


ARAMAIC BIBLE COMPANION

THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS

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1. THE CUP OF COVENANT

The death of Christ has been studied by Christian teachers for two thousand years and still we stumble and balk and strive and fall short in comprehension. This essentially is because only one was worthy and only one was found in heaven who could atone - our Lord Jesus Christ.

The preaching of the cross may be “foolishness” to those that do not believe but to us it is the power of God. We seek to draw nigh to what Gethsemane and Calvary meant to Christ because He did it for us. We are obliged to accept the death of Christ as satisfying divine justice and enabling the application of righteousness to the repentant sinner. In this study we look more intently to see what else we are obliged to believe and teach concerning this great matter.

Christ for sure was put to grief for us. If the “cup” which the young Hebraist scholar Leberecht found to derive from a common root with the term “hidden” means anything it means that Redemption’s cup or draught in the imbibing delivers joy to the believer but sorrow for the Christ.

The medievalist theologians hardly excluding Luther found it an essential of their concept of the cup to say that the very cup they sipped held His blood. This belief has been largely relinquished. Thus we do not “offer again” any contrived facsimile mysterious sacrifice to God. The “revealed secret” or *musterion* of the cross inheres in one single act of dying on the part of the Lamb of God. To this the Holy Spirit through Paul in Romans the same Spirit in *Hebrews* give absolute consent.

There can be no doubt that the death of Christ is “the” outstanding case of Herculean discipline through an experience of death vexatious in the extreme and lonely to the point of experiencing what we call dereliction. Yet in that deep trauma the relationship of

the trinity held good - the Father and the Son willed one will and whilst God did not spare His only Son nor the beloved Son remit his mission he did cry “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

In that cry which is the fifth word from the cross where Christ was both offering his body and blood and making His soul and offering for sin on the one hand and also pleading for us and exercising His role as mediator for our remission on the other hand with such words as “Father forgive them” and “Today you will be with me in Paradise” which were spoken in favour of persons whose lives were in danger of judgment and one whose enmity perceptibly changed to the love of Christ through the offices of Christ his Redeemer on the cross.

2. PAUL: MYSTERY SEEN THROUGH A PRISM

To cut to the chase as it were the doctrine we are looking into is most tantalisingly expressed by the apostle Paul when he says (and I quote the A.V. rendering) “He was made sin for us who knew no sin that we might be become the righteousness of God in Him”(2 Corinthians 5.21). We should pay the most careful attention to the statement and its import. Paul has found a way to understand the mystery of the cross and can put it in a brief aphorism or hemistich. I believe that way is the sin-offering-others since have made alternative though I think not better submissions.

Taking first its *import* we can plainly say that our righteousness derives from Christ’s death as the perfect Son of God who even in dying perceived or discerned no sin in His person. Neither He nor any about Him at that time including Pilate - the dying thief and Peter His disciple could point our any sin or disobedience. Thus He was and remained until his dying moment actually sinless. Had this not been so He could not atone for sin. This import is largely legal and is in the nature of divine justice but we need to look further.

3. SIN AND THE SIN OFFERING

HUPER HEMON HAMARTIAN EPOIESEN.

- (1) The prima facie reading of these words in English and I think in German is “He became sin” and bible teachers**

rehearse an interpretation which reads instead “He became a sinner”. The Greek text does not say “He became” at all so the reading of the received text has to establish itself on an interpretative basis.

- (2) Others choose the interpretation “He became a “sin offering” for us who because he knew no sin was of course legally an absolute and sufficient offering to fulfil all righteousness. It is a very attractive concept but does not properly answer to the text examined in depth for there are two references in the text to *αμαρτια* and they cannot have widely divergent meanings. The term means “Sin or offence”. This idea was promulgated by Ambrose of Milan and Augustine and taken up by the reformer Oecampadius and by the scholar Erasmus and so resurfaces in Hammond and Wolf.

It does not appear that there is much scope or any option for other verdicts on these accepted interpretations yet there is more that can and should be said on this aphorism of theological subtlety.

4. LUTHER’S READING OF THE PROPHETS

Martin Luther used strong language on many occasions. His statements anent the Jews for instance are to be eschewed. He made a statement in respect of what the prophets said, in his view, about the person of Christ upon the cross. His words are *“The prophets say in or by the Spirit that Christ would be of all men the greatest robber, murderer, adulterer, thief, sacrilegious person, blasphemer than whom none greater ever was in the world, because He who is a sacrifice for the sin of the whole world now is not an innocent person and without sin and is not the son of God born of a Virgin.”* Even the kindest critic would find it goes hard to establish the logic of Jesus as not Virgin Born on the Cross. Few would consent to Christ as less than the Son of God during any time upon the cross- in fact Luther has not only over stated his case but fallen into theological error at this point for upon the cross Jesus said “Father into thy hands I commit my spirit”. Such surmise reaches close to the heresy that says that before the cross he forfeited deity. All along the passion journey our Lord was indwelt by the Spirit of God who marked him out in holiness for whom He was. The railing remarks

of Luther sit best along with the reviling at the cross and for that reason are best forgotten. There is a smidgeon of self doubt in his added remark balanced sadly with more than adequate conceit when he counters possible criticism with the foolish words “It is not absurd to say He was a sinner”.

Luther insisted upon there being a point in the final hours of the life of Christ which he thought he could match to words from the prophets and to which he believed he could append the authority of the Holy Spirit when Christ who went to the cross as one who knew no sin came on the cross to that theologically critical juncture He became a sinner. Luther did not establish his theology by N.T. proofs so far as I am aware. But no doubt he would have subscribed some such interpretation as (1) above. If Luther had any biblical prism it might be the 53rd of Isaiah - indeed He could not quote the prophets in respect of the death of Christ without this reference. He may have taken the prophetic reference to the popular misconception of who Christ was to have the signature of the Holy Spirit i.e. “We esteemed him to be a leper etc”. Isaiah indeed predicted that the people would revile Jesus but the prophet maintained he was God’s obedient servant. Luther to whom Philip Melanchthon taught N.T.Greek is either not thoroughly acquainted with idiom and syntax or his dogmatic as a theologian cut loose from scripture.

CHRIST THE GREAT SINNER DELUSION

Set against the concept of reading *αμαρτολος* for or as equivalent to *αμαρτια* is the telling verdict of Dean Alford in loco. Alford was received universally as the greatest N.T.Greek scholar of his day and arguably of the modern era. Alford notices “Not *αμαρτολος* as Meyer, al but as De Wette, al - Sin abstract as opposed to righteousness which follows; compare Galatians 3.13. where the curse not the cursed one is similarly distinguished as “not concrete” but “abstract” to indicate that which is co-extensive with our disability.” (Alford indicates that older commentators emphasised “instead of” whereas Paul is emphasising “on behalf of”. Whilst Christ suffered “instead of us” [“that circumstance is not expressed by *υπερ* used of the death of Christ for us”- Alford references Ellicott Usteri, Paulinus, Lehrbegriff etc.) Christ on the cross was

the Representative of Sin - of the sin of a world He created. "That which is set forward (i.e. His death) is not only perfect and complete or finished but endures or holds good until now". You can distinguish the ideas better when you think theoretically and recognise it is not necessary or right or valid to stamp Christ a blasphemer to arrive at the concept of the atonement. Christ suffered as God's Son "on our behalf" to apply full theological rigour thus "for us" is technically more accurate than "in our place". We have to say that Luther ends up going "away out west" and trails not a few moderns with him.

5. IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE N.T

Before we attempt answers to these three questions let there be no doubt about the type of "righteousness" which we receive from Christ's atoning death. It is and can be nothing less than the very righteousness of God. It is not a brand of human goodness or holiness. The word itself is a combination of "righteous" and "together". Thus we are united to God as His dear children and receive his righteous nature. It is an act of grace and it endured for eternity and is vested entirely in what Jesus did for us on the cross. We receive not just a legal status through the death of Christ but are taken right up into the life of God and by the Holy Spirit born of God so that we receive the divine nature. This conveys to us not alone a standing 'with God but the very life of God in the soul of man. The word "become" is a *subjunctive* which expresses the wish and will of God and so the application of the work of Christ in an effectual manner to us is by faith and repentance and that by the work of the Holy Spirit.

