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# From Metaphor to Theology

## *The Suffering Servant*

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### Abstract

Theological change suffers under the obligation to seem—and the danger of seeming—both consistent with what has come before and genuinely new. Where does the idea of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 come from? Leaving aside those acts of warfare and violence against the innocent, which seem more matters of brute aggression than symbolic atonement, we can find well-acknowledged roots for the doctrine of a suffering servant in the practice of symbolic animal sacrifice and in the figure of the prophet who suffers with, and perhaps for, the people. But there is a third root as well that goes back to the language of the divine attributes and to the ambiguous Hebrew idiom of *noseh avon*, bearing sin or forgiving sin. If the servant of God bears iniquity, he can be imagined not just to remove sin from the head or shoulders of many but also to carry what he removes; he himself can “bear” it. And when all the people in the Gospel of Matthew call down the blood of Jesus on their heads, they “own” (own up to, but also claim for their own) the rich history of ambiguous responsibility and atonement.

### Keywords

suffering servant – atonement – scapegoat – forgiveness

In a justly famous or infamous passage, Kant calls into question the fundamental principle of Christianity—vicarious atonement—on the grounds that its debt metaphor just does not work:

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This original debt ... cannot be erased by somebody else, in the manner of a financial debt (where it is all the same to the creditor whether the debtor himself pays up, or somebody else for him), but the most personal of all liabilities, namely a debt of sins which only the culprit, not the innocent, can bear, however magnanimous the innocent might be in wanting to take the debt upon himself for the other.<sup>1</sup>

Kant's aim does not appear to be to free Christianity from metaphor but rather to heighten our awareness of how deeply, essentially metaphoric are the propositions taken as matters of faith. Thus Paul's putting off the old man and the putting on of the new<sup>2</sup>—a piece of symbolic language of which Kant very much approves—is represented in crucifixion: "Dying to the old human being throughout his life is depicted in the representative of the human kind as a death suffered once and for all" (115). Kant ultimately accepts the debt metaphor, though he distinguishes the way an individual can rid himself of debt from the way Christ, traditionally, pays for him.<sup>3</sup> Recently, a remarkably accessible and simultaneously scholarly study of the rise of the debt metaphor has been written by Gary Anderson: *Sin a History* (2009). While Anderson shows that the turn to the debt metaphor occurred in Judaism as well as Christianity, he leaves no doubt that it is Christianity that rises or falls with the accessibility and acceptability of thinking about sin as debt and the messiah as the remitter of debts. We can add that even Kant's unique, "rational" Christianity depends on a refiguration of the debt metaphor rather than an ultimate rejection of it. In what follows, I wish to add but a footnote to Anderson's wonderful study by lingering over the metaphor for sin that precedes sin as debt and that dominates the Hebrew Bible: sin as burden. The question I wish to address is not what difference it makes which metaphor we use (Anderson addresses this in exemplary fashion) but how it is that the old metaphor of sin as burden allowed for the introduction of vicarious atonement theology.

Scholarship has long acknowledged an extraordinary feature of the sin-as-burden metaphor: the same words, *noseh avon*, can refer to being burdened by sin or being relieved of that burden, commonly translated as "forgiven." As Baruch Schwartz explains, the metaphor involved depends on a slight differ-

<sup>1</sup> Kant 113. See in particular Lawrence Pasternack's article, "Kant on the Debt of Sin," pages 30–52.

<sup>2</sup> Ephes. 4: 22–24, Colos. 3: 9–11; see also Rom. 6: 6, Ephes. 2: 15.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Pasternack is especially clear about this: "Since the moral characteristics which put the old man into the state of sin are not present in the new man, the new man does not bear the debt" (44).

ence in the connotation of *noseh*: “In both contexts it retains its primary sense of ‘bear’. But only in the first case is ‘bear’ used in the sense of ‘to carry about, to be laden with’. In the second, when the sinner is relieved of his burden, it means not ‘carry’ but ‘carry off, take away, remove’” (10). Occasionally, as when Cain complains *gadol avoni minsoah*, there may be a telling uncertainty whether we should translate this “the burden of my sin is too great to bear” or “my sin is unforgivable.” Because the word for sin is as ambiguous as the word for bearing, the translation might even be “my punishment is too great to bear.” And indeed, some variant on that is the dominant English translation, though if one allows “my sin is too great to be forgiven,” then, as Anderson notes, “Cain exhibits a certain remorse for what he has done” (24). Though assuming the burden of guilt for one’s own misdeeds is not the same thing as sacrificing oneself to atone for the sins of others, there is a sense in which this first biblical assumption of the burden plants the seed for the later flowering of atonement ritual in the form of the suffering servant.

The Fourth Song of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 52: 13–53: 12), as most scholars since Duhm have called it, is one of the most written about texts of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>4</sup> But regardless of whether the interpreter is interested in historical context or proto-Christianity, corporate or individual identity of the servant, individual or national sin, a special relationship to Duhm’s three other “servant songs” or the figure of the servant in Isaiah or in the Hebrew Bible generally, there seem to be three distinct roads to take if one wishes to trace the origins of the idea of vicarious atonement in preventient biblical text or to explore similitudes with like ways of thinking outside Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible. These three roads lead back to the scapegoat ritual, precursor figures of suffering for others, and the attributes of God.

## I       Scapegoat Ritual

The best paved of these is the levitical sin-offering, especially the scapegoat or *caper emissarius* of Leviticus 16. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this description of ritual atonement is that it involves a literal bearing away of sin, conceived as a burden symbolically placed on the back of a goat. The fact that there are two goats involved, one of which is sacrificed outright, the other of which is “burdened” by sin and sent out to the wilderness, may indicate a fun-

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<sup>4</sup> Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia*. The most important dissenter is probably Tryggve Mettinger (see *A Farewell to the Servant Songs*).

