

# *Atonement: Soundings in Biblical, Trinitarian, and Spiritual Theology*

## Chapter 1: Atonement in the Old Testament

### Interpretive Framework: **Interpersonal Relationship of Reciprocal Love**

<b>Lover</b>	<i>vis-à-vis</i>	<b>Beloved</b>
<b>Paternal Love</b>	<i>vis-à-vis</i>	<b>Filial Love</b>
<b>Generative, Archetypal Love</b>	<i>vis-à-vis</i>	<b>Engendered, Mirroring Love</b>

The covenant relationship that God establishes can live only by the interpersonal process of initiating love and answering love, generative love and engendered love, archetypal love and mirroring love.<sup>1</sup> The God of the covenant loves in such a way that He not only leaves room for an answer but also empowers his beloved to love reciprocally and in mirroring or imitative fashion. Following the Bible, we can see this reciprocal action as an interplay between paternal love and filial love – as we find in Jeremiah, where the LORD says outright: “I am a father to Israel, Ephraim is my first-born” (Jer 31:9).

Atonement operates within this pattern of reciprocity and bilaterality. The reality of the covenant structures atonement as a bilateral event between God and His chosen partner (His “first-born”). This bilateral event involves an interplay of divine and human freedom, an interplay in which three elements are intertwined: (1) God’s sovereignly free initiative; (2) God’s passionate involvement with His covenant partner; and (3) His partner’s participation and collaboration in eliminating sin and guilt.

### 1.1. **Three elements integral to the process of atonement**

**(1) God’s sovereignly free initiative of love – generative and exemplary in nature.** (See pp. 29-31.)

- \* The covenant relationship is *initiated* by God in virtue of His freely given and unmerited love.<sup>2</sup>
- \* Yet the loving God, in initiating the covenant, *aims at mutuality* with an unswerving commitment.<sup>3</sup>
- \* God aims to engender an answer of love awakened and animated by His own self-donation.
- \* What happens when the answer of love is *not* given (that is, when this interplay of love is broken due to sin)? “God restores the damaged relationship on the initiative of his own power to love” (Ratzinger). God Himself takes the initiative in restoring the relationship, but only so as to reestablish the interplay.
- \* God’s power to love is a forgiving power, yet because of its intrinsic generativity, its outworking does not remain one-sided. God chooses to be the father of Israel so emphatically that His own readiness to be reconciled and His power to forgive cannot, in and of themselves alone, become actual forgiveness without nullifying the fecundity and abandoning the aim of that very fatherhood.
- \* The way in which God forgives is by enabling Israel to collaborate in the work of effacing sin through the power of their reciprocal love.

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<sup>1</sup> On the imitative or mirroring character of Israel’s filial love, see Ex 22:21; Dt 5:15; 10:17-19; 15:14-15; 16:11-12; Lev 11:44-45; 11:4; 19:2; in the New Testament, see Mt 5:48; Jn 5:19-20; 1Pt 1:15-16; Eph 5:1.

<sup>2</sup> See Dt 7:6-8; 8:17; 9:6; 10:15.

<sup>3</sup> See Dt 6:5; Ex 6:7; Lev 26:11f.

**(2) God's passionate involvement with His covenant partner.** (See pp. 31-47 and pp. 247-63.)

- \* At issue here is a passionate involvement which stems entirely from God's un-needy and selfless initiative. Precisely because God has nothing at stake for Himself in choosing "to father" His covenant partner, He can allow His love to be "pained" by their disobedience and estrangement without this capacity signaling any lack or imperfection of His being.
- \* Indeed God's *passio caritatis* (passion of charity) proves all-powerful, unimpaired, and undiminished through whatever "*passio*" God would freely endure for the sake of restoring the interplay of love.
- \* God's *passio caritatis* is actively at work to evoke repentance and empower his filial beloved willingly to mirror God's *passio caritatis* in the form of contrite love.

**(3) Man's participation and willing collaboration in eliminating sin and guilt.** (See pp. 47-50.)

- \* Recall that God loves in such a way that He not only *leaves room* for but also *empowers* His partner *to love reciprocally*. The loving God is intent on *engendering mutuality* already in His self-donation.
- \* Indeed, the love which the beloved *returns* to God is always *God-engendered* love, *filial* love – love that *depends* on, *derives* from, and *imitates* or *images* the love it has first been shown.
- \* Atonement has its place within the bilateral dynamic of the covenant; it is a work of filial love (a work of answering, mirroring love) vis-à-vis God's forgiving love.
- \* Fundamentally, atonement is a God-engendered filial collaboration in the restoration of broken reciprocity.

**NOTE:** The reciprocal love to which Israel is summoned consists above all in *filial obedience*. God's self-revelation in word and deed intends to engender in His beloved a *manner of loving that obediently imitates* and thereby *glorifies* the God and father of Israel. By obeying God, Israel is to fulfill its vocation as God's visible image in this sin-darkened world. God is to be glorified and His true character seen in and through the life-testimonial of His obedient "son".<sup>4</sup>

**1.2. The Old Testament notion of sin** (See pp. 50-54.)

- \* Just as *atonement* should be understood within the bilateral dynamic of the covenant, the same goes for the biblical notion of *sin*.
- \* Sin is a failure to respond with grateful love and righteous conduct to the goodness of the LORD. Sin is essentially a refusal to see and mirror the character of God whose deeds and words show His paternal presence and benevolence.<sup>5</sup> Sin bespeaks a refusal to exist in intimate co-existence with God. At bottom, sin is a spurning of God's love; it is a forsaking of God.<sup>6</sup>
- \* This understanding of sin suggests something important about the identity of the *sinner*. Within the context of the covenant, sin is committed by someone whom God regards as His beloved son/child.<sup>7</sup> "Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth, for the LORD speaks: Sons I have raised and reared, but they have disowned me! ... They have forsaken the LORD, spurned the Holy One of Israel" (Is 1:2, 4).

<sup>4</sup> See Is 29:23; Dt 32:51; Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12; Phil 2:8-11.

<sup>5</sup> See Ex 4:22-23; Dt 4:37; 7:8.

<sup>6</sup> See Hos 1:2, 9; 2; 3:1; 4:10; 7:13; 8:3; 11:1-11; 2 Kgs 17:6-23; Is 1:2, 4; 29:13-15; 30:9; 63:16; 64:7; Jer 31:9; Dt 32:6,18; Mal 2:10.

<sup>7</sup> See Ex 4:22; Dt 14:1; 32:1-43; Is 30:9; 43:6; 45:11; Jer 31:9.

- \* As a *consequence* of persistent sin, the covenant relationship is ruptured, and sinners exist in a state of estrangement from God, alienation from the LORD – and God, on his side, is forsaken.
- \* Other (worldly) effects of sin are exile, hardships, suffering at the hand of enemies, and innumerable ways in which human beings suffer alienation internally and externally, culminating in death.
- \* **Sin** in the Old Testament is a complex reality consisting of **three dimensions**:
  - (1) the **inner attitude** of the doer (turning away from God, disobedience, infidelity, indifference),
  - (2) the **evil deed** (the transgression), and
  - (3) the **effects** or **consequent penalties** (chiefly, separation from God).

### 1.3. Atonement as **the bearing of sin in filial love-suffering** (See pp. 54-60.)

- \* In light of the totality of the Old Testament evidence, sin is not eliminated simply by ceasing to do wrong. If sin is to be effaced, sin must be “converted” in all three of its dimensions.
- \* The sinner must:
  - (1) **turn back** his heart (**inner attitude**) toward God,
  - (2) **turn away** from the **evil deed(s)**, and
  - (3) **turn round** the **effects/consequent penalties** of sin.
- \* In brief, sin in its threefold totality is re-versed or transformed into its opposite.
- \* With the inducement of God’s grace, the sinner (1) undergoes a change of heart and (2) ceases to commit the evil deed(s). Yet more needs to be done. He still has to bring his regenerated love to bear on (3) the effects or consequent penalties of sin. Sin is not merely walked away from; sin (its effects) must be borne away. To bear away sin means to take sin’s effects upon oneself and “carry” them, to endure the consequences that sin has wrought<sup>8</sup> until they are “suffered through.”<sup>9</sup>
- \* Here we touch on a decisive point: the chief effect that must be borne is sin-wrought distance from God (God-forsakenness). What must be borne is the breaking of filial communion with God.
- \* What gives the bearing of sin its atoning efficacy is regenerated filial love as the motive power. Only someone (1) animated by the love of God, and hence (2) converted *from* sin, is capable of (3) suffering sin *through* to its elimination. Only someone whose heart has turned back to God (and in this respect is no longer a sinner) is capable of bearing sin-wrought separation from God as the heartache of a contrite son, in filial love-suffering.
- \* What’s more, by the very fact of bearing the theological core of sin (God-forsakenness), albeit now with regenerated love, the penitent son *converts* sin (sense #3) into material for the expression of sonship; sin is *transformed* into the suffering form of filial love. By being borne in this way, sin is borne *away*, annihilated.<sup>10</sup>
- \* Atonement is a work that annihilates sin “when human freedom allows *itself* to be reversed by grace into love for God, and then, it reverses its *sin* by ‘bearing’ it and transforming it into the pain of filial love” (Hoffmann).
- \* And this implies that the manner in which God draws near to His estranged son is by way of paternally engendering a love that filially suffers for a hidden (or self-concealed) God.

<sup>8</sup> See Hos 13:16; Ez 4:1-8.

<sup>9</sup> See Num 14:17-19; Ex 34:6-7; Hos 2; 6:4; 11; Jer 9:10; 48:31-33.

<sup>10</sup> To annihilate is to cause something to vanish or cease to exist by changing it into other forms.

**In regard to atonement as a work of filial love-suffering:**

- \* **What is suffered?** Distance *from God* (as the principal effect of sin).
- \* **Who suffers it?** One who is **beloved by God** and who opens his heart to God's forgiving love.
- \* **How is it suffered?** **With regenerated love for God**; with a contrite and resolute heart.
- \* **Why is it suffered?** **To bear sin away and be restored to communion with God.**

Atonement is a work of sonship that "annihilates" sin by transforming sin into its opposite: *nearness to God* in the filial love-suffering of *distance from God*.

NOTE: Insofar as one is animated by the love of God in willingly bearing the consequences of sin, this bearing of sin has atoning efficacy. St. Thomas, *ST III*, q.14, a. 1, ad 1: one atones for sin by taking on the penalties due to sin. "The penalties one suffers for sin...are the matter, as it were" of atonement. "But the [formal] principle is the habit of soul [or attitude of heart] ... from which atonement has its efficacy." The suffering or bearing of sin's penalties would not be efficacious as atonement "unless it proceeded from charity." (See also III, q. 15, a. 1, ad 5.)

**1.4. Atonement is a process engendered by God: it has a patrogenetic structure.** (See pp. 60-70.)

- \* In order to perceive more clearly God's paramount role in the work of atonement, we return once again to the first two elements: (1) God's sovereign initiative and (2) God's passionate involvement with the sinner's destiny.

**(1) God's sovereign initiative:**

- \* Only one who (formally considered) is no longer a sinner is capable of bearing sin in such a way that he transforms sin into its opposite by the power of suffering love. But this capacity presupposes that God's prevenient, forgiving love has empowered the sinner to repent.
- \* "Such *forgiveness* does not simply negate the need for repentance, but rather *evokes* and *animates* this repentance. ... [I]nstead of human repentance bringing about divine forgiveness, *it is divine forgiveness that gives rise to human repentance.*" (Khaled Anatolios)
- \* "It is only because of the love the sinner has received in the (initial) forgiveness, and in virtue of the 'initial conversion' wrought by it, that he is able to 'bear' his sin under the form of [filial love-] suffering." (Hoffmann)<sup>11</sup>

**(2a) God's passionate involvement: God's love as "pained" in the face of sin.**

- \* Recall that God's love is intent on engendering a *mirroring, imitative* response. That is to say, what God generates is a filial image of His own manner of loving. This generative work involves the exemplary nature and power of God's love to draw the human image to willingly become ever more like its divine archetype.
- \* Here we are affirming that divine revelation is not simply the conveying of a message but the self-disclosure of God's inner attitude, His divine subjectivity – in a word, His "Heart." God lays bare His Heart in order to draw the beloved into His inner attitude and to move the beloved from within (through the interior working of God's Spirit) to respond in like manner. At issue is the exemplary,

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<sup>11</sup> See Dt 30:6; Ezek 16:59-63; 36:23-32; Ps 80:19-20.

persuasive power of God's love which operates as an inner motivating force.

- \* On God's side, God reveals a paternal Heart that (freely) endures a *passio caritatis* on the sinner's account.<sup>12</sup> God shows that He is first to bear in love the hurt of separation, the absence of His beloved ("The more I called them, the farther they went from me," Hos 11:2). The LORD shows that He is first to willingly endure forsakenness in the mode of a suffering love, a love that is not withdrawn despite being "pained" (there being no limit to love's power to endure).
- \* Furthermore, the disclosure of God's almighty *passio caritatis* has a potent capacity to evoke repentance, ignite filial love, and move His partner willingly to mirror it in turn – that is, to bear the effects of sin in the mode of a suffering love, a love that takes the form of contrition.
- \* The beloved on his side reveals God's power to shape his filial image under the conditions of a sin-marred relationship. In the process, the converted sinner is rehabilitated as a living image of God, in whom the glory of God's almighty love becomes visible in confronting and effacing sin.

## **(2b) God's passionate involvement: God's love as "wrath" in the face of sin.**

- \* God's wrath in the face of sin is not an independent power of destruction separate from or set in opposition to God's love. Rather, God's wrath is the form that God's love takes when it encounters whatever is opposed to the designs of God's love. And it only "turns" or "stands still" (2 Mac 7:38) when the sinner is converted and "cleansed" from sin, when effects of sin are overcome, and forgiveness is fully achieved.<sup>13</sup>
- \* Indeed God's anger is redemptive in intent (this side of the eschaton). This notion is key to the Book of Isaiah, which affirms that redemption takes place *through* God's act of wrathful judgment. "I will turn my hand against you, and refine your dross in the furnace, removing all your alloy.... Zion shall be redeemed by judgment" (Is 1:25, 27). Redemption and wrathful judgment are *not* mutually exclusive categories here. Rather, redemption consists in the initiative of divine forgiveness which operates *through* an event of divine judgment/wrath.
- \* God's anger is indicated when God "hides His face" in judgment against sin.<sup>14</sup> For attitudes and conduct that ruin the reflection of God's glory on the face of His covenant partner must be discredited by God's withdrawing from association with false and counterfeit "sons".<sup>15</sup> After all, God cannot be a "partner" to sin, much less mistaken for the "father" of sin-corrupted sons. So God withdraws His glory (His manifest presence) from counterfeit sons, and thereby allows sinners to suffer the state of God-forsakenness they have chosen for themselves.<sup>16</sup>
- \* The chief point to grasp here is that God's withdrawal (His self-concealment) is itself a modality of forgiving love that operates in a hidden manner, so that His filial beloved can bear sin (its theological core, God-forsakenness) and thereby change it into the suffering form of filial love.
- \* For their part, God's sons are called to bear God's hiddenness with contrition and trust (or, what amounts to the same, to bear God's love in its mode as anger, as self-concