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# The Concept of Atonement in Early Rabbinic Thought and the New Testament Writings

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THE CONCEPT OF ATONEMENT IN EARLY RABBINIC THOUGHT AND  
THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

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*Introduction*

The doctrine of atonement is an early Christian belief as expressed in a variety of New Testament writings (Mt. 26.26-29; Mk 10.45; 14.22-25; Lk. 22.15-20; Rom. 3.25; 1 Cor. 11.25; 15.3; 1 Pet. 1.18-19; Heb. 2.17; 9.13; 1 Jn 2.2; 4.10), but scholars still do not agree on the issue of its origin. The more traditional view held by scholars such as Hengel is that the interpretation of the death of Jesus as a representative atoning death comes from the Old Testament and Jewish sources.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars, however, find its origin in Hellenistic sources.<sup>2</sup> According to Williams, there is no evidence of the concept of beneficial, effective human death for others in any Jewish writing that is not greatly influenced by Greek ideas—that is, only in *4 Maccabees* (and possibly in Josephus). From this observation, he concludes that ‘the concept originated among Christians who not only spoke Greek but were also thoroughly at home in the Greek-Hellenistic thought world’.<sup>3</sup>

This study attempts to provide a reference point to the origin of the concept of atonement by examining the early rabbinic traditions that include the concept of vicarious atonement, and compare the results with

1. M. Hengel, *Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (trans. J. Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 3.

2. K. Wengst, *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1972), p. 70; S.K. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept* (HDR, 2; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 153-61. See my article above, pp. 100-116.

3. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, p. 230.

the New Testament concept of atonement. This study will demonstrate two things: (1) there is a certain level of continuity among the Old Testament, the Second Temple writings and rabbinic literature in their concept of vicarious atonement; and (2) there is an analogical connection between the concept of vicarious atonement in certain writings in rabbinic Judaism and that of the New Testament writings. However, rabbinic Judaism still has a particularistic focus.

What concerns me here is the fact that the concept of vicarious atonement found in the Second Temple literature is found more explicitly in rabbinic literature. The primary contribution to this subject is still the work of Lohse,<sup>4</sup> who in turn depended upon Strack–Billerbeck and Moore for sources.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars' works on the same subject are often fragmentary in their handling of rabbinic literature, and they usually depend upon the work of Lohse, whether they agree or disagree with his thesis.

In terms of the sources, my work is narrower than other works. Whereas Strack–Billerbeck and Lohse include in their discussion everything related to the subjects of sufferings and atonement in the Second Temple literature and rabbinic literature, I will confine my sources to those that are directly relevant to the concept of vicarious atonement.

By rabbinic literature, we mean the canon of rabbinical writings that consists of (1) the Mishnah (c. 200), a law code; (2) the two Talmuds (*yerusalmi*: c. 400; *babli*: c. 500–600), systematic exegeses of the Mishnah; and (3) the various collections of exegeses of Scriptures called *midrashim* (c. 400–600).<sup>6</sup> Altogether, they constitute 'the Oral Torah', that is, that body of tradition traced back to God's unwritten revelation to Moses at Mount Sinai.<sup>7</sup> With regard to the definition of vicarious

4. E. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955).

5. G.F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era the Age of Tannaim*, II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927).

6. J. Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 11.

7. Unless otherwise specified, the English translations of the rabbinic writings hereinafter are quoted from: Danby's translation for Mishnah: H. Danby (trans.), *Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980 [reprinted lithographically from the first edition 1933]); Neusner's edition for Jerusalem Talmud: J. Neusner (trans.), *The Talmud of the Land of Israel* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism, 1-31; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); the Soncino edition for Babylonian Talmud: I. Epstein (ed.), *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino, 1935–1952);

atonement, we follow Kadushin: ‘Vicarious atonement...is the doctrine that an individual Israelite atones through the sufferings visited upon his person for the sins of all Israel’.<sup>8</sup>

This study will follow three steps. First, we will select the traditions in rabbinic literature that state the concept of vicarious atonement either implicitly or explicitly, and will divide the traditions into five groups according to their characteristics in content and form.

Secondly, each tradition in the five groups will be studied in its relationship to its literary and historical contexts. This means its ties to the Old Testament, the Second Temple writings, other related traditions in the group, and other rabbinic literature, and their connections with rabbinic Judaism in general and their relations to the historical situations covered in the traditions, in the Roman world in particular. Considering the limited scope of this study, however, our discussion will be confined to the elements that are directly relevant to the concept of vicarious atonement. With regard to the authors and dates of composition of the traditions cited in rabbinic literature, four assumptions are adopted: (1) if a tradition is attributed to a particular authority and no contradictory

Neusner’s edition for Tosefta: J. Neusner (trans.), *The Tosefta* (New York: Ktav, 1981); Lauterbach’s translation for *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*: Jacob Z. Lauterbach (trans.), *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961); the Soncino edition for *Midrash Rabbah Pentateuch*: H. Freedman (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah Genesis* (London and New York: Soncino, 1983), S.M. Lehrman (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah Exodus* (London and New York: Soncino, 1983), and J. Israelstam and J.J. Slotki (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah Leviticus* (London and New York: Soncino, 1983); Neusner’s edition for *Song of Songs Rabbah*: J. Neusner (trans.), *Song of Songs Rabbah* (BJS, 197; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Braude’s edition for *Midrash on Psalms*: W.G. Braude (trans.), *The Midrash on Psalms* (Yale Judaica Series, 8; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); Braude’s edition for *Pesiqta Rabbati*: W.G. Braude (trans.), *Pesikta Rabbati* (Yale Judaica Series, 18; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Neusner’s edition for *Pesiqta deRab Kahana*: J. Neusner (trans.), *Pesiqta deRab Kahana* (BJS, 122–123; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987); Hammer’s edition for *Sifre Deuteronomy*: R. Hammer (trans.), *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Levertoff’s edition for *Sifre Numbers*: P.P. Levertoff (trans.), *Midrash Sifre on Numbers: Selections from Early Rabbinic Scriptural Interpretations* (New York: Macmillan, 1926). The Hebrew/Aramaic consonantal texts of these writings are from the Judaic Classics Library, CD-Rom version 2.2: D. Kantrowitz, *Judaic Classics Library, 2.2* (Davka Corp, 2001).

8. M. Kadushin, *The Theology of Seder Eliahu* (New York: Bloch, 1932), p. 134.

evidence is found in its parallel account, it is probable that that tradition can be traced back to that authority; (2) if a tradition is attributed to a particular authority whose general teachings correspond to its content, it is highly probable that that tradition can be traced back to that authority; (3) if a tradition is attested in more than one place under the name of the same authority, it is very probable that that tradition can be traced back to that authority; and (4) like most other historical studies, this study proceeds on the basis of probabilities rather than certainties.

Thirdly, the concept of vicarious atonement in these rabbinic traditions will be compared with that of the New Testament writings.

### *The Five Groups of Tradition*

The traditions to be discussed in this study belong primarily to the *aggadah*, which is usually defined as that portion of rabbinic teaching which is not *halakhah*, that is, which is not concerned with religious and ethical laws and regulations. *Aggadah* ‘seeks to clarify various historical, theological, and ethical assertions of the Torah, to rationalize them in the light of current knowledge and prevailing moral ideals, and to derive from them the generalizations that can inspire, guide, and edify life, in the existing conditions under which men lived’.<sup>9</sup> As will be observed from our inquiry, *aggadah* is primarily the creation of Palestinian Jewry, from the time of the Second Temple to the end of the talmudic period. The contribution of Babylonian Jewry in the field of *aggadah* is limited. Thus, very few aggadic statements are reported from the many great Babylonian *Amoraim*, while many aggadic statements are reported from Palestinian *Amoraim* such as R. Joshua b. Levi, R. Tanhuma, R. Samuel b. Nahmani, R. Simlai and R. Judah b. Simon.<sup>10</sup>

The traditions to be discussed here are for the most part ascribed to the *Amoraim*, but they also include early Tannaitic traditions attributed to such men as R. Ishmael (d. 135), who founded one of the two most important schools that revived the Torah after Bar Kokhba’s rebellion, R. Jonathan (c. 140), who was one of the two pupils of R. Ishmael, and R. Simeon b. Yohai (c. 150), who was one of the five pupils of R. Akiba

9. B. Zion Bokser, *The Wisdom of the Talmud* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), p. 13.

10. S. Safrai, in ‘AMORAIM’, *Encyclopedia Judaica* (CD-ROM Edition Version 1.0 ; Judaica Multimedia [Israel], 1997). The compilation of the Mishnah (ca. 200) forms a divide between *Tannaim* (teachers) and *Amoraim* (expositors).

who revived Torah studies together with R. Ishmael's two pupils after 135.