6. PAUL'S PRISMATIC STATEMENT

HUPER HEMON HAMARTIAN EPOIESEN

υπερ ημων αμαρτιαν ποιησεν. *He made a sinoffering on our behalf.*

What are we looking at? We are looking in the above words at a *protasis* statement that has action in it that balances the creation of a righteous bride in the *apodosis*. The *protasis - cum-apodosis* balance is not achieved in the statement "Christ is sin so we become righteousness" nor is the balance achieved by the statement "Christ became a sinner that we could become righteous people". The

balance is achieved quite differently. The verb ποιεω is never associated with an attempt - but rather with a successful action. It is not a “middle” voice or “passive voice” verb. The action of the verb is neither self-orientated as if Christ acted for Himself nor is the action of the verb inflicted or enacted upon our Lord as if something changed Him.

The Greek might read in a number of ways in respect of αμαρτια. It might read A. “He created sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (or)

B. “He made [add the word “Him” and assume the infinitive of the verb “to be” sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (or) Syntax is difficult because an active voice verb is being made into a middle voice verb or it is being elided in favour of the verb in the – i.e. “He made” becomes “He became”

C. He made a sin offering that we might be the righteousness of God in Him.

D. Had the ποιεω verb been “middle voice” it might have read “He reckoned Himself sin that we might be the righteousness of God in Him.” This would have taken the theological world off on a nightmare journey of a maverick Christ.

E. “Not having in himself personal experience of sin He worked through the experience of sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.”

A is grotesque and unthinkable. B reflects the abstract but the syntax when supplemented changes the voice of the main verb from “do” to “Be made to become”. C adopts Levitical interpretation and is affirmed by tradition but is untrue to the double use of αμαρτια both in the context and the LXX. D has little virtue because it would present Christ’s self consciousness in a manner prejudicial to his work of atonement and the *apodosis* would contradict the *protasis*.

7. THE EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

I believe there is another alternative which is strictly agreeable to scripture and context and syntax and it is one that has huge theological moment.

The text reads most naturally in the context of the message of reconciliation delivered to us as ambassadors “The one who had *no*

experience of sin in Himself adopted *the experience* of sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him!"

The value of this rendering is considerable.

- (1) It retains the abstract whilst providing benefits for sinners of every hue.
- (2) It attaches the negative to Christ as the purest lamb whilst allowing for the added experience of our burden to fall on Him
- (3) It springs the trap Luther fell into by equating sin and sinner-the concrete application does unacceptable despite to who Christ is and indeed His nature as virgin born
- (4) It finds the effect Paul intended by showing that up until the passion Christ suffered nothing of the penalty of sin though fervently desiring our redemption with the deepest compassion.
- (5) It preserves the distinction between ποιεω and πρασσω in that it stresses that Christ did that which was creative at Calvary. He did not only pass through the experience but He also felt all its deep woe.
- (6) The disjoin between what our Lord had been in a joyous daily walk with the Father and temporal care of souls and what He was on the cross purchasing eternal redemption by his blood sacrifice through that dreadful discipline, traumatic infirmity of dying and vexation of soul in facing at some length the silence of the Father while He carried our sins in His body and bore the curse of the law in death- all this is called identification – the baptism He underwent – who died once for all. Our Lord's death is so described by Paul in Romans 6.10 includes all the uses of this case - its instrumental, locative, specific interest, possession, advantage, obligation and sympathy.

8. THE PRISM OF OUR LORD'S EXPERIENCE

When we address ourselves to the major issues of Isaiah's prophecy we read that God caused "all our iniquities to meet upon His Son". This "meeting" [GP is like the frontal assault of sin and our Lord's victory indemnifies us and all who will repose trust in Him against its penalty. Isaiah also avers that "He was wounded for our

transgressions and bruised for our iniquities and the chastisement of our peace was upon Him”. Thus in the high disciplined strife of His unyielding soul Christ without rancour or demur fought the fight of the supreme righteous one without sin and obtained a redeemed people. This experience is encapsulated in the N.T. in the course of that warfare in what is known as the “words from the cross.