damental ambivalence about whether it is really possible to bear sin for others. That is, perhaps both goats are “scapegoats,” the one sacrificed immediately representing the efficacious substitution and the one “escaped” lingering with the question of what it means to bear guilt for others. As numerous commentators have noted, the ritual depends on the Israelites dwelling in their land with an extant temple ritual; exile and the destruction of the Temple open up the possibility that the exiled people as a whole or one representative of them might take the place of the scapegoat burdened with others’ sin. Scholars disagree, however, on whether the temple ritual was imagined to be purely representative or in some sense genuinely substitutive; and tied to this distinction is the question whether, in exile and in replacement for a Temple ritual, a collective or individual body burdened with the sin of others inherits some notion of “real” or symbolic atonement for others’ sins. Thus Bruce Vawter and Leslie Hoppe, for example, present Ezekiel, bearing the guilt of Israel, “playing in part the role of the scapegoat of Lev. 16: 21–22.”<sup>5</sup> But such a view may make more sense if “playing the role of the scapegoat” is taken in a sense of *playing* that Vawter and Hoppe did not intend. In any event, there is no Hebrew Bible negotiation from a time of efficacious animal sacrifice to a new need for a superior form of vicarious atonement. We may need to consider whether or not there are authorially approved examples of one life being offered for the redemption of others; but the New Testament view that human or superhuman sacrifice is necessary “for [now] it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (Heb. 10: 4) is wholly unprecedented in the Hebrew Bible. Even René Girard, who at one point proposes Job as an example of “scapegoats who have been unjustly persecuted and expelled, if not always massacred,”<sup>6</sup> does not propose that Job’s guilt offerings in 1: 5 are inadequate, necessitating the scapegoating of Job himself. There is more to be said against treating Job as a scapegoat. For now, though, the idea of a move from less efficacious to more efficacious substitution must be reiterated in larger, less specifically Christian terms: the central, New Testament view that human suffering is necessary *in place of the blood of bulls and goats* is unprecedented, almost unimaginable, in the Hebrew Bible.

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<sup>5</sup> Vawter and Hoppe 42. But cf. Moshe Greenberg: “Ezekiel’s adaptations of other traditional idioms warn against the simple equation of traditional senses with his, though the earlier uses of *na’sa ‘awon*—particularly the priestly—are instructive” (104).

<sup>6</sup> *Sacrifice* 74. See also *The Scapegoat* 170.

## II Precursor Figures

The second road back from Isaiah 53 takes us to various other suggestions for a prophetic precursor to Isaiah's suffering servant.<sup>7</sup> Though I cannot imagine a full-fledged reading of Job along the lines intimated by Girard—that Job suffers for the theological sins of his friends—Girard's other suggestion, that we read Joseph as a scapegoat, may deserve more deliberation. It is, after all, Joseph himself who suggests an interpretation of the nasty family history in which his suffering serves a redemptive purpose: "Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45: 5). Yet it is hard to imagine Joseph's peace-making blandishments here as the theology of the writer of the story. It may be "providential" that Joseph has been sold into slavery in Egypt, but Joseph has not suffered *in order to* redeem the sins of his brothers. Perhaps one could imagine the piety that he has been saved to redeem the sins of his brothers, but even that would be a far cry from finding sacrifice itself, self-sacrifice or the sacrifice of an unwilling innocent, salvific. Girard's life-long obsession with sacrifice, from *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) onward, has been with acts of violence that work, or that once worked, irrespective of the motivations of the participants: violence is apotropaically purged in acts of sacrifice, whether the victim is willing or the butchers understand symbolic action.

The most frequently mentioned precursor to the suffering servant of Isaiah is Moses, about whom God is all too willing to decree the most ferocious anti-vicarious-atonement: Just let me kill off all the sinners and start over with you, Moses (Exod. 32: 10). God never proposes, and Moses never offers, to take the sins of others on himself. Moses does offer to intervene on behalf of the people, but his most self-denying words cannot be interpreted as a vicarious atonement in the sense that punishment of him would free others from punishment: "Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written" (32: 32). Moses does not offer to be blotted out of the book in place of blotting out the sinners. Some have wondered just what "then" clause could be imagined to follow Moses's great "if." But Moses proposes being blotted out of the book of life as something of a threat

<sup>7</sup> The most careful account of prophetic antecedents for vicarious atonement may be Herman Spieckermann, "The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament," in *The Suffering Servant*. The most Spieckermann is able to find by way of prophetic precursors is "in the hindrances to intercession and in suffering" of the prophet (13).

to God's historical plan, not as a vicarious atonement. And God confirms His distaste for anything like vicarious atonement in the very next verse: "And the Lord said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book." The Hebrew Bible is filled with examples of punishment mitigated or postponed, but no examples (outside of Isaiah 53) of one *offering himself* in place of others.<sup>8</sup> It is worth pausing over Moses's idiom in verse 32. Most English translations freely render *tisa et avonam*, like virtually every other instance of the verb *nsa*, as a dead metaphor for forgiveness. The literal expression, "if You will bear their guilt" or "if You will bear away their guilt," repeats the crucial, ever-present metaphor of sin as a burden.

If sin is a burden, one strand of thinking (to which I shall return below) would have it that someone, himself guilty or not, must bear the burden. Despite the explicit statements of Exodus as we know it denying Moses's capacity to serve in vicarious atonement for the sins of the Israelites, some scholars—and countless ordinary readers, tacitly—have read the larger, Pentateuchal story of Moses's exclusion from the promised land as an indication that, however understated or denied before Deuteronomy, Moses in the end does bear the burden of the people's sin. G. Ernest Wright, for example, takes it as a general matter of principle, a principle he thinks shared across centuries and variations of theology, that "to ancient Israel the law of God cannot be broken or disregarded without someone bearing the burden of the sin, that is, the penalty" (181). And so he reads Moses's declaration in Deuteronomy, "Yahweh was angry with me on your account" as implying that "Moses bore a burden which kept him from entrance to the Promised Land" in order that the Israelites he addresses would be able to enter (182). Now Deuteronomy could be read to suggest something like "guilt by association" rather than vicarious atonement, as represented for example by the also in Deut. 1: 37: "The Lord was angry with me for your sakes, saying, Thou also shalt not go in thither." But for Wright, the *also*, the *gam atta* spoken to Moses, does not add Moses's name to the list of those of the former generation who are excluded from the land; it adds a supersessionary theological point, much like the way the suffering of Christ