I have divided these rabbinic traditions into five groups: (1) two Tannaitic traditions that attribute atoning efficacy to the death of righteous Jews without actually citing the maxim that the death of the righteous atones; (2) two Tannaitic and three Amoraic traditions that attribute atoning efficacy to the actions and the intercessions of the patriarchs and the prophets who risked their lives for Israel but did not die in the process; (3) four Amoraic traditions that attribute atoning efficacy to the death of exemplary figures such as Moses, Miriam and Aaron, and connect their death with the maxim that the death of the righteous atones; (4) five Amoraic traditions in which God is described as the one who chastises or seizes the great ones to atone for the sins of their generation; and (5) a formulaic saying, 'May I make atonement for you!' or parallel expressions that appear in many rabbinic writings.

### *Study of the Traditions*

#### *The First Group: Martyr Traditions*

*A Tradition Ascribed to Simeon b. Yohai.* The first group to be discussed consists of two Tannaitic traditions that seem to have a connection with Jewish martyrdom during the wars with Rome. They attribute atoning efficacy to the innocent death of Jews. A tradition is handed down in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai (c. 150):

Therefore: 'Your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people' (1 Kgs 20.42). You find that when Israel went forth to war, of them all only Ahab, king of Israel, alone was the one who died. That is in line with the following... (1 Kgs 22.34). And how shall I interpret the statement, 'And your people instead of his people'? R. Yohanan [d. 279] in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: 'Every drop (of blood) which flowed from that righteous man (אותה הטיפה שיצאה מאותו צדיק) (the prophet who was killed by a lion in 1 Kgs 20.36) brought about atonement for all Israel (כיפרה על כל ישראל) (y. *Sanh.* 30c).

This is probably one of the earliest rabbinic traditions in which the concept of vicarious atonement is explicitly stated. The tradition is ascribed to Simeon b. Yohai. It does not have any parallel account in known rabbinic literature, but its message agrees with Simeon's personal experience and teachings in general.



Simeon was a faithful disciple of R. Akiba (50–135), who was executed by the Romans for treason after the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt. According to a Jewish tradition, Akiba was tortured to death, his flesh being torn from his body with iron combs (*b. Ber.* 61b). Simeon and four other disciples of Akiba survived the failure of that revolt, and they were the ones who were credited for reviving Torah studies at that time (*b. Yeb.* 62b). The crushing defeat of Bar Kokhba did not deter Simeon from maintaining his staunch opposition to Rome. The complete paganizing of Jerusalem and the prohibition of circumcision during the Hadrianic era, and the cruel martyrdom of Akiba and other rabbis, only intensified Simeon's hatred of Gentiles in general and especially of the Roman people and its culture. As a result, Simeon was sentenced to death, and he had to hide in a cave for 12 years with his son Eleazar (*b. Shab.* 33b).

The style and content of the tradition about the disciple's death seems to fit the context of Simeon's time and his personal experience. So personal and emphatic is the statement: "every" drop (of blood) which flowed from "that" righteous man brought about atonement for "all" Israel' (*y. Sanh.* 30c). The statement points strongly to the bloodshed of the Jews during their wars against the Romans under Titus and Hadrian. Thus, Simeon's authorship of this particular tradition need not be doubted.

The Old Testament text that Simeon refers to is from 1 Kings 20, which tells the story of a prophet who would not strike another prophet, despite his earnest request. Because of his refusal, judgment was announced against him: 'Because you have not obeyed the voice of the LORD, as soon as you have left me, a lion will kill you' (1 Kgs 20.36). And when he had left him, a lion met him and killed him. In the story, the death of the prophet in 1 Kgs 20.36 foreshadows the destiny of Ahab (22.34), who let Ben-Hadad out of his hand, even though YHWH had devoted him to destruction (20.42). Thus, judgment was announced against Ahab: 'Your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people' (1 Kgs 20.42).

According to the Old Testament context, this passage (1 Kgs 20.42) means that Ahab and his people would perish in place of Ben-Hadad and his people, but the Jerusalem Talmud interprets the second half of the passage differently by connecting it with the death of the dead prophet on the basis of a common theme of vicarious death (*y. Sanh.* 30c). The Talmud appeals for its interpretation to silence about the death of

Israelites other than Ahab in 1 Kgs 22.34. The logic of the Talmud goes like this: since, when Israel went forth to war, of them all only Ahab died in the battle, ‘your people for his people’ must not mean the death of Israelites in place of Arameans, but must point to something else. This something else the Talmud finds in Simeon’s authoritative statement that ‘your people’ refers to the dead prophet and ‘his people’ to Israel. Thus, the prophet died to atone for all Israel, proleptically fulfilling the prophecy.

Certainly, it is difficult for us to accept such a manipulative use of Scripture, but we are concerned with the roots of Simeon’s statement. His statement seems to point to three things: (1) the concept seems to have its background in the bloody conflict with Rome;<sup>11</sup> (2) the concept that the blood of one atones for all Israel (כיפרה על כל ישראל) seems to point to the Levitical atoning sacrifices, the blood rites on the Day of Atonement in particular (Lev. 16); and (3) also involved here is the idea that the death of a righteous man is atonement for Israel, which may have its roots in the notion of ‘merit of the fathers’, ‘the doctrine that progeny benefit from the righteousness of their forebears’.<sup>12</sup> According to Jewish law, a criminal atones for his offence by his death (cf. Isa. 22.14; *m. Sanh.* 6.2; *Sifre* §112 on Num. 15.31), but what baffles the readers of the story is that the prophet in 1 Kings 20 did not seem to have committed a grave sin worthy of such a cruel death. Since the righteous man did not deserve to die, his death was an atonement, not for his own sins, which were few, but for Israel as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

*An Anonymous Tannaitic Tradition.* We have observed that the tradition ascribed to Simeon b. Yohai attributed atoning efficacy to the innocent death of a prophet. The same idea seems to be behind another Tannaitic tradition:

*And doth make expiation for the land of His people (32.43):* Whence do we learn that when Israelites are slain by the nations of the world (שהריגתן של ישראל ביד אומות העולם), it serves them as expiation in the world to come (כפרה היא להם לעולם הבא)? From the verses, *A Psalm of Asaph: O God, the heathen are come into Thine inheritance... They have given the*

11. Hengel, *Atonement*, p. 63.

12. Joshua H. Shmidman, ‘ZEKHUT AVOT’, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (CD-ROM Edition; Judaica Multimedia [Israel], 1997).

13. M. Kadushin, *A Conceptual Commentary on Midrash Leviticus Rabbah: Value Concept in Jewish Thought* (BJS, 126; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 142.



*dead bodies of Thy servants (to be food unto the fowls of the heaven, the flesh of Thy saints unto the beasts of the earth). They have shed their blood like water (Ps. 79.1-3) (Sifre §333 [140a] on Deut. 32.43).*

This tradition in *Sifre Deuteronomy* 140a is important because it is another early example of the concept of vicarious atonement. The tradition amplifies Deut. 32.43, which closes the Song of Moses with a glimpse of hope after the darkness of the judgment expressed so vividly in the rest of the Song (32.1-42). With the symbolic action of raising his hand, YHWH makes an oath (v. 40) and declares that he will take vengeance on his adversaries, who had been instrumental in the execution of YHWH's judgment on Israel. YHWH will avenge the blood of his servants (דָּם־עֲבָדָיו), and he will make atonement for his land and his people (וְכִפֶּרְ ) (v. 43). This is one of the two occasions in the Song in which YHWH calls Israel his servants (cf. v. 36. 'Indeed the LORD will vindicate his people, have compassion on his servants [עֲבָדָיו], when he sees that their power is gone, neither bond nor free remaining'). YHWH will make atonement for (purify) the land by taking vengeance on the innocent blood of his servants (cf. Num. 35.33: 'You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it'). The use of the expression עֲבָדָיו, thus, signifies the turn of fortune for the Israelites.

The writer of the *Sifre* seems to have connected the blood of his servants to the concept of atonement;<sup>14</sup> from this, he drew his conclusion that the Israelites killed by the Gentiles provide atonement for the world to come. This implies that the blood of the Israelites killed by the Gentiles atones in the same way as the blood of the atoning sacrifices.<sup>15</sup>

*Comparison with the New Testament Writings.* We have observed that at least two Tannaitic traditions connect the innocent death of Jews with

14. By saying 'the writer of the *Sifre*', I do not assume the authorship of the *Sifre* by a single writer. A tradition reports that R. Simeon b. Yohai is the composer of the *Sifre* on Numbers and Deuteronomy, but now scholars agree that the *Sifre* is in both of its parts a combination of two midrashim from the two Tannaitic schools: R. Ishmael's school and R. Akiba's; see Herman L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (First Harper Torchbook; New York: Harper & Row, 1965 [1931]), p. 206. The final compilation of the *Sifre* was made by Amoraim.

15. J. Neusner (trans.), *Sifre to Deuteronomy: An Analytical Translation*, II (BJS, 101; Atlanta: Scholars Press, rev. edn, 1987), p. 382.

vicarious atonement as early as the middle of the second century. The concept of vicarious atonement and eschatological forgiveness is also observed in some Second Temple writings, such as Dan. 3.38-40 LXX and *4 Maccabees*, which are in continuity with the Old Testament in their application of the Levitical atoning sacrifices to the sufferings of the righteous (cf. Isa. 53).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a variety of the New Testament writings apply the Levitical atoning sacrifices to the death of Jesus Christ the righteous (Rom. 3.25; 8.3; 1 Cor. 5.7; 2 Cor. 5.21; 1 Pet. 1.18-19; Heb. 2.17; 9.13; 1 Jn 2.2; 4.10; cf. Mt. 26.26-29; Mk 10.45; 14.22-25; Lk. 22.15-20; Rom. 5.9; 1 Cor. 11.25; 15.3). Likewise, the group of rabbinical traditions studied here point to three Old Testament concepts: (1) there is atoning power in the blood of the innocent victim in Levitical atoning sacrifices (y. *Sanh.* 30c; cf. Lev. 16.27; 17.11). In particular, the idea that the blood of the innocent victim brings about an atonement for Israel is strongly reminiscent of the Levitical atoning sacrifices on the Day of Atonement. (2) The death of the righteous atones (y. *Sanh.* 30c; *Sifre Deut.* §333 [140a]; cf. 2 Sam. 21.3, 14; Isa. 53). (3) The coming age will replace this age of sufferings (*Sifre Deut.* §32 [73b], §333 [140a]; cf. Isa. 40.9-11; 51.6; 52.7; 60.1-3, 19; 65.17; 66.24).

Of particular importance to us is the fact that the two traditions in *Sifre Deuteronomy* (73b and 140a) connect the concept of atonement with the world to come. The earliest source in which the phrase ‘the world to come’ (עולמ הבא) occurs is *I En.* 71.15, which is dated in the first century AD by a majority of scholars.<sup>17</sup> There is no consensus on the dating of the Book of the Similitudes that includes this passage. Otherwise, the phrase does not occur in the Second Temple writings. The meaning of ‘the forgiveness of sins’ to the Jews in the Second Temple period is primarily the return from exile and the re-establishment of the Jewish nation, which the author of *4 Maccabees* (6.27-29; 17.21-22) connected with the martyrdom of seven brothers.<sup>18</sup>

16. J.W. Van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People* (JSJSup, 57; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), p. 163; H. Anderson, *4 Maccabees* (OTS, 2; New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 539; Hengel, *Atonement*, p. 60; Williams, *Jesus’ Death as Saving Event*, p. 122.

17. E. Isaac, *I (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch (OTP, 1; New York: Doubleday, 1983)*, pp. 5-89 (7).

18. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 273.

The idea that ‘the Israelites killed by the Gentiles are an expiation for the world-to-come’ (*Sifre Deut.* §333 [140a]) is certainly analogous to the concept of atonement in the New Testament writings (Rom. 3.25; 1 Cor. 11.25; 15.3; 1 Pet. 1.18-19; Heb. 1.1-4; 1 Jn 2.12; 4.10). In 1 John, in particular, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah is the basis for the realized eschatological forgiveness of the new covenant Christians (2.12), as well as the basis of the ultimate redemption in the future: ‘And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming’ (1 Jn 2.28). ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure’ (1 Jn 3.2-3). This implies that there will be a final divine revelation that will involve the final judgment (v. 2) and the transformation of believers in Christ (v. 3), which happens to agree with the two primary features of the world to come in rabbinic literature (cf. *Pes. R.* 11.7: ‘In this world, Israel cleave unto the Holy One... But in the time-to-come they will become like [the Lord]’).

Compared to the rabbinic traditions in this group, the New Testament writings are distinctive primarily by bringing in the person of Jesus and the universal efficacy of his sacrifice. In particular, the rabbinic traditions did not envision the Messiah’s death as the atoning sacrifice.

#### *Those Who Did Not Die, but Atoned*

*A Tannaitic Tradition Ascribed to Jonathan (c. 140).* We have just examined a group of writings that attribute atoning efficacy to the death of innocent men. Another group of rabbinic writings applies the concept of vicarious atonement to the actions and intercessions of the patriarchs and the prophets who risked their lives for Israel. These situations do not involve the actual death of the mediator. The first tradition comes down to us in the name of R. Jonathan (c. 140) concerning Jonah, Moses, and David:

R. Nathan says: Jonah made his voyage only in order to drown himself in the sea, for thus it is said: ‘And he said unto them: Take me up and cast me forth into the sea’ (Jon. 1.12). And so you also find that the patriarchs and prophets offered their lives in behalf of Israel (נתנו נפשא על ישראל).

As to Moses, what did he say: ‘Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin; and if not blot me, I pray Thee, out of the book which Thou hast written’ (Exod. 32.32); ‘And if Thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray Thee, out of

hand, if I have found favor in Thy sight; and let me not look upon my wretchedness' (Num. 11.15).

As to David, what did he say? 'And David spoke unto the Lord, when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said: Lo, I have sinned and I have done iniquitously; but these sheep what have they done? Let Thy hand, I pray Thee, be against me, and against my father's house' (2 Sam. 24.17). Thus you find everywhere that the patriarchs and the prophets offered their lives in behalf of Israel (*Mek.*, *Pisha* 1.104-113).

Jonathan represents the school of R. Ishmael b. Elisha during the Hadrianic era, and his statements therefore appear mostly in the *Mekilta* and the *Sifre* on Numbers, which emanate from the school of R. Ishmael. The object of this aggadic tradition seems to be clear: Jonathan wanted to describe the heroes of ancient times such as Moses, David and Jonah as the prototypes of Israelites to follow in the aftermath of the Roman wars. This tradition is distinctive in two ways: (1) the mediators are confined to a few patriarchs and prophets; and (2) the atonement did not involve their deaths. So, here we have evidence that the concept of vicarious death was expressed in the traditions ascribed to the two authorities that represented the two schools during the Hadrianic era.

As observed in another tradition (*y. Sanh.* 130a), Jonah's action receives a more favorable interpretation in this tradition than in the Old Testament story itself. The key element that Jonathan emphasizes is Jonah's attitude towards Israel: he cared for his people, even if that meant to disobey YHWH and be drowned in the sea. The expression 'gave their life for Israel' (נתנו נפשם על ישראל) in *Mekilta* is strongly reminiscent of the words of a Maccabean martyr: 'I, like my brothers, give up body and life (σῶμα καὶ ψυχὴν προδίδωμι) for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation...to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation' (2 Macc. 7.37; cf. Dan. 3.38-40 LXX; 4 Macc. 17.22). They clearly share the concept of surrendering their lives for their nation. In particular, the expression נתנו נפשם in *Mekilta* is clearly equivalent to the Greek ψυχὴν προδίδωμι in 2 Macc. 7.37. Jonathan finds correspondences between Jonah and the two exemplary figures in the Old Testament: Moses (Exod. 32.30-34) and David (2 Sam. 24.17). The two cases used by Jonathan are Moses' mediation after the golden calf episode and David's mediation after the census. The context seems to indicate that Jonathan considered Moses to be one of the prophets and David one of the patriarchs. The title 'patriarchs' is usually reserved for Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob (*b. Ber.* 16b), but there is some indication that it was also used for David in the first century AD. In the New Testament, Peter refers to David as ‘the patriarch David’ (Acts 2.29).

In addition to their attitude toward their people, these two Old Testament figures typify two eschatological figures who will liberate Israel from exile and reestablish the Jewish nation in the land of Israel. Moses is a type of the leader who will lead the people of Israel from bondage (Deut. 18.18) and bring about the renewal of the covenant between YHWH and Israel. David is a type of the kingly Messiah, who will restore the golden days of the early monarchy (Jer. 23.5; 30.9; 33.14-16; Zech. 3.8; Hos. 3.5; Sir. 45.25; 47.11; cf. *y. Ber.* 5a). Involved here are all four Jewish eschatological ideas: (1) the concept of the new covenant (cf. Mt. 26.26-29; Mk 14.22-25; Lk. 22.15-20; 1 Cor. 11.25), (2) the concept of the eschatological kingdom, (3) the idea of divine forgiveness (cf. Mk 10.45; Rom. 3.25; 5.9; 1 Pet. 1.18-19; 1 Jn 2.2; 4.10), and (4) the concept of vicarious sufferings. We find all four ideas in the New Testament interpretation of the life and the death of Jesus the Messiah.

Of particular importance here is the fact that the idea of vicarious suffering is explicitly stated with a similar pattern in both cases: (1) the wrath of YHWH is upon the people because of the sins of the people (in Moses’ case) or the leader (in David’s case); (2) the leader steps in between the people and YHWH as a mediator; (3) during his attempt to mediate, the leader volunteers to suffer on behalf of them; and (4) YHWH accepts the leader’s supplication and forgives them. Of the two cases, the primary emphasis seems to be on Moses’ case, as indicated by its precedence over David’s in the text.

The Exodus passage deals with Moses’ intercession before YHWH after the golden calf episode. After that fateful event, Moses ascends the mountain a second time (Exod. 32.30-34), and he states the purpose of his trip in v. 30: ‘You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin (אֲכַפֵּרָה בְּעֵד הַטְּאֵתְכֶם).’ The expression אֲכַפֵּרָה בְּעֵד הַטְּאֵתְכֶם points to the so-called *kipper* formula used for the two atoning sacrifices: ‘The priest shall make atonement for him/them, and he/they shall be forgiven’ (Lev. 4.20; cf. 4.26, 31, 35; 5.10, 13, 16, 18, 26; 19.22; Num. 15.25, 26, 28).

This cultic connection seems to imply that Moses made atonement by offering his life as a ransom during his attempt to mediate. Baltzer argues, ‘Here there is a double condition for the people’s survival. Moses offers to take upon himself the consequences of the “great sin”, on



behalf of the people. To be blotted out of “the book of life” — the list of citizens of heaven — means that his death will be final’.<sup>19</sup>

Williams, however, excludes any notion of vicarious death in this case, saying: ‘Moses expresses his desire to stand with them and to share their fate’.<sup>20</sup> The issue is whether we may clearly differentiate between the concept of death in solidarity with the people and that of vicarious death in the Old Testament. Such a distinction between representation and substitution is foreign to the writers of the Old Testament or the rabbis. Moreover, when a human person is the subject of the action, *kipper* ‘denotes the action of a substitutionary mediator, effecting forgiveness of sin (Exod. 32.30, 32), withdrawal of wrath (Num. 25.11), or cessation of a plague (Num. 17.13, 15)’.<sup>21</sup> As will be observed, the rabbis noticed this, and applied the concept of cultic vicarious atonement to these Old Testament passages.

*Two Amoraic Traditions.* The interpretation of Moses’ mediation as an atonement, as seen in the preceding tradition, is supported by two Amoraic traditions. The first one is handed down in the name of Samuel (d. 254), a Babylonian *Amora*: ‘Moses besought (לְיְהוָה) the Lord his God (Exod. 32.11)... Samuel says: “It teaches that he risked his life for them [that is, found a ground of absolution], as it says, And if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written (Exod. 32.32)”’ (*b. Ber.* 32a). The second Amoraic tradition (*b. Sot.* 14a) is ascribed to R. Simlai (c. 250), R. Samuel’s contemporary, who applied the Servant passage (Isa. 53.12) specifically to Moses’ atonement.

Just as Jonathan’s interpretation of Jonah’s action was strongly reminiscent of the words of a Maccabean martyr (2 Macc. 7.37), so is Simlai’s interpretation of Moses’ action. Like the Maccabean martyr, Moses’ role involves both that of vicarious sacrifice and that of intercessor, which are closely associated with each other. He not only ‘surrendered himself to die’ (cf. Mk 10.45; 1 Jn 3.14), securing atonement for Israel, but also ‘begged for mercy on behalf of sinners in Israel’.

This way of interpreting Moses’ action is paralleled by the New Testament concept of atonement in four ways: (1) as the people were under the wrath of God because of their sins in the case of Moses, so is

19. K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* (trans. M. Kohl; ed. P. Machinist; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 420-21.

20. Williams, *Jesus’ Death as Saving Event*, p. 103.

21. B. Lang, ‘Kipper’, in *TDOT*, VII, pp. 288-303 (294).



the whole world subject to God's wrath because of their sins (Jn 3.16; Rom. 3.9; Heb. 2.17; 1 Jn 3.14; 5.19); (2) as Moses was the leader of a new community of Israel based on a covenant, so is Jesus the leader of the new covenant community (Mt. 26.26-29; Mk 14.22-25; Lk. 22.15-20; 1 Cor. 11.23-26; 1 Jn 1.3); (3) as Moses was a willing sacrifice and intercessor, so is Jesus (3.5, 8, 16; 2.1, 2). In particular, the three New Testament statements, such as 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10.45), 'He laid down his life for us' (1 Jn 3.16) and 'I lay down my life for the sheep' (Jn 10.15) are clearly reminiscent of expressions such as 'The patriarchs and prophets gave their life for Israel (נתנו נפשנו על ישראל)' (*Mek.*, *Pisha* 1.104-113; cf. 2 Macc. 7.37) and 'surrendered himself to die' (*b. Sot.* 14a; cf. Isa. 53.12; Mk 10.45). Finally, (4) as Moses' mediation brought about divine forgiveness, so did the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and his intercession. Their 'sins are forgiven on account of his name' (1 Jn 2.12), and they 'have passed from death to life' (3.14). The New Testament writings are distinctive in their universalizing tendency.

*A Tannaitic Tradition regarding Phinehas's Atonement.* Another Tannaitic tradition (*Sifre* on Num. 25.13) applies the same Servant passage (Isa. 53.12), this time to Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, who 'was zealous for his God, and made atonement (נִיֶּכְפָר) for the Israelites' (Num. 25.13). Levertoff considers this tradition as a fragment of a larger section where Isaiah 53 was interpreted as referring to Phinehas.<sup>22</sup> Phinehas shares an exalted position with Moses in both the Old Testament and the Second Temple literature. Ben Sirach exalts Phinehas as the third in glory after Moses and Aaron (Sir. 45.23). In the *Sifre* on Num. 25.13, it is obvious that the writer wanted to emphasize the parallel between Moses and Phinehas.

This argument is supported by three things: (1) just as Isaiah 53 was interpreted as referring to Moses in *b. Sot.* 14a, so was it interpreted as referring to Phinehas in the *Sifre*; and (2) the pattern of the event closely follows the golden calf episode. Like Moses in that episode, Phinehas acts as a mediator between YHWH and Israel in the apostasy at Baal Peor, this time accompanied by sexual relations between Israelites and pagan women. The wrath of YHWH could only be appeased by the execution of all the leaders of the people, but Phinehas turned back

22. Levertoff (trans.), *Midrash Sifre on Numbers*, p. 143 n. 1.

YHWH's wrath from the Israelites by killing two conspicuous and defiant sinners in the very act (Num. 25.6-8). (3) As Moses' mediation brought about divine forgiveness and restored the covenant relationship between YHWH and his people, so does the mediation of Phinehas and his intercession.

According to the *Sifre* on Num. 25.13, it was Phinehas's zealous action that constitutes the atonement. The *Sifre* emphasizes Phinehas's zealous action by setting off his zeal against other Israelites' complacency. They even tried to lynch Phinehas, and they all despised him even after YHWH performed six miracles for him. For Phinehas's zealous action, the *Sifre* uses Isa. 53.12: 'Because he hath put out his soul unto death'. 'It does not say here כָּפַר, he atoned once for all, but יִכַּפֵּר; for until this present time hath he not ceased (to do so), but he stands and atones, until the time shall come when the dead will live again.' The *Sifre*'s interpretation is based upon the difference between the perfective כָּפַר and nonperfective יִכַּפֵּר. When the combination of waw and prefix conjugation such as וַיִּכַּפֵּר is preceded by a suffix form, as seen in Num. 25.13, it usually expresses a perfective value,<sup>23</sup> but the *Sifre* considers the waw as just a conjunction that does not affect the tense of the verb יִכַּפֵּר and interprets וַיִּכַּפֵּר as a nonperfective present tense. This way of reading the passage seems to have been prompted by the fact that the 'eternal' possession of the priesthood was promised to Phinehas and his descendants as the covenant of peace.

This interpretation of Phinehas's action is in line with Simlai's interpretation of Moses' atonement, but adds to it the important element of the ongoing ministry of atonement by Phinehas, which may be based on YHWH's promise of 'the covenant of an everlasting priesthood' to Phinehas and his descendants (25.13). Nevertheless, this particular aspect of Phinehas's atonement is paralleled by 1 John's description of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice. Like the picture of Phinehas in the *Sifre*, Christ has not only accomplished atonement for our sins on the cross, but still stands and makes atonement for our present sins as our advocate (παράκλητον) with the Father (1 Jn 2.1-2; cf. Rom. 8.34; Heb. 8.1; 10.21).

*An Amoraic Tradition on Isaac Ascribed to Jonathan b. Eleazar (c. 220)*. This way of connecting the Servant passage to exemplary figures

23. B.K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §33.3.1.

is not limited to Moses and Phinehas. Isaac was described in the Midrash as the first to experience ‘sufferings’ from God (*Gen. R.* 65.9), and in *Targ. Job* 3.18 he is expressly called ‘the servant of YHWH’.<sup>24</sup> Based upon this observation, Rosenberg argues that ‘in Jewish tradition, Isaac was described as the prototype of the “Suffering Servant”, bound upon the altar as a sacrifice’.<sup>25</sup> Rosenberg’s argument finds its support in a tradition (*b. Shab.* 89b) handed down in the name of R. Jonathan b. Eleazar (c. 220), in which Isaac is described as a voluntary atoning sacrifice. In this tradition, we find all the elements observed in rabbinic interpretations of Moses’ and Phinehas’s atonements. Emphasized again is the voluntariness of the sacrifice on Isaac’s part (‘I offered myself up before thee [as a sacrifice]!’), which can also be found in both the Second Temple literature and other rabbinical literature. According to Josephus, Isaac was 25 years old when he obeyed God’s command and went immediately to the altar to be sacrificed (*Ant.* 1.227-232). This aspect of the sacrifice is expressed more explicitly in a Tannaitic tradition handed down in the name of R. Meir (c. 150): ‘*And with all thy soul, as did Isaac, who bound himself upon the altar, as it is said, And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son (Gen. 22.10) (Sifre Deut. §32 [73b] on Deut. 6.5).*

Of particular importance here, however, is the new element added to them: *Aqeda* of Isaac becomes the basis of Isaac’s intercession with YHWH (‘And shouldst Thou say, they must all be upon me, lo! I offered myself up before Thee [as a sacrifice]!’). Involved here again is the fusion of the two concepts: the doctrine of the merits of the fathers and the concept of the atoning sacrifice.

This picture of Isaac is strongly reminiscent of that of Christ as the believer’s advocate with the Father in the New Testament writings (1 Jn 2.1-2; Rom. 8.34; Heb. 8.1; 10.21). Like the picture of Isaac in the talmudic tradition (*b. Shab.* 89b), the accomplished fact of Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross becomes the basis of his continuing ministry of atonement before the throne of God. In addition to this, the sacrifice of Isaac parallels that of Jesus in another important respect: in both, the sacrifice itself does not have any inward connection with the sinner. The Isaac language is applied to Jesus in the New Testament

24. A fragment of *Targum Job* (11QtgJob) was found at Qumran; thus, we may say that this tradition is even earlier than the Qumran literature.

25. R.A. Rosenberg, ‘Jesus, Isaac, and the “Suffering Servant”’, *JBL* 84 (1965), pp. 381-88 (385).

writings using μονογενής (Jn 3.16; 1 Jn 4.9; Heb. 11.17), one of the two LXX terms that render the Hebrew word יִצְחָק used for Isaac in Gen. 22.2, 12, 16.<sup>26</sup>

We may still find many differences between the two, despite these parallels. In particular, whereas Christ's atoning sacrifice is for the whole world (Jn 3.16; Rom. 3.25; 1 Jn 2.2), the beneficiaries of Isaac's atonement were confined to Israelites in the talmudic tradition.

### *The Death of the Exemplary Figures*

There is also a group of traditions that attribute atoning efficacy to the death of exemplary figures. I have identified four traditions, which are all ascribed to the *Amoraim* in the third century. Like the Isaac tradition in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 89b), these four Amoraic traditions combine the doctrine of the merits of the fathers with the concept of the atoning efficacy of the death of the righteous.

The first tradition is handed down in the name of R. Hama, son of R. Hanina (c. 260), a Palestinian *Amora*: 'And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab over against Beth-peor (Exod. 34.28)... R. Hama son of R. Hanina also said: Why was Moses buried near Beth-peor? To atone for the incident at Peor' (*b. Sot.* 14a). Thus, Hama connects Moses' burial place to atonement for the event at Peor recorded in Num. 25.1-3. Moses died a natural death, but that fact does not deter R. Hama from attributing atoning efficacy to his death. This tradition is attested only here.

Similarly, atoning efficacy is attributed to the death of Aaron in a tradition (*b. M. Qat.* 28a) handed down in the name of R. Eleazar (d. 279), a Palestinian *Amora*. The same atoning efficacy is attributed to the death of Miriam in a tradition (*b. M. Qat.* 28a) handed down in the name of R. Ammi (c. 300), one of the two most outstanding Palestinian *Amoraim* of the period (*b. Meg.* 22a; *b. Sanh.* 17b). Finally, atoning efficacy is also attributed to the death of the two sons of Aaron and Saul's sons in a tradition (*y. Yom.* 38b) handed down in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba (c. 280). In the Old Testament, Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's two

26. R.E. Brown, *Epistles of John* (AB, 30; New York: Doubleday, 1982), p. 517; E. Best, *Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology* (SNTSMS, 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 169-73; G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (SPB, 4; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961), p. 233; V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 162; W.R. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 57.

sons, are remembered primarily in relation to their offering of ‘unholy fire’ before YHWH and their tragic death (Lev. 10.1-2). Here they receive a more favorable view in line with the rabbis’ favorable reinterpretation of their history. R. Hiyya applied the known maxim ‘The death of the righteous effects atonement’ to their death; thus, they are seen to be righteous, and their deaths have atoning efficacy for all Israel in the manner analogous to the rituals on the Day of Atonement.

All four traditions are nearly identical in their style of argument, content and underlying maxim. In addition, they are all ascribed to the rabbinic authorities of the third century. Based upon our study of this group of traditions, we may conclude: (1) the concept of vicarious atonement was popular among the rabbis at this period of time; (2) the maxim that the death of the righteous effects atonement can be traced to the earlier period, as seen in a tradition ascribed to Simeon b. Yohai (c. 150). The fact that these later traditions use the maxim explicitly seems to indicate that there was development of the concept of vicarious atonement. (3) Involved here is also the fusion of the concept of vicarious atonement and the concept of the merits of the fathers. This combining of concepts has a precedent in a tradition ascribed to Jonathan (c. 220) concerning *Aqeda* of Isaac. These later traditions seem to have expanded their application of the concept by including Moses, Miriam, Aaron and Aaron’s sons.

With regard to their interpretive handling of Scripture, we may hardly agree, except in the last case that has explicit connection with atonement (2 Sam. 21.3). What determined the result of the rabbis’ exegesis was their hermeneutical goals, rather than any conscious subscription to method.<sup>27</sup> The rabbis’ interpretive goal was to establish that the death of exemplary figures atones. The maxim was that the death of the righteous atones, and assuming that these exemplary figures were righteous, their death had to atone. However, there is no explicit statement about the atoning efficacy of their deaths in the scriptural texts; thus, the rabbis appealed to a variety of scriptural contexts for support of their premises. They consisted of the burial place, immediate literary contexts and the

27. D.G. McCartney, ‘The New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament’, in H.M. Conn (ed.), *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), pp. 101-16 (107-110).



date of death, from which the rabbis sought deeper meaning in connection with their premises.<sup>28</sup>

Of particular importance here is the fact that rabbis attributed special atoning efficacy to the death of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, who are mentioned together in Micah as those sent by God to lead Israel out of Egypt: 'For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam' (Mic. 6.4).

The rabbis' interpretation of these three figures is similar to the New Testament description of Jesus Christ in three ways: (1) just as the three are sent by God to redeem Israel from Egyptian bondage, so is Jesus sent by God to redeem his people from the bondage of sin and death: 'God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 Jn 4.9-10; cf. Jn 3.16; Rom. 3.25; 1 Pet. 1.18-19); (2) like the death of the three figures, the blood of Jesus has atoning efficacy for his people's sins: 'But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin' (1 Jn 1.7; cf. Rom. 3.25; Heb. 9.28); and (3) they both use cultic language to express the atoning efficacy of the death of the mediator. The concept of atonement in the New Testament writings points to its correspondence with the Levitical atonement rituals, especially on the Day of Atonement. This group of rabbinical traditions also connects the death of Aaron and Miriam (and Aaron's two sons) to the Levitical atonement rituals. In the case of Aaron and his two sons, their deaths are directly compared to the Day of Atonement.

As seen in other respects, however, the New Testament concept of atonement is unique primarily because it has to do with Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Messiah, and because of the extent of the atoning efficacy of his death.

#### *God Chastising or Seizing the Great Ones to Atone*

There is a group of rabbinical traditions that describe God as the one who chastises or seizes the great ones to atone for the sins of his generation. This group can be divided into two subgroups: (1) the cases in

28. J.W. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptics Gospels and Acts* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1954), p. 89.



which no death of a mediator is involved, and (2) the cases in which the death of the mediator is involved. I will deal with the former first.

*The Sufferings of the Great One(s)*. The traditions pertaining to this subgroup are ascribed to authorities that belong to the Tiberias academy headed by R. Johanan in the later half of the third century. These authorities are Johanan, Abbahu, Resh Lakish and Judah the son of Nahmani. Johanan was the teacher of both Abbahu and Hiyya. Resh Lakish was one of the most esteemed sages in the Tiberias academy headed by Johanan (*b. Ta'an.* 8a), and Judah, the interpreter of Resh Lakish, may well have been Johanan's disciple, considering his relationship with Resh Lakish.

The first tradition comes down to us in the name of R. Abbahu (c. 300), a Palestinian *Amora*, who was a disciple of R. Johanan and also studied with Resh Lakish and Eleazar b. Pedat:

A certain Min said to R. Abbahu: 'Your God is a jester [i.e., He makes His prophets ridiculous], for He said to Ezekiel, Lie down on thy left side (Ezek 4.4), and it is also written, Lie on thy right side' (Ezek. 4.6). [Just then] a disciple came and asked him: 'What is the reason for the Sabbatical year?' 'Now', said R. Abbahu, 'I shall give you an answer which will suit you both equally. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, Sow your seed six years but omit the seventh, that ye may know that the earth is mine (cf. Lev. 25.3, 23). They however, did not do so, but sinned and were exiled. Now, it is the universal practice that a king of flesh and blood against whom his subjects have rebelled, if he be cruel, kills them all; if merciful, he slays half of them; but if he is exceptionally merciful, he only chastises the great ones (מייסר הגדולים) [i.e. the leaders]. So, also, the Holy One, blessed be He, afflicted Ezekiel in order to cleanse Israel from their iniquities' (*b. Sanh.* 39a).

Abbahu lived in Caesarea, then the center of Roman rule and of Palestinian Christianity, which may have provided the life-setting of this particular tradition. Abbahu's interpretation is consistent with the description of Ezekiel's ordeal in the Old Testament. Ezekiel was to 'bear the punishment' (וְשָׁמַתָּ אֶת-עֵינֶיךָ) of both Israel and Judah by his sufferings (Ezek. 4.4-6), which Abbahu interprets as vicariously atoning for the sins of both nations.

The same dictum is applied in a tradition (*b. Ket.* 8b) to the sufferings of R. Hiyya (c. 280), the outstanding disciple of R. Johanan. Behind these statements of rabbis, there lies a dictum that God chastises the great ones to atone for the sins of their generation. This dictum follows a general

teaching that sufferings atone for sins: ‘For R. Simeon b. Lakish [Resh Lakish] said...the sufferings wash away all the sins of a man’ (*b. Ber.* 5a). So, according to Judah the son of Nahmani, the fact that R. Hiyya suffered the loss of his child innocently implies that he is ‘important enough to be held responsible [lit. “to be seized”] for the generation (with the sufferings, that come over you, you should expiate your generation vicariously)’.

*The Death of the Mediator Involved.* We have examined the first subgroup of traditions, in which no death of the mediator is involved. In the second subgroup of traditions, the atoning death of the mediator *is* involved. The first tradition was handed down in the name of R. Eleazar (d. 279), who was born in Babylon (*y. Ber.* 4b) and studied under Samuel (*b. ’Erub.* 66a) and Rav (*b. Hul.* 111b). Eleazar later migrated to the land of Israel, and studied under R. Hanina (*y. Kil.* 32c):

*And He said to the Angel that destroyed the people, It is enough [רב] (2 Sam. 24.16). R. Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Angel: take a great man [רב] among them, through whose death many sins can be expiated for them [According to the dictum that the death of the righteous is an atonement—Rashi.]. At that time there died Abishai son of Zeruah, who was [singly] equal in worth to the greater part of the Sanhedrin (*b. Ber.* 62b).*

Eleazar explains the cause of the death of Abishai by applying the well-known dictum that the death of the great one atones. He uses 2 Sam. 24.16 as a proof-text for his argument. The context of that verse does not warrant his interpretation, but that does not deter him from drawing a conclusion on the basis of the word רב. Another tradition connects this dictum with the context of the Abrahamic covenant:

AFTER THESE THINGS (Gen. 15.1). Misgivings were entertained there. Who entertained them? Abraham. He said to God: ‘Sovereign of the Universe! Thou madest a covenant with Noah not to exterminate his children; then I arose and accumulated meritorious acts and pious deeds, whereupon my covenant superseded his. Perhaps another will arise and accumulate even a greater store of precepts and good deeds, and then a covenant with him will supersede Thy covenant with me?’ Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: ‘From Noah I did not set up shields of the righteous, but from thee I set up shields of the righteous. Moreover, when thy children take to transgressions and evil deeds, I will see one righteous man amongst them who will be able to say to My Attribute of Justice,

“Enough!” whereupon I will take him and make him atone for them’ (*Gen. R.* 44 [27b]; cf. *Song R.* 1.14 [93b]).

In *Genesis Rabbah*, this tradition is quoted anonymously, but in the parallel account in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, it is quoted almost verbatim in the name of R. Hama (c. 260), a Palestinian *Amora* who also attributed atoning efficacy to the death of Moses (*b. Sot.* 14a). Since there is no other parallel account in the known rabbinic writings, it seems likely that Hama is responsible for this tradition too. The tradition interprets Gen. 15.1 as focusing on the difference between the Abrahamic covenant and the Noahic covenant. Compared to the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant lacks one important element: a divine promise not to exterminate Abraham’s descendents. The tradition connects this difference to the maxim that the death of the righteous atones. Thus, according to this tradition, in place of the promise in the Noahic covenant, shields are given to the righteous in the Abrahamic covenant. For the basis of the shields, the tradition seems to appeal to 2 Sam. 24.16. The expression ‘My Attribute of Justice, “Enough (רַב)!”’ is strongly reminiscent of ‘It is enough (רַב)’ in 2 Sam. 24.16, which we observed in the tradition ascribed to R. Eleazar (*b. Ber.* 62b). This argument is supported by the fact that the word רַב is connected to the attribute of justice. The use of the word רַב seems to presuppose the merciful act of God in taking the righteous man for the sins of the generation. The same idea is found in the talmudic tradition (*b. Ber.* 62b).

Another tradition seeks to explain the root of the same maxim by connecting it to the destruction of the temple. A tradition is handed down in the name of R. Hoshya (c. 225), a Palestinian *Amora* who was the head of the academy at Caesarea and studied under Bar Kappara and Hiyya and taught R. Johanan (d. 279):<sup>29</sup>

Another explanation of *And Thou shalt make the boards for the Tabernacle* (לְמִשְׁכָּן) (Exod. 26.15). Why does it say לְמִשְׁכָּן? Should it not rather have said ‘into a tabernacle (לְמִשְׁכָּן)’? R. Hoshya said: Because the sanctuary stands as a pledge [Reading: *And thou shalt make the boards לְמִשְׁכָּן* (for a pledge) instead of לְמִשְׁכָּן (for the tabernacle)], so that if the enemies of Israel [a euphemism for Israelites] became deserving of destruction, it would be forfeit as a pledge. Moses said to God: ‘Will not the time come when Israel shall have neither Tabernacle nor Temple? What will happen to them?’ The divine reply was: ‘I will then take one of their righteous men and retain him as a pledge on their behalf, in order that

29. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 120.

I may pardon all their sins'. Thus too it says, *And He hath slain all that were pleasant to the eye* (Lam. 2.4) (*Exod. R.* 35.4 [95a] on Exod. 26.15).

This particular tradition is attested only once in rabbinic literature. By applying a different vocalization to the word לְמִשְׁכַּן, the tradition interprets Exod. 26.15 to mean that the tabernacle (and the temple) served as a pledge for the Israelites. From this interpretation of the passage, the tradition concludes that after the temple was destroyed, the righteous became a pledge on its behalf.

Williams cites this tradition as evidence for his position that the doctrine of vicarious expiatory suffering and death among the rabbis is a post-70 development.<sup>30</sup> He takes Hoshya's statement literally: 'Because of the destruction of the temple it is necessary for God to "take"—apparently by death—a righteous man to expiate Israel's sins'. Williams's argument is weak for two reasons: (1) as seen in the tradition attributed to R. Hama, rabbis seem to have known a maxim, the basis of which was sought later from a variety of biblical events, such as David's census-taking, the difference between the two covenants, and so on. Hoshya, too, seems to have connected the maxim with the destruction of the temple. Thus, Hoshya's statement does not necessarily mean that vicarious atonement by the righteous was a new remedy for the destruction of the temple. (2) This is apparently the only occasion in which the vicarious death of the righteous is explained in connection with the destruction of the temple. We can hardly accept an argument based upon this one piece of evidence, without any other supporting proof.

Another tradition presents this idea as a general principle in the name of R. Gorion (c. 350): 'When there are righteous men in the generation, the righteous are seized [by death] for the [sins of the] generation; when there are no righteous in the generation, school children are seized for the generation' (*b. Shab.* 33b).

These traditions suggest that the maxim that the righteous are seized for the sins of the generation was popular among the *Amoraim* between the early third century and the middle of the fourth century. The concept seems to be rooted in another maxim, that the righteous atone, but it is distinctive in saying that God takes the initiative in the whole process of atonement. The idea that God seizes the righteous to atone for the generation is paralleled in Isaiah 53, but it is not found in the known Second Temple writings or in rabbinic literature except in writings

30. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, pp. 123-24.

examined here. The divine initiative in seizing the victim in these traditions is certainly analogous to the New Testament emphasis on the divine initiative in offering the Son as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world (Rom. 3.25; Heb. 1.1-4; 1 Pet. 1.18-19; 1 Jn 2.2; 4.10). Of course, the New Testament concept of atonement is distinctive in that it involves Jesus as the sacrifice and it universalizes the efficacy of his atoning death.

*The Traditional Saying, 'May I Make Atonement for You (or Them)!'*

The last group of traditions that state the concept of vicarious atonement include the popular formula אָנִי כִפֵּרְתָּהּ. This formula or its equivalent is found in many rabbinic writings from a very early period.<sup>31</sup> This formula is very important to our study because it is very old. It is attested in a tradition ascribed to R. Ishmael (d. 135): 'R. Ishmael says: the Children of Israel (may I make atonement for them! [אָנִי כִפֵּרְתָּהּ]) are like box-wood, neither black nor white, but of the intermediate shade' (*m. Neg.* 2.1). It certainly expresses the concept of vicarious atonement, and became a popular formula among the rabbis to express their love for their people.

At issue are the roots of the formulaic saying. The phrase אָנִי כִפֵּרְתָּהּ is not attested in the Old Testament or the Second Temple literature, but the similar phrase אֶכְפֹּרְתָּהּ is attested in Exod. 32.30, in which Moses explains his purpose of ascending the mountain a second time after the golden calf episode: 'Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin (אֶכְפֹּרְתָּהּ בְּעַד חַטְאֵתְכֶם)'. It is possible that אָנִי כִפֵּרְתָּהּ may have its roots in the expression אֶכְפֹּרְתָּהּ in Exod. 32.30.<sup>32</sup>

As observed already, Jonathan (c. 140) and other rabbis applied the concept of vicarious atonement to Moses' mediation after the golden calf incident (*Mek., Pisha* 1.107-109; *b. Ber.* 32a; *b. Sot.* 14a), and he seems to have used these examples as prototypes for all Jews to follow, which may reflect the general mood among the rabbis during the two wars with Rome. Thus, it is certainly possible that the formula אָנִי כִפֵּרְתָּהּ may have its roots in reflection on Moses' mediation. The fact that R. Ishmael, Jonathan's teacher, used the formula may indicate that the

31. Parallels given by Str-B, II, pp. 279-80 and II, p. 261 are: *t. Yom.* 1.12 (181); *t. Sheb.* 1.4 (446); *y. Yom.* 39d; *b. Yom.* 23a; *b. Sanh.* 2.1; *b. Neg.* 2.1; *Sifra Lev.* 13.2 (235a); *b. Qid.* 31b; *b. Suk.* 20a.

32. Danby's English translation of the phrase in the Mishnah actually follows אֶכְפֹּרְתָּהּ.



concept of vicarious atonement was held by certain rabbis even before 135. There is evidence that this saying may have been used even earlier than Ishmael. The formula is used by a man who was involved in an episode that occurred before the destruction of the temple:

It once happened that two priests were running up the steps leading to the Altar... he fell dead at the foot of the Altar. R. Zadduk [c. 70] came and stood on the steps of the Temple-hall and said... the father of the dead priest arrived, and found that his son was still struggling in his death agony. He turned to them all, saying: 'May I be your atonement (אֲנִי כַפָּרְכֶם)! My son is still breathing, so the knife has not become defiled.' Then comes the following remark ('May I be your atonement', a popular exclamation of the period) (*Sifre* §161 [62b] on Num. 35.24; cf. parallels in *t. Yom.* 1.12 [181], *t. Sebu.* 1.4 [446], *y. Yom.* 2.1 [39d], and *b. Yom.* 23a).<sup>33</sup>

This tradition may indicate that the concept of vicarious atonement was current before AD 70, because this event would have happened before the fall of the Second Temple.<sup>34</sup> R. Zadok (c. 100), who is said to have delivered an address in this tradition was of priestly descent, and is known to have officiated in the temple. Lohse argues for the great antiquity of this 'Jewish formula' based upon the testimonies of Paul (Rom. 9.3) and Josephus (*War* 5.419).<sup>35</sup>

Williams, however, rejects both Strack–Billerbeck's and Lohse's arguments for pre-70 dating of the formula. While acknowledging that Josephus's language ('take my blood as the price of your salvation' in *War* 5.419 [LCL]) expresses the underlying idea of vicarious atonement, Williams discounts its value as evidence, based upon his thesis that 'in first century Judaism one finds clear expression of this idea in only one other writing: IV Maccabees'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Williams totally rejects the argument of Lohse that אֲנִי כַפָּרְכֶם may stand behind the statement in Rom. 9.3. In my judgment, however, we may find an indirect connection between the formula and Paul's statement in Rom. 9.3. Williams seems not to have considered the possibility that Paul's statement alludes to Moses' word in Exod. 32.31-32. Many commentators think that Paul

33. The formula (אֲנִי כַפָּרְכֶם "May I be an atonement for you") is attested in all parallel accounts except *b. Yom.* 23a, in which the pronoun of the formula is changed to the third person singular.

34. Str–B, II, p. 275.

35. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, p. 101.

36. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event*, pp. 125-26.



probably has in mind the similar offer of Moses in Exod. 32.32.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, we find allusions to Moses' history and person elsewhere in Romans 9–11 (9.14-18; 10.19; 11.13-14), which increases the likelihood of Paul seeing Moses as, to some extent, his own model in Rom. 9.3. Here is how the passages correspond:

So Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written' (Exod. 32.31-32).

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh (ἡὐχόμεν γὰρ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι αὐτὸς ἐγὼ ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν συγγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα) (Rom. 9.3).

The idea expressed by Paul is clearly reminiscent of Moses' statement. As Moses was willing to give up his salvation on behalf of his people, so was Paul willing to be accursed on behalf of the Jews.<sup>38</sup> Certainly what Paul meant is analogous to the idea expressed by the formula אֲנִי כִפֶּרְהָ. According to the Exodus account, Moses' mediation is considered to be his atonement for Israel. Moreover, as has been argued, the expression used by Moses (הִכָּפַרְתָּ in v. 30) is a term that is equivalent to אֲנִי כִפֶּרְהָ. Paul may have been familiar with the formula אֲנִי כִפֶּרְהָ and, thus, he may have had the same concept in mind when he made the statement in Rom. 9.3. Compare Paul's statement with that of R. Ishmael (d. 135): 'the Children of Israel (may I make atonement for them!)' (*m. Neg.* 2.1). They certainly shared the same intensity of love for the people of Israel. Thus, it is not farfetched for Lohse to find the formula behind Paul's statement.

Moreover, this idea is certainly paralleled in the Second Temple writings. In Dan. 3.38-40 LXX, the three men offer themselves as atoning sacrifices. Behind the expression 'such may be our sacrifice to bring atonement with you' may lie the formulaic saying אֲנִי כִפֶּרְכֶּם. In *4 Macc.* 6.27-29, Eleazer surrenders himself in order to atone for his nation: 'You

37. D.J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT, 6; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 558-59; J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (WBC, 38B; Dallas: Word, 1988), p. 532; Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9–11* (trans. I. Nixon; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 29.

38. The phrase ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου in Rom. 9.3 can be translated better in English as 'on behalf of my brethren' because the Greek ὑπὲρ with the genitive often implies the idea of substitution (BDF 231).

know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments for the sake of the law. Be merciful (ἵλεως γενοῦ) to your people, and let our punishment *be a satisfaction* for them (ἀρκεσθεῖς τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν δίκη). Make my blood their purification (καθάρσιον), and take my life *as a ransom* for theirs (ἀντίψυχον αὐτῶν).’ Thus, it is certainly possible that the concept of vicarious atonement was current before AD 70.

### *Conclusion*

In this study, we have examined the rabbinic traditions that state the concept of vicarious atonement. We divided them into five groups according to their characteristics, studied each tradition in its relationship to its literary and historical contexts, and compared their concept of vicarious atonement with that of the New Testament.

First of all, as argued by a majority of scholars, we found that the concept was widespread among the rabbis, both temporally and geographically. These traditions were for the most part ascribed to the *Amoraim*, but they also included very early Tannaitic traditions. These Tannaitic authorities included R. Ishmael (d. 135), who founded one of the two most important schools that revived Torah studies after Bar Kokhba’s rebellion, R. Jonathan (c. 140), who was one of the two pupils of Ishmael, and R. Simeon b. Yohai (c. 150), who was one of the five pupils of R. Akiba who revived Torah studies together with Ishmael’s two pupils after 135.

In the Amoraic period, these traditions became popular. For the sake of convenience, I will here adopt the customary division of the Amoraic period into generations.<sup>39</sup> The first five generations consist of both Palestinian and Babylonian *Amoraim*, whereas the last three generations are limited to Babylonian *Amoraim*, since the Palestinian Talmud had already been completed by then. Included among the first generation of Amoraic authorities (c. 220–250) are: R. Jonathan b. Eleazar (c. 220); R. Hoshya (c. 225), the head of the academy at Caesarea; and Mar Samuel (d. 254), the head of the academy at Nehardea in Babylon. Included in the second generation of Amoraic authorities (c. 250–290) are: R. Johanan (d. 279), the head of the academy at Tiberias; Eleazar (d. 279), also the head of the academy at Tiberias; R. Simlai (c. 250); R. Abba (c.

39. Safrai, ‘AMORAIM’; Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, pp. 119-34.

250); R. Hama (c. 260); R. Judah b. Nahman (c. 280); and R. Hiyya (c. 280). Included in the third generation of Amoraic authorities (c. 290–320) are: R. Abbahu (c. 300), the head of the academy at Caesarea; and R. Ammi (c. 300), the head of the academy at Tiberias. Included also was R. Gorion (c. 350), a fourth-generation *Amora*.

Secondly, by at least the first half of the second century AD, the concept of vicarious atonement was expressed in the traditions (*m. Neg.* 2.1; *Mek.*, *Nezikin* 10.151-81) ascribed to R. Ishmael (d. 135), who was one of the chief spokesmen among the sages of Jabneh. Ishmael took part in, and expressed his view at, all its meetings and assemblies and was present on the day Rabban Gamaliel was deposed as *nasi* and Eleazar b. Azariah was appointed in his place (*m. Yad.* 4.3). According to a tradition, Ishmael was a child at the time of the destruction of the temple, when he was taken captive to Rome and ransomed by R. Joshua (*b. Git.* 58a), who took him as one of his disciples (*t. Par.* 10.3). Thus, these two traditions ascribed to Ishmael in the Mishnah and the *Mekilta* cannot have been composed before the destruction of the temple, but it is still possible that they may have been composed in the early second century AD.

Thirdly, there is continuity among the Old Testament, the Second Temple literature, and later rabbinic literature in their concept of atonement. Jonathan (c. 140), one of the two disciples of Ishmael, applied the concept of vicarious sufferings to all patriarchs and prophets who risked their lives for Israel, and used the cases of Moses and David as examples (*Mek.*, *Pisha* 1.104-113). The language and the concept applied by Jonathan to the patriarchs and prophets closely resemble those of the Second Temple writings (*Dan.* 3.38-40 LXX; *4 Macc.* 17.22; cf. *2 Macc.* 7.37; *Exod.* 32.30-34; *Num.* 25).

This phenomenon was not confined to the school of Ishmael, but was found also in the school of Akiba (c. 50–135), the most intimate colleague of Ishmael, who disputed with Ishmael on *halakhah*, *aggadah*, and in expositions of the Old Testament. Simeon b. Yohai, one of the five disciples of Akiba, applied the language of Levitical atoning sacrifices to the death of innocent Jews and attributed atoning efficacy to it (*y. Sanh.* 30c). This way of applying cultic language to the death of innocent Jews is paralleled in the Second Temple writings, too.

We also argued that Simeon's view might reflect the view of his teacher, Akiba, and his school. The same may be true of the tradition ascribed to Jonathan, which may represent the view of his teacher,

Ishmael. Jonathan and Simeon may have stamped their own individual outlook on the traditions ascribed to them, or those traditions may have come down to us in their original wording, but the ideas behind them did not originate with Jonathan and Simeon.<sup>40</sup> This means that the concept of vicarious atonement observed in these traditions may represent the views of the two chief spokesmen of Jabneh (Ishmael and Akiba) and their schools, whose roots may be traced to the Second Temple literature, and ultimately to the Old Testament traditions of atonement, such as the account of Moses' mediation after the golden calf episode (Exod. 32.30-34; Num. 25) and the prophecy of the Servant of YHWH (Isa. 53) as typified in the Levitical atoning sacrifices.

Fourthly, with regard to the concept of atonement, these rabbinic traditions agree with the New Testament writings. First of all, both apply the two fundamental concepts to their interpretation of the Old Testament passages as epitomized in the traditions ascribed to Simeon b. Yohai and Jonathan: (1) the concept that the sufferings or death of the innocent victim brings vicarious atonement and forgiveness (*y. Sanh.* 30c); and (2) the concept that exemplary figures such as Moses and David gave their lives for Israel (*Mek., Pisha* 1.104-113).

They also agree in their paradigmatic applications of the Servant motif to the vicarious atonement of the exemplary figures. I identified three traditions that applied the Isaianic Servant motif to the vicarious mediation of the exemplary figures such as Moses (*b. Sot.* 14a), Phinehas (*Sifre* on Num. 25.13), and Isaac (*b. Shab.* 89b). The last two traditions share with Hebrews and 1 John the concept that the mediator not only accomplished atonement for his people, but still stands and makes atonement for their present sins as their advocate (Rom. 8.34; Heb. 1.4; 1 Jn 2.1-2). In particular, the picture of Isaac in *b. Shab.* 89b corresponds clearly to that of Jesus Christ in 1 John, whose atoning sacrifice becomes the basis for his continuing ministry of atonement as the advocate before the throne of God.

Despite the similarities between the New Testament writings and these rabbinic traditions, there are still decisive differences between them. Just as the Second Temple writings were particularistic in their focus, so are these rabbinic traditions.

40. M.P. Miller, 'Targum Midrash and the Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament', *JSJ* 2 (1971), pp. 29-82 (41).