- (1) Jesus announced the forgiveness of sin by the grace of God and through his suffering as the sin-offering in the word “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”. Opposite this in the burden of guilt were the 39 lashings and the play of dice to appropriate his very clothing whilst the Lord anguished. In this experience he aligned Himself with God as the Father of mercies and acted as the mediator.
- (2) Jesus in deep compassion for John and Mary whose hearts were fully broken at the sight of His un-remedied pain bound two lives in covenant through their union with Him. Thus He addressed Himself to years ahead and garnered the work of all His ministry through the love of the cross
- (3) Jesus patiently waited whilst the torrent of vilification from the thieves dried up and the light of His kingdom broke into the heart of the dying thief. He showed his overwhelming anticipation of Paradise and tendered for all to see that Sheol was not the first stop since the work of redemption would be completed - but Paradise.
- (4) Jesus displayed as the hours of darkness that signalled judgment to the world’s people lifted a more than exclusively physical thirst for the courts of God. David harried by Saul in His psalms expressed this experience in miniature. Our Lord Christ in a manner foreshown in Psalms 25.1, 42.4-11, 43 5, 62.1, 84.2 *et alii* longed for the reward of his travail and thirsted for the uninterrupted converse of the Father.
- (5) Jesus in the most express cry of all in respect of His adoptive role in respect of sin He showed the true sense of distance and grief attendant upon the utter loneliness of being a sin-bearer. The relationship with the Father was rock-like as attested by our Lord’s preparedness to go to the single resort he had with the searing words “My God, my God.” The

thought that at this time when redemption was never so critical God was out of the picture is theologically absurd. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Notwithstanding Christ cries through the help of the indwelling Spirit at this time of grossest physical infirmity “Why”? This is ostensibly not the call of one who did not suffer in all points like we sinners have done. This is no abdication of the sin burden the Lord willingly adopted. This is the point where all the faculties of His impenetrable soul wrestle with emotions and the will to reach the point where this draught of sorrow ends. This is the place where understanding has to continue to yield in obedience. This is the place where the consciousness of One man that His obedience is about to overturn all history agrees with His pure conscience and conviction that there is no more He has to do nor could do until the Father signals the rending of the veil, the shaking the foundations of the world and His own heart breaks.

- (6) Jesus cried in utter ransom summoning all His physical powers “It is finished”. There was from this moment a message to tell to the world. As its author He had to be the first to announce it. No man knows the heart of the Father but the Son and this time our Lord had neither why nor wherefore? All debts of believers the world over could be cancelled. All sin could be forgiven and all the prisoners of Satan released. The place of the foundation of Peace - Jerusalem – was to have its way of life undermined and not till the imminent advent of Shiloh would it find grace to resume its role. Soon the Spirit of God was to be sent to this ancient city and from this place the evangel would spread worldwide. The veil was rent; the rocks rent; a new day dawned; the centurion saluted; the heart of Joseph and Nicodemus upon hearing of the news from the temple immediately understood God was moving in some as yet uncanny new way. The long years marked by the domination and unchallenged reign of sin were at an end. *Christus Victor*. For the Jewish community Passover was imminent - for the Christians ever afterward it was complete as it had

been when Israel left Egypt as children of God, judgment past, redemption assured and in praise of God.

- (7) **Jesus said “Into Your hands I commend my Spirit”. Jesus had taught that salvation’s safety reposed securely in his hands and that they were cupped by the Father’s hands. From this day forward they that are tried to the utmost and they that approach the valley of the shadow of death could die with words of assurance of everlasting life. Jesus experience as a burden bearer was coupled with the Father’s pledge that He would not lose any treasure that the Son secured. The experience of the cross began in the Upper Room and ended in Paradise. Its message would reach the lowest hell within days and within weeks would reach far flung parts of the northern hemisphere. Jesus shed his blood freely whether in the Garden or at the hands of Pilate or the Soldiers or upon the cross. Through this passion experience He carried our sins - He bore our sins in His body to the tree. Paul rejoices in the greater work of justification by the blood of Christ and the future work of being saved from wrath through Him who is judge of all and in that judgment He is advocate of those whose names are written in the book of life (Romans 5.9). There his great heart was broken at the fountain. His adoption of sin on our behalf and that of many was the most gruelling experience and the most disciplined of all time and the Son deserves the highest station that heaven affords for that love that “loved to the end” as does the Father deserve the highest praise for sparing not the darling of His bosom for us and our salvation from sin. The Holy Spirit had continued with the Son since His baptism under John until His baptism and death on the cross where He identified in depth and sorrow with sinners by adopting sin’s great burdens of guilt, the curse of the law, the penalty of death and judgment itself which pertain to the wrath of the Lamb, hell and destruction and His atoning death extracts their sting. The Holy Spirit searched the Father’s heart from the Son’s lips and now spreads His wings to replicate the obedience of Christ in the church. The prerogative Christ is to baptise every Christian life with the same fire and holiness**

that burned in the Saviour's life when He put all on the altar of sacrifice and it is Christ's purpose through the Spirit's possession of the vessel of each Christian life to reign in fullness and unrivalled in our souls.

8. THERE IS HOPE FOR CHILDREN OF WRATH

Paul reminded the Ephesians that they were brought into the world in disobedience and with a flesh nature and their destiny as distinct from grace and justification would have been to suffer wrath (Ephesians 2.3). The Lord as the apostle further states in Romans 9.22 "carries" or bears with vessels thoroughly prepared (in themselves - middle voice) for destruction whilst He makes known His riches of Glory in the Christ-like vessels prepared or made ready for His use through His calling. He is immensely patient with all but some who might be fitted for heaven by our Mediator instead fit themselves out for "utter destruction" (απ-όλλυμι). The active voice verb καταρτιζω is used of the work of a Mediator but the middle voice verb is used of putting up one's own defence and mediating for oneself repudiating that which is available. Thus the potter's work is ruined by the hardness and impenitence of the heart. The ground of the Second Death and appearance at the Great White Throne is that those who reject Christ do it their way and that is the broad way that leads to "destruction". Paul extols the patience and mercy or grace of God which brings salvation but equally he affirms that the rejection of the offices of the Mediator leads to wrath and destruction.

8. CHRIST DIED ON OUR BEHALF

HUPER is a super word for the theologian. It is a defensive word and it has a legal and military background or frame of reference. The Lord acted to protect us – He acted in the defence of His elect. On our behalf He intercedes. The action our Lord took was over and above us in that it's initiation and purpose was from before the foundation of the world. Its execution was two thousand years ago and its efficacious application is our experience in this our day. Its glorious completion is in eternity where soon we shall honour and praise Him who planned it all.

There we must train our eyes upon that multitude whom no man can number and their whiteness of holiness lest we become imprisoned in the gaol of sinning and spend our lives looking for assurance whereas we might live in the liberty of the Spirit for which Christ by His death has purchased us that we might spend our lives rejoicing as living sacrifices for this glory as is our reasonable service.

1. He was wounded FOR our transgressions and bruised FOR our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him and with His stripes we are healed” Isaiah 53

2. Christ died FOR our sins according to the scriptures”.1Cor.15.3

3. For a good man some would even dare to die but while we were yet sinners Christ died FOR us.” Romans 5.6

4. He died FOR all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died FOR them and was raised again 2 Cor.5.15

5. He died FOR us so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.1Thess.5.10

The New Testament writers and its translators all adhere to the principle that Christ died for us according to the scriptures and that this action is over us all in solidarity as his bride or ecclesia and His offices are on behalf of His people who each may therefore assuredly say “He died for me”. Though popularly we imagine He would die for “oneself alone” that is a travesty of His stated mission. The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost. God is not desirous that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. It is a logical deduction that if many may be saved by faith in Jesus so may I but the doctrine of God’s elect people and their assurance is not pinioned on any one person’s assurance of redemption but rather their baptism by the Holy Spirit into His body.

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