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<sup>8</sup> The classic statement against *any* idea of vicarious atonement in the Hebrew Bible is that of Yehezkel Kauffmann. See *The Babylonian Captivity and Deutero-Isaiah*, especially pages 128–149. My claim here is more limited, that though there are individuals and patterns of substitution in the Hebrew Bible, there is no clear precedent to Isaiah 53 of an individual offering his life in place of others'. There are limited instances of God's wrath being vented on individuals, such as Phineas's exacting of prophylactic punishment on a particular (guilty) sinner in Numbers 25, or the Gibeonites's butchering of seven in 2 Samuel 21: 1–14. But these involve no heroics on the part of the victim, even if someone seemed to think the perpetrators noble.

for the sins of mankind is an “also,” i.e., a consequence of Adam’s sin. Wright dismisses the story of Moses hitting the rock as “the rather shallow moralistic explanation of the Jerusalem priesthood in Num. 20: 10–13” (182). To be sure, whether or not we wish to second Wright in regarding Moses’s exclusion from the Promised Land as vicarious atonement for the Israelites who are allowed to enter, the idea of vicarious atonement that Wright proposes here will strike no one as “rather shallow” by comparison.

Wright himself encourages us to hesitate, however, before concluding that an implied vicarious atonement in Deuteronomy is a theological development from the more primitive causality in Numbers. If, as he claims generally, “a developmental view of Israel’s religious ideas and ideals … is no longer generally believed” (Wright 182), then perhaps the most we can say is that the Exodus dialogue between Moses and God denying vicarious atonement, the Deuteronomy verses appearing to proclaim it (1: 37, 3: 26, 4: 21) and the Numbers story that comes up with something for which Moses himself can be guilty and suffer for his own sin are three variant positions with no clear historical progress from one to the other. This minimal statement of differences may perhaps be all that can be ascertained with certainty; Joel Baden and David H. Aaron are two superb scholars dedicated to debunking the idea of “historical progress” between ideas and substituting instead what they take to be the happy plurality of coexistent but divergent points of view.<sup>9</sup> But if Wright is willing to imply that the Deuteronomic assumption that Moses suffered for others is an advance over the Numbers invention of a petty sin of his own, I should like at least to counter that the Numbers invention may have arisen as a corrective to the very idea of suffering for others that Wright prefers. The Numbers story may not boast a subtle moral example of the punishment fitting the crime, but it might express the same reluctance to accept a vicarious atonement implication: that Moses bears the sins of the Israelites and is excluded from the Promised Land so that they can enter it. The Numbers story, attributing Moses’s punishment to Moses’s own guilt, may thus encode the same reluctance expressed in dialogue between God and Moses in Exodus.

9 See David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery*. It is interesting, though, that on the crucial metaphor or literalism of the ark a container for God, Aaron insists that the ark was first an icon, and later a container (171). See also Joel S. Baden, especially *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis*. My own work in biblical studies over the decades has always been predicated on the possibility and desirability of trying to sequence variant theologies and traditions, however speculative such chronology may be.

All three expressions in Deuteronomy of Moses suffering exclusion for the sake of the Israelites specify that God was angry with Moses, not that God sadly or reluctantly accepted Moses's suffering in place of the Israelites. This specification may make one wonder about Wright's conviction that the Deuteronomy references to Moses's punishment represent a more sophisticated conception than the story of Moses's personal guilt in Numbers. If God's anger with Moses can be read less literally than God's anger with Moses for some shortcoming specific to Moses, why cannot the morality of the story of hitting the rock be likewise loosened from its literal expression? There is a second feature of the Deuteronomy references that still more insistently questions the relation of Moses's own sin to that of the Israelites. In English translation, this feature is obscured by the choice of a common idiom for three different expressions. In King James: "The Lord was angry with me *for your sakes*" (1: 37); "The Lord was wroth with me *for your sakes*" (3: 26); and "The Lord was angry with me *for your sakes*" (4: 21; all italics mine). The New Jerusalem Bible renders all three "because of you." The Hebrew Bible, however, offers a curious variation. The first expression is *biglalchem*, which can most readily be understood to mean that God was angry with Moses and the Israelites are the cause of that misplaced anger. The second expression is *limaanchem*, which, though it too can be translated "for your sakes" or "because of you," more suggestively implies "for your sakes" in the sense of *to do you good*. One can read that good as the good of a moral example: God punishes Moses to teach the principle that political power is no excuse for acting badly with impunity. But one could also read that good as exculpatory: God is angry with Moses in order not to be angry with the Israelites, in order not to have to punish them with the severity they would otherwise deserve. Perhaps God is angry with Moses as a member of the generation all of whom, excepting Caleb and Joshua, must be excluded from the land; or perhaps God is angry with Moses exclusively. The latter possibility comes closer to a doctrine of vicarious atonement, and we may come closer still in the third Deuteronomy formula in 4: 21: the Lord was angry with me *al divrechem*. The *davar* or "matter at hand" can be the Israelites' moral turpitude, their lack of faith in God's salvific power; *davar* can also be interpreted literally to mean "the things you said" in scoffing at God's salvific power. A translator may well wish to let the ambiguities of "for your sakes" stand as such, but we might also, in acknowledging the variations between these three formulas, wonder if the variants themselves indicate anxiety—or perhaps, in observance of the sequence, mounting temerity—about the hint of something like vicarious atonement. But keeping in mind the caution of David Aaron and Joel Baden against assigning a temporal progress between divergent theological ideas, perhaps the best we

can say is that the Pentateuch includes sentiment for and sentiment against vicarious atonement.

