108. ITC, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," II.B.2. Assuredly, we are not reducing the mission of Jesus Christ as the definitive revealer of the Father (Jn 1:18) to that of a mere human prophet; rather, we are only casting light onto a distant foreshadowing. Actually, in light of the Incarnation of God the Son and of man's deification in the Son, we can say with Maximus the Confessor that God exhibits a will to anthropomorphism—a divine will that initiates and determines a pattern of covenantal exchange and mutual *perichoresis*. By God's gracious dispensation man, body and soul, becomes a paradigm for God—so long as man, body and soul, is properly ordered and deified. Such is preeminently the case with Christ Jesus, true God and true man. As Maximus says in *The Ambigua* 10, §3, "For they say that God and man are paradigms of each other, so that as much as man, enabled by love, has divinized himself for God, to that same extent God is humanized for man by His love for mankind." (I am indebted to Dr. Adrian Walker for his insightful interpretation of Maximus's doctrine.)

109. Balthasar, *GL6*, 234.

to become "the personified [embodied] word of God for the people."<sup>110</sup>

Precisely for this reason, the prophet is also drawn into a fellowship in *destiny* with God. The prophet Hosea, for instance, discloses the humiliated love of God when he runs after his unfaithful beloved, only to be expelled from the land. "The prophet is a fool! The man of the spirit is mad!" (Hos 9:7). "Even in this fate," observes Balthasar, "he declares something of the 'foolish' God's love (1 Cor 1)."<sup>111</sup> Jeremiah, for his part, "must share in God's withdrawal: 'Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament, or bemoan them. . .' (Jer 16:5). He is separated from other people in loneliness. 'I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation' (15:17)."<sup>112</sup> Insofar as the prophet exposes the word of God to the sinful people, he himself becomes exposed to their hostility toward God, as is attested by God's warning to Samuel: "According to all the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, so they are also doing to you" (1 Sam 8:8; cf. Ps 69:8, 10; Jer 15:15).<sup>113</sup> In this light, Jesus himself will assert that the prophetic mission leads to martyrdom (Lk 13:33). The jaw-dropping implication is that "it is God himself who uncovers his heart to blows in the prophets."<sup>114</sup> But this implication will be rendered explicit—beyond all conceivable expectation—only on Golgotha (Mk 15:39; Jn 8:28–29).

The role of the prophet, however, is not only to represent God before sinners; he is also to represent sinners before God. The dialogue between God and his people passes through him. This is readily seen in the case of Moses: in

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110. Ibid., 268.

111. Ibid., 245.

112. Ibid., 256.

113. As Ratzinger states in *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, in the suffering of the martyrs, "it is a righteousness mirroring that of God which brings about the cruelly premature loss of life" ([Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988], 91).

114. Ibid., 236.

Deuteronomy we find him lying stretched out for forty days and nights on the mountain “in order to perform penance in substitution for the people (Dt 9:9, 18–19, 25).”<sup>115</sup> More yet, the reason Deuteronomy gives as to why Moses dies outside the promised land is that “Moses has to die vicariously for the sake of Israel’s sin.” “YHWH was angry with me also on your account, and said, ‘You shall not go in there’” (Dt 1:37; cf. 3:26, 4:21).<sup>116</sup> Moses “becomes the one who suffers vicariously.”<sup>117</sup> Accordingly, Balthasar (with von Rad) regards this portrait of Moses as already converging on that of the anonymous figure of the Suffering Servant of YHWH (Is 53).

At any rate, in the Suffering Servant (Is 53) we have an unambiguous instance of *vicarious* or *representative* atonement: the Servant of YHWH bears the sin of many (i.e., of all) in their place (Is 53:11–12). The suffering is willingly assumed by the Servant, undergone in righteousness, and deliberately offered to God (53:10, 12). It renders just the unjust, cleanses them from sin, and brings about reconciliation (53:5, 11–12). Behind this atoning sacrifice is God’s initiative. God lays upon the Servant the guilt of all (53:5–6). The whole process bespeaks God’s resolute will to redeem through judgment (Is 1:27) by way of commissioning his Servant (with whom he is pleased, Is 42:1) to take upon himself the baneful effects of sin.<sup>118</sup> Though the Servant had done no wrong (53:9, 11), God allowed sinners to seize and condemn him (53:8); in effect, God hid his face or abandoned his Servant so that God’s will to forgive and restore (53:5, 11) “shall be accomplished through

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115. *Ibid.*, 189.

116. Von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 201, cited in Balthasar, *GL6*, 192. See also *GL6*, 296.

117. Balthasar, *GL6*, 188. The full passage reads: “In the earlier portraits, Moses is punished because of a personal mistake, when he is refused entry into the promised land (Num 20:12); but here [in Deuteronomy] he becomes the one who suffers vicariously.”

118. Regardless of how we view the idea of “punishment” when applied to the Servant (Is 53:5), we must agree that the idea of “solidarity” is insufficient to express the substance of the biblical affirmation. There is solidarity, it is true, but it extends as far as substitution (representative, vicarious suffering): the Servant’s solidarity with sinners goes as far as taking their place and allowing the weight of their sin to be laid upon him (53:6).

him" (53:10). The view that this expiatory suffering involved an experience of God's seeming absence is perhaps supported by the Servant's words that describe the feeling of a seemingly useless self-expenditure. Nonetheless, all the while his cause is with YHWH (49:4; 53:10–12). Here too, then, regarding the prophecy of the Servant, Hoffmann suggests that we "see the righteous man's power of *atonement* as a power of *transformation*, inasmuch as his righteousness enables him to *change sin* (i.e., the 'forsaking of YHWH' or 'being forsaken' by him) into the painful renunciation of God's nearness."<sup>119</sup> And finally, inasmuch as his righteousness is the stamp of his filiation, the Servant is the one in whom God shows his glory (49:3).

The Suffering Servant of YHWH doubtless has its successor in the mysterious death of "the pierced one" in Zechariah (Zech 12:10–11, 13:1), as well as in the voluntary "oblations" of the martyrs (Dan 3:29–42, 11:31–35, 12:1–10; and 2 Macc 7:37–38).<sup>120</sup>

Concerning the voluntary "oblations" of the martyrs, we have already discussed the sequence of steps discernible in Daniel 3:29–42. This prayer was very likely composed under the influence of Isaiah 53. That would account for the explicit way it speaks of the suffering of the righteous (of the three would-be martyrs) as equivalent to sin-offerings. According to Martin Hengel, this prayer, when placed in the mouths of the three men in the fiery furnace (in the Septuagint), suggests a *representative atoning* death offered by the (almost) martyrs on behalf of God's sin-ridden people.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, the martyrdom of "the wise" in Daniel 11:31–35 brings to mind the atoning purpose of the Servant's death in Isaiah 53.<sup>122</sup>

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119. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 153 (emphasis original). See Balthasar, *GL6*, 295–97.

120. When Pope John Paul II discusses the emergence of vicarious atonement in the Bible, he collects and links together key points that we have made in this study. See "Fight Evil and Sin," 243–44.

121. See Hengel, *Atonement*, 61.

122. Finally, in 2 Maccabees 7:37–38, a young martyr offers his life in order to advance the process of forgiveness of sins so that the nation may be delivered from its persecutors. According to N. T. Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 582), this suffering is described in 2 Maccabees as "having the effect of dealing with the nation's sins in the present time, so that Israel might receive

A further aspect, not directly developed in Isaiah 53 or in the martyrdom narratives, is the *generative* nature of God's love that serves as the *model* and *source* of his servant's love-suffering, which bears sin away. Even if the Old Testament and late Judaism lacked a formal theory of atonement properly so-called,<sup>123</sup> we may still see God's archetypal and generative love as part of the horizon of understanding within which Israel envisioned God's role vis-à-vis his beloved. In this perspective, the God-inspired work of atonement can be understood to show, not only the *human* suffering of the representative atoner in compassion with the sinful people, but also "the *divine* suffering caused by Israel."<sup>124</sup> Atonement, then, is not simply a penalty; nor is it solely a saving event. It is also revelatory of the almighty God and Father of his beloved son.

#### 10. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we arrive at the threshold to the New Testament, the main lines of our sketch point toward a convergence in the atoning mission of God's incarnate Son. Yet this point of convergence cannot be foreseen by reason alone. "It remains an 'utterly strange work' (Is 28:21), an 'offence' (Is 8:14), 'something unheard-of' (Is 52:15)."<sup>125</sup> All the same, the constellation of features presented here may indicate a hidden "theo-logic" that can cast a penetrating light on the transition from the Old Testament to the New. We will continue our attempt at uncovering this "theo-logic" in our next article on the Cross as atone-

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mercy in the future." Wright goes on to examine 4 Maccabees 7:20–22 (*ibid.*, 583). He concludes that the Maccabean martyrs, in suffering at the hands of foreign powers who occupied the land, were taking onto themselves the suffering of the nation, and the inner meaning of this suffering consisted in (theological) exile-as-the-effect-of-sin. He summarizes, "This representative exilic suffering functions *redemptively*. . . . Their sufferings will have the effect of drawing upon themselves the sufferings of the nation as a whole, *so that the nation may somehow escape*." Indeed, Wright adds in n172 that "the atoning value of sufferings is a regular theme in various subsequent Jewish writings."

123. See Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 166–67.

124. Balthasar, *GL6*, 410. See also *ibid.*, 234, 257.

125. *Ibid.*, 400. See also *GL7*, 33, 36–37.



ment, and in the process attempt to illuminate the Cross event in view of its closeness to and distance from the old covenant history of cleansing from sin.<sup>126</sup> □

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126. If in this article we have focused on the existential sphere of atonement, by no means are we denying the significance of the ritual sacrifices. There is no evidence that the Jews in the Second Temple period believed that the suffering and death of the martyrs warranted the abandonment of the sin-offerings in the Temple. Rather, the process of atonement extended to these two spheres, without the sphere of suffering in righteousness simply replacing the Temple's sacrificial cult. The two forms of sacrifice—one a ritual act, the other an existential act—existed side by side and mutually interpreted each other. See Balthasar, *GL6*, 397–99; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 585, 588.