The other prophetic precursor for the suffering servant is Ezekiel—ironically, the prophet most ferocious in proclaiming individual responsibility and the obliteration of any thought of vicarious atonement (18:19). Ezekiel is hardly averse to symbolic action, however, and though he puts up a fuss about eating dung, he is willing to represent the burden of sin as a physical weight he himself assumes: “Lie thou also upon thy left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it: according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it thou shalt bear their iniquity” (4: 4). We cannot, to be sure, say that he literally “takes on” the burden of their sin, though this piece of symbolic action is described as though a literalism about taking on others’ sin were possible. The Hebrew phrase is the same as we encountered in Exodus 32: 32, *tisa et avonam*: You, Ezekiel, will bear their guilt—not, however, as vicarious atonement, but as symbolic representation of their guilt. He does not bear off their guilt or make their guilt easier for them to bear; he shares in their guilt in this piece of symbolic action that represents, but does not substitute for, their guilt. There is some uncertainty whether the number of days on his side represents the number of years in which the people, collectively, might be said to have gone astray—or the number of years of exile as punishment. Along with the ambiguity about where *nsa* means “bear” in the sense of “be burdened with” or “bear off” is the uncertainty whether *avon* means sin or punishment.<sup>10</sup> I believe that the best account of this ambiguity is that of Carl Gross, who posits that the meaning of *avon* changes from one side to the other: Ezekiel is to lie on his left side for 390 days to represent that the people of Israel sinned for 390 years, and he takes on their *avon* in the sense of representing this period of their sin; after that, he is to lie on his right side, “taking on” the *avon*, now in the sense of punishment of the people of Judah, to represent forty years of punishment, of exile, by forty days of his lying on his right side.<sup>11</sup> At this point, it is worth

<sup>10</sup> On the ambiguity of ‘*nose*’, see especially Baruch J. Schwartz, “The Bearing of Sin in the Priestly Literature” 3–21.

<sup>11</sup> Gross 108. Gross is primarily interested in discarding the distinction virtually every other commentator takes for granted between the House of Israel and the House of Judah and substituting the distinction between 390 years of sin and forty years of punishment. My interest is in the way such verbal play between the two meanings of *avon* is generative, as though seeing the “slippage” from the meaning of “sin” to the meaning of “punishment” were seeing (the ways of) God. Further support of Sapp’s thesis that sometimes *Israel* and *Judah* are not names of kingdoms but of the people of Judah, seen from different aspects, comes from Jeremiah. His use of *Israel* throughout chapter 31 and Ephraim in 31: 9, 31: 18,

pausing to specify that of course we have no record of the prophet performing symbolic action; we have the verbal record of a verbal injunction, and it seems a record also of verbal play: the substitution of one meaning of *avon* for the other “trumps” the substitution that was vicarious atonement.

### III      Sacred Butchery

Before turning to the third “proper” road back to the origins of the suffering servant, I would like to pause briefly over a disturbing set of what we might call “dead ends.” These take us back to scenes of violence where a character, though not necessarily an author, believes it to be (or represents it as being) in the collective interest to sacrifice one for the sake of the many. In 2 Samuel 21, as the redacted text has come down to us, David saves the Israelites from starvation by placating the Gibeonites, and it seems God as well whose oracle supports their complaint: he hands over to sacrificial death seven sons of Saul. Simeon Chavel, who unravels the two strands of the story, has no trouble in voicing the perspective of the Gibeonite strand: “impaling the sons amounts to a sacrificial offering to YHWH. So indeed, say the Gibeonites themselves: we shall impale them *to* YHWH” (37–38). Yet the seams of this carefully crafted composite story are not completely hidden, and it is possible, even probable, that an original tale had famine devastating the land because of Saul—in the sense that the bones of Saul and Jonathan were not retrieved and given proper burial. Into this somber and dignified story gets inserted a much more dubious tale, one in which “the matter of Saul” that arouses divine anger is the question of Saul’s betrayal of a promise to the Gibeonites in Joshua. In this tale, David placates the Gibeonites by facilitating their revenge against Saul by providing them with seven sons on whom to wreak their vengeance in place of the whole house of Israel. By combining the two tales, a redactor accomplishes an extraordinary feat of slanting the news: he “spins” the story of David ruthlessly butchering all possible rival claimants to the throne by inventing a supposed slight of Saul to the Gibeonites for which an innocent, resigned David needs to atone. This not only cloaks David’s villainy as piety; it pits David’s piety against Saul’s supposed villainy. As Chavel puts it, this redacted story has it “that Saul bears the blame for the famine and, tragically, for its grisly resolution. David, on the other hand, keeps his vow to Jonathan and spares Mephibosheth. Ultimately,

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20, for example, does not refer to the long vanished kingdom of Israel but to Judah seen anew in a loving aspect.

then, the story pits Saul against David on the issue of vows. Saul violates them, bringing death to his family; David upholds them, saving Saul's family" (35). Yet if the redacted story seems to uphold the value of sacrificing a few for the welfare of the many—if the redacted story is so craftily combined as to make it seem that David is sacrificing those dear to him—there seethes beneath the surface an antithetical sense of the nasty self-interest that has concocted this tale. If the famine was originally lifted in response to David's piety in burying Saul, the new statement of cause and effect becomes a narrative sacrifice, the sacrifice of truth for the sake of whitewashing David.

Elsewhere, the whitewash is of even thinner veneer. When David impregnates Bathsheba, and fails to get Uriah to sleep with his wife to cover for David's sin, Uriah is sacrificed for the sake of David's political career. That passive construction, "is sacrificed," (Uriah is so placed that he "is smitten") may represent in miniature the elaborate play-acting in which David and Joab indulge to cover for first-degree murder. The sense that a burden of sin is being improperly "lifted" from David's shoulders is given further narrative space when David ceases to mourn for the child who dies in David's pace:

Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat. Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me that the child may live. But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.

2 SAM. 12: 20–23

Though David has the last word, David's servants rebuke him with a sense of moral outrage that lingers far beyond David's retort. The literal last words (an elegiac "he shall not return to me"? ) are at odds with the lingering morality of the antithetical perspective in just the way that the last verse of Genesis 35 pits the sons of Jacob against their father. Jacob complains about the slaughter of the Shechemites, and Simeon and Levi retort, "Should he deal with our sister as with an harlot?" (Gen. 34: 31). For Simeon and Levi, the slaughter is a sacrifice, a ritual of atonement; for Jacob (and, regardless who wrote Gen. 49: 5–7, Jacob has the last word there) there is no such thing as the many dying for the sins of the one: this is butchery, not sacrifice.

There are a few texts where interpreters have found the author sympathetic to sacrificial slaughter, as dubious as these claims appear to me. One of the most problematic of these is the story of Jephtha, which, like David and the Gibeonites, appears to pit the morality of the vow against the sanctity of human life. But because Jephtha's original vow was that he would sacrifice the first being whom he met on his return home, it seems almost ineluctable that the story is meant to disparage the idea of sacrifice as arrogantly and foolishly manipulative of the divine. Phyllis Trible argues that the statement, "then the spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah" (11: 29) "clearly establishes divine sanction for the events that follow and predicts their successful resolution."<sup>12</sup> But that "spirit of the Lord" is a most dubious thing, and just how much of the action that follows is governed by it, even if it is not meant ironically, is open to question. The shadiness of Jephtha's actions is corroborated by the association of Jephtha with "fellows of no worth"—and by the exclusion of Jephtha from both the plangency and the celebratory tradition: "It is the daughter, and not he, who will be remembered in Israel."<sup>13</sup> These objections, and the fact that no ritual survives of women going off four days a year to lament the sacrifice of Jephtha's daughter (Judg. 11: 39–40), should lead one to doubt that Jephtha's daughter's apparent acquiescence to the ritual sacrifice means that Jephtha did the right thing: "And she said unto him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth" (11: 36). In the story of Saul ready to sacrifice Jonathan, the Children of Israel for once have more moral sense than their inadequate leaders: "As the Lord liveth, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground; for he hath wrought with God this day. So the people rescued [redeemed, paid the atonement price for] Jonathan, that he died not" (1 Sam. 14: 45).

Perhaps nowhere is involuntary victimization more problematic than in a pair of texts involving the sacrificial offer of virgin daughters in place of male guests. Lot tells the gang rapists of Sodom:

Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes; only unto these men do nothing, for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.

GEN. 19: 8

<sup>12</sup> Trible 179. Compare the bitter remarks of Mieke Bal on Jephtha's "success" in *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*, especially 199.

<sup>13</sup> 11: 40. See David J. Chalcraft, "Deviance and Legitimate Action in the Book of Judges" page 195.

Lot's guests do not pause to commend or quarrel with Lot's sense of hierarchy of sins; but they do pause to enliven a dead metaphor when the ordinary idiom "as is good in our eyes" (i.e., whatever you want) occasions the literalization of their moral blindness. The question "Did Lot do the right thing?" may be best answered by noting that Lot does not have to *do* anything; he makes a hyperbolic statement about just how offensive their offense against guests, and male guests no less, would be. But further than that he (unlike his daughters later in the chapter) is not obliged to go. When in Judges 19 we return to an equivalent moral challenge, the Levite's host may be indulging in a culpable moral arithmetic. He pleads, "Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing" (Judg. 19: 24). One daughter and one concubine to be raped to death to spare the Levite guest may be an arithmetic meant to challenge the morality; or it may be that the host specifies one daughter and one guest in order to match the two daughters in the Genesis Lot story. But there is nothing ambiguous about the morality here: "But the men would not hearken to him; so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them: and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning" (19: 25). The Levite who puts his wife out to rape, and who sleeps quietly through her night of abuse unto death, must be the anti-type of suffering servant. Neither he nor his host prepares us in any way for the morality of self-sacrifice in the suffering servant periscope.

#### IV God's Attributes

The Levite gives "weight" to sin by cutting up his concubine and distributing her pounds of flesh, as though he were trumping a single scapegoat with a human scapegoat and trumping the old ritual by sending out, as it were, twelve for one. The ambiguity over whether "there was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day" refers to the deed done *by* the Levite or *to* him reminds us that a certain amount of ambiguity attends the term *avon* and the concomitant *nsa* from the beginning. We have seen that when Cain answers God, *gadol avoni minso*, conventionally rendered, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (Gen. 4: 13), it is also possible that Cain is saying "my guilt is more than I can bear," and that the sign God grants him does not only mark him so that others will not kill him but mark him as "God's," not wholly abandoned by the deity who henceforth hides His face. Ordinarily, we do not have difficulty in deciding

whether the sense of any context of *nṣa* is to burden or to relieve of a burden. God's attributes, whether we imagine them revealed by God or proclaimed by Moses in the form of a prayer, place a premium on forgiveness:

The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty: visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

EX. 34: 6–7

I do not know any translation that prefers to render *noseh avon* as “keeping” or “keeping track of” that burden of sin rather than “forgiving” it as here in King James. It is interesting that the dividing line between God's forgiveness and God's memory of sin involves a transfer of metaphor: *noseh avon*, God's power to “bear” in the sense of “bear off” sin uses the metaphor of sin as burden; *nakeh lo yinakeh*, “that will by no means clear” in King James, uses the metaphor of cleansing. The soilure of sin, or, to borrow the metaphor Freud suggests in “The Mystic Writing Pad,” the impress of sin, is never quite erased.

Though I shall argue in what follows that verbal play on *noseh avon* reaches a special, generative importance in Isaiah 53, I need to acknowledge that at least one great student of sin and punishment in the Hebrew Bible has argued that forgiving and carrying, forbearing and bearing sin, are more intimately connected in the Pentateuch. Yochanan Muffs claims that more than forgiveness is meant when Moses reminds God that He has carried off the sin of the Israelites till now: “And just as you have carried (*nasa'ta*) this people from Egypt up to now” (Num. 14: 19) means, “And just as you have borne their sin, in other words, did not destroy them, so you shall continue to bear their sin.” Reading so much in Muffs, just like reading so much in Numbers, one may think that *bearing their sin* means “bearing with them.” But Muffs continues: “And when God says, ‘I have forgiven according to your request’ (Num. 14: 20), the author does not imply a total forgiveness, but rather the divine resolve to bear the sin of a sinful generation until the time He actually punishes them, in other words, until they die a natural death” (22, 41). In Muffs's reading, God “bears the sin of a sinful generation” in the sense of carrying it for them. If it is those of a later generation or those of the same generation later in life who atone for present sin, it is nonetheless God Himself who bears the sin in the sense of carrying it, at least for a while. One curiosity of this reading is that it makes the best translation of *salachti kidvarecha* not “I forgave them as you asked” or “I forgave them even before you asked” but “I forgive them in accordance with your word.” I for-

give them now; I forgive them *for now*. A second curiosity of this bearing, truly a profound meditation on the Mosaic negotiations with God, implied though not explicitly articulated by Muffs, concerns what we might label a theological complement to God's own vicarious atonement: if God Himself can bear the Israelites' sin in the sense of bearing it for them, then Moses, insisting on God's own presence in going forth from Sinai, argues for the continuity of God Himself—and no vicarious Presence—as the One bearing with the people and bearing them along. Moses argues that the angel that once seemed like a mark of God's special care for Israel (Ex. 23: 20) would be a vicarious atonement in reverse, a vicarious substitution for the Presence of God in unmediated fashion: "If You are not coming with us Yourself, then hell no, we won't go" (Ex. 33: 15; my translation on the model of Muffs's paraphrases). If You yourself can bear, You yourself can come. The extraordinary compromise, or more accurately the extraordinary transcendence of this dispute, is the revelation of the attributes of God, the turn from the question of where He is to what, in essence, He is.

The enumeration of God's attributes provides the third great precursor idea to the concept of vicarious atonement. For what is revealed in Exodus 34: 6–9, however layered the composition of the attributes may be, is not just the absolute reliability of God's mercy but the blessing of deferred punishment as more time, as life itself. For scholars who doubt the integrity (single authorship) of the attributes passage, there is the possibility that the tinkering with the description of God's mercy in order to acknowledge the fact that the wicked all too often do not appear to be punished in this life is a belated tinkering, post Second Isaiah.<sup>14</sup> There is a sizeable scholarly community that denies any variation in the theology of individual responsibility. Thus Houtman, for example, citing Exodus 34: 7 and Deuteronomy 7: 10, is absolutely firm: "One may not read these passages as if there was a shift in Israel's thinking on retribution" (174). But one certainly may—and I think should. R. C. Dentan, who demonstrates that the attributes passage reflects the wisdom tradition, believes "it is inconceivable that the credo is an original part of the J document or even a stray formula which has survived from early times" (48). In adopting the perspective of change and theological correction, one still is faced with options about which statement on retribution is oldest; it is by no means certain that as a matter of principle, the fullest statement is the oldest. It may seem that "Exod. xxxiv 6f., by reason of the fullness of its form as well as by its strategic placement in the unfolding of the Sinai drama, is the original text upon

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<sup>14</sup> For the provenience of deuteronomistic doubt about deferred punishment to Ezekiel's full rejection of it, see, for example, Spieckermann 12.

which all the others [all other attributes formulas such as Num. 18, Neh. 9. 17, etc.] are dependent" (34). Given the extensive and careful work of Michael Fishbane in analyzing the way older notions are modified or expounded, it seems to me probable that there are distinct stages in the evolution of the indirect punishment formula.<sup>15</sup> Though many have surmised as much, at least one scholar appears to have confused the revisionary stages with the pages of a Bible book, as though higher page number were indicative of later composition. Mark Boda assumes that the qualification in Exodus 20, "visiting the iniquity of parents on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of *those who hate me*" is then revised into the Exodus 34 formula without the qualification.<sup>16</sup> It seems to me far more probable that revision goes the other way. At some point, the idea of deferred punishment arose as a way of reconciling the idea of a just God with the obvious fact that the wicked do not appear to be punished directly in their lives. But if the idea of deferred punishment proved to introduce more theological difficulties than it solved, a second modification, preserved in Exodus 20: 6 and Deuteronomy 5: 10, restored the balance of justice: God may punish indirectly, in a later generation, but only when the later generation also deserves punishment. A story of deferred punishment recounted without this nicety (1 Kings 21: 29) may focus on balancing just punishment with consideration of repentance—to the exclusion of consideration of the justice of afflicting a later generation. But even without an explicit theological formula in place that limits deferred or indirect punishment to those who somehow themselves deserve it, there is protest against violation of the rule of individual responsibility. So David, when he sees God punishing broadly for a sin that is David's own, argues: "Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? Let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house" (2 Sam. 24: 17). Theological principle and Hebrew idiom are uneasily allied here: David cannot say, "Let thine hand be against me and the House of David—my children and grandchildren." But if this is what "my father's house" means, the

<sup>15</sup> See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, especially p. 335. On the idea of stages in the development of sin theory, see also Yochanan Muffs, 16–37.

<sup>16</sup> 43. William Johnstone has argued persuasively against the assumption (by Christoph Levin) that the shorter text must be the prior one (see "The Decalogue and the Redaction of the Sinai Pericope in Exodus" 369). My own interest in seeing as belated modifications such as delayed punishment and "for those who [continue to] oppose Him" cannot be put on the same scientific basis as the Dt/Ex variants in the Decalogue; but whether or not the Dt formula was imported by P into Exodus, we are free to suppose that the modifications are later efforts to address problems with the idea of divine retribution and with the idea of vicarious atonement down the generational lines.

turn back as a way of permitting the turn forward seems itself an argument against deferred or indirect punishment. We seem to be hearing David intending an argument for limited, direct punishment, but wording it, in deference both to Hebrew idiom and God's right to punish broadly, as a more limited request: Punish me, or if you must, my house; just do not punish the people at large.

David's speech act cannot be called the equivalent to the qualification in the Decalogue, "punish down the generational line if others down the line sin likewise." Nor could one say that David's protest is dependent on the moral reasoning articulated in the Decalogue qualification. Most important, David is not offering himself or his children in vicarious atonement for others' sins; there remains a vast theological gulf between the idea of deferred punishment, which grants God freedom in deciding when and whom to punish, and real vicarious atonement, which involves the will of the innocent substitute to stand in the place of the guilty.

The David story is interlaced with a number of telling pieces of figurative language. Besides the question of "my father's house," there is David's reference to the people as innocent sheep, sheep that should not be sacrificed for David's sin—though literal cattle are to be offered by way of symbolic atonement. There is also David's choice to fall into the hand of God rather than into the hand of man (24: 13)—with the understanding that the figure, hand of God, itself encodes both the punishing hand and the mercy of God, whose hand is gentler than the hand of man. It is tempting to think that the dead metaphor "hand of God" itself contributes to the mitigation of God's vengeance: if thinking of God's hand as a figuration for punishment from God also conjures up the mercy of God, then David's articulation of this traditional piece of figurative language is itself part of the process of reconciliation. Elsewhere as well, the use of dead metaphor is not just a convenience but a mode of cultural assimilation (theologically, humbling oneself before God). At the same time, the revivification of a dead metaphor is an imaginative possibility, one way a biblical author can represent that he has something new to say. I would like to pause between the two most dominant dead metaphors for sin, sin as burden and sin as soilure, to suggest that prophetic innovation with one may point us to the possibility of prophetic innovation with the other. Jeremiah offers a vision of consolation that King James translates with severe limitation:

For I am with thee, saith the Lord, to save thee: though I make a full end of all nations whither I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee: but I will correct thee in measure, and will not leave thee altogether unpunished.

30: 11

The last phrase is translated under the principle (which the translators in their Preface wisely renounce) that words translated one way in one place need to be translated the same way in a different context. “And will not leave thee altogether unpunished” does not sound much like consolation. But what if *v'nakeh lo anakeh* repeats the formula from Exodus 34 but reverses its meaning? I will discipline you in moderation, but will surely not wipe you out! The verb actually does not change its meaning (*nakeh* = to cleanse) but it changes its object. In place of the traditional formula in which God holds on to a record of sin, not altogether cleansing the slate clean, Jeremiah prophesies that God will not altogether wipe the Israelites from off the face of the earth; there will be difficult times, but no annihilation.<sup>17</sup>

## v Bearing Iniquity

What I propose about vicarious atonement in Isaiah 53 similarly involves an inventive lingering over a trope. *To bear iniquity* has so often meant “to bear it away” that even the most literal English translations routinely offer “to forgive.” And certainly, when God Himself is the “bearer,” there was little point in suggesting that the dead metaphor encoded anything else. Even when the forgiver is human, there has been no question of confusion between bearing iniquity away and carrying it. Thus in Genesis 50, Joseph’s brothers appeal to him *sa na l’fesha avdai elohei avicha*, “forgive [carry away] the iniquity of the servants of your father’s God,” while in Leviticus 24: 16 *ish ki yikalel elohev vinasa heto* we understand to mean “a man who curses God bears his iniquity.” But in Isaiah, if the servant of God bears iniquity, he can be imagined not just to remove it from the shoulders of many but to carry what he removes; he himself can “bear it.” Something like this appears to be happening in 53: 12: *hu chet rabim nasa* can itself migrate from the theologically conventional notion that “he bore the sin of many” in the sense of “suffered with them” to the theologically innovative “suffered for them,” relieving them of the burden he himself assumed. From the dead metaphor of *nsa*, bearing iniquity, we can move backward to verse 11, *v’avonotam hu yisbol*: he did not just suffer their burden of their iniquity with them; he suffered it *for* them. And the same could be said of verse 4: *halayenu hu nasah* can now mean not that he participated in our collective illness but that he bore it away, on his own shoulders, relieving us.

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<sup>17</sup> On the prophets’ fondness for linguistic play, see especially Harry M. Orlinsky, “The So-Called ‘Suffering Servant’ in Isaiah 53” 229.

What I wish to suggest, then, is that in addition to the widely-acknowledged roots of the doctrine of vicarious atonement, the scapegoat ritual and the self-sacrificing prophet, there is a third root in the language itself, going back to and reinvigorating the language of the divine attributes. One objection that immediately arises is that the linguistic origin of theological invention seems too modern a notion, something invented by Ricoeur, or Freud, or perhaps Faulkner. (Faulkner does seem to play, in *Absalom, Absalom*, with the notion that a misinterpretation of “suffer the little children to come unto me” might have contributed to Sutpen’s determination to make the children “suffer.”) But there are two pieces of evidence that the invention of vicarious atonement from revivification of dead metaphor might not have been an idea far from the mind of Deutero-Isaiah. The first is the lingering over forgiveness and bearing of sin in Psalm 99: 8. As Yochanan Muffs has shown, ‘*el nose’ hayita lahem* is best understood not just with the forgiveness denotation of *nose*’ but the lingering connotation of bearing sin, carrying the burden of sin that is not to be instantly forgotten or made to disappear. Yes: “You were a forgiving God to them.” But if “You are a merciful God,” Your mercy took the form “You bore the sin, You delayed the punishment, but You did not expunge their sin; You punish them for their sin” (Muffs 23). The bearing is both the lifting of the burden and the carrying, so it will not get lost, of the burden of sin.

The second piece of evidence for the accessibility of such verbal play within the historical range of Deutero-Isaiah comes clear in the work of David A. Sapp, comparing the Hebrew text with the Septuagint translation. Comparing the two versions of verse ten, Sapp draws a sharp distinction:

In the Hebrew text “righteous one” is the *subject* of the verb. But in the Greek text “righteous one” is the accusative *object* of the verb. In the Hebrew texts the righteous *Servant* of the Lord does something *for the many*. But in the Greek text the *Lord* (the subject of the sentence back in v. 10) does something to the *Servant*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sapp 174. See also Eugene Robert Ekblad, Jr., *Isaiah’s Servant Poems according to the Septuagint: an Exegetical and Theological Study*. What Sapp shows about the LXX needs to be distinguished from “the constant influence of corrective Palestinian recensions upon the original Septuagint translation” (Martin Hengel with Daniel P. Bailey, “The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period” 81). Hengel and Bailey note that the Septuagint translator omits *nisah* from the triumvirate of Hebrew verbs of exaltation (121).

The Septuagint does not erase the concept of vicarious atonement, but it appears not fully to register it, allowing for the more conventional notion of a prophet-like servant who suffers with, rather than for, the people; he does not “justify” the people in mysteriously taking away their guilt, but God “justifies” him in proclaiming that an essentially innocent individual represented the collective guilt. In the Hebrew Bible, the Lord desires to crush him, apparently in payment for others’ sins; in the Greek, the Lord desires to purge him of association with the wicked, and the guilt offering is not the servant himself but what the wicked must offer to make up for persecution of the servant. Sapp concludes, “The LXX, in contrast to the Hebrew, understands the Servant’s bearing the sins of the many to have been accomplished not through a sacrificial death, but through humiliating sufferings and denial of justice with which the people identify” (186). The people owe much to this servant who *represents* their suffering in order to help them see their iniquity; but this servant does not vicariously atone for others’ sins. There are, admittedly, many reasons why the LXX translators might have failed to see or deliberately altered the vicarious atonement theology of the Hebrew text; but one possibility is that the play on *nsa* as oneself bearing a weight of sin, not just freeing others, is a feature of the Hebrew itself.

Though, as Gary Anderson has so convincingly shown, the metaphor of sin as debt overtakes sin as burden in the New Testament, there hovers over several depictions of the crucified Christ the shadow of the ambiguity of *nsa* as lifting and bearing rather than simply bearing away the sins of the many: bearing his own cross, and lifted onto the cross, Christ bears the sins of all. There is one text in particular where the crossing of *nsa* from bearing away to carrying seems to be evoked, or at least paralleled. The Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 is reading Isaiah 53 when Philip finds him, though curiously the passage cited from Isaiah 53 stops short of “the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.” The last line cited from the LXX Isaiah, “his life has been taken from the earth” leaves ambiguous whether *erthe*, aor. passive of *airo*, should be translated “taken away” or “lifted up.” If the eunuch is not instinctively led to think of a messiah, he may well be thinking of himself, of the situation of the eunuch, despised by the Jews, rejected from their temple service, but, in the great promise of Isaiah 56, to be accepted and elevated in the end of days. The Greek *airo* thus seems, by linguistic magic, to encode the very ambiguity of the Hebrew *nsa*: and just as the Hebrew Isaiah 53 seems to be the vehicle for metaphoric movement from lifting up to bearing, the Greek *airo* becomes the very word that allows Philip in the story to preach the messiah and vicarious suffering. Luke’s carefully cut-off citation, like the fate of the eunuch, otherwise “cut-off,” could not be more carefully crafted. In the beginning was the word-play.

## VI Coda: My Metaphor, My Savior

And in the end? Matthew is generally thought to be a gospel addressed to Jewish Christians or proto-Christians, and several of the crucial differences between Mark and Matthew can be explained as modifications made to appeal to this audience. It is surprising, however, to find Matthew preserving or inventing the people's response to Pilate's proclamation of his innocence: "Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matt. 27: 25). Why is this verse here—here of all the gospels? One explanation is that this Gospel not only addresses Jewish Christians but seeks to explain to them the particularly thorny question "why it is that the 'nations' are taking over the kingdom of heaven" (Fitzmyer 670). And so Matthew has "all the people" accept responsibility for the crucifixion, thus encouraging Jewish Christians to identify instead with the new people, the new Israel that accepts salvation through Christ.

Beyond this specific challenge, however rightly or wrongly perceived, is a Matthean interest in cultivating the spirit of identification of readers with the relevant traditions *and language* of Judaism: the idiom of someone's blood being on someone else's head is idiomatic Hebrew in the Hebrew Bible. Thus David says to the slayer of Saul (or says over the body of the slain slayer), "Thy blood be upon thy head; for thy mouth hath testified against thee, saying, I have slain the Lord's anointed" (2 Sam. 1:16). Blood is a literalization of guilt, and "thy blood be upon thy head" is a way of saying "You, not I, are responsible for the blood I now shed in slaying you." And so when the people say to Pilate, "His blood be on us," they use a traditional figure of speech, a dead metaphor for assuming the burden of guilt—if guilt there be. In the context of the crucifixion, this idiom appears to convey the people's willingness to overlook their guilt, to hide the question of their guilt, under the surety of the old dead metaphor: that is the way the acceptance of responsibility (or rather, in 1 Sam. 1: 16 and 3: 28 the *accusation* of responsibility) has been, traditionally, voiced. Yet while returning us to the old concept of guilt as a burden to be carried or carried off, the idiom ironically suggests the salvific shedding of Jesus's innocent blood for the redemption of all.

Scholars who have considered the ironic reading carefully distinguish what the people say from what Matthew may be understood to mean. That is, when we read, "Then answered all the people, and said, 'His blood be on us, and on our children'" (Matt. 27: 25), it is clear that "all the people" voice their eagerness to crucify Jesus to the point where they are willing to take full responsibility for his guilt, so sure are they that they would not be committing the crime of shedding innocent blood. Yet "all the people" need not be a

nasty way of implicating Jews in general, and Jews for all generations to come, in responsibility for the crucifixion. As John Paul Heil puts it, “the covenant people of Israel are also, ironically and unwittingly, invoking ‘my blood (*haima mou*) of the covenant to be shed for many [alt. translation, “for all”] for the forgiveness of sins!”<sup>19</sup> The very phrase that has given rise to the thought that Matthew may have gone out of his way to make an anti-Semitic accusation (not just a small crowd of priests but “everybody”) may have been chosen instead to suggest the blood of expiation poured out by Christ for everybody. One further feature of this extraordinary passage in Matthew supports this ironic reading: Pilate’s washing of his hands makes no sense in a Greek or Roman context, but makes very good literary sense if it is meant to recall the ritual in Deuteronomy 21: 8 whereby the elders of Israel wash their hands of responsibility for shedding innocent blood: “Be merciful O Lord, unto thy people Israel [KJV; better: forgive thy people Israel] *whom thou hast redeemed*, and lay not innocent blood unto thy people of Israel’s charge” (italics mine). What Matthew would be doing is letting the hand-washing recall the phrasing of Deuteronomy and thus associating the old redemption from Egypt with the new, Christian redemption from sin through the sacrifice of Jesus. As Timothy Cargal puts it,

The passage in Deuteronomy describes Israel as those ‘whom thou has redeemed’, calling to mind the purpose for the pouring out of Jesus’ blood given in Matt 26: 28, namely the ‘forgiveness of sin’. It seems likely that the author is wanting ... readers to recall this passage and to apply its prayer to the people who shed Jesus’ innocent blood.

III

The irony, thus, is not at Matthew’s expense but Matthew’s own irony, what Matthew hopes his readers will understand in the double meaning of taking Jesus’s blood on their heads. Matthew is not writing against the Jews but appealing to them—appealing to Jews to recall Deuteronomy and sense, consciously or unconsciously, this forgiveness ritual is *my* trope, *my* religion—and therefore—this must be *my* savior. If the blood these people take on their heads

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<sup>19</sup> 26: 28. See Heil, “The Blood of Jesus in Matthew” 124. See also Heil’s formulation of this idea in *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus* 76: “By invoking ‘his blood’ (*haima autou*) upon themselves and their future generations (27:25), the covenant people of Israel are also, ironically and unwittingly, invoking my blood [*haima mou*] of the covenant to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (26: 28).”

is *my* responsibility, then the blood Jesus sheds for me is also *my* salvation. In the beginning—and in the end—was the word-play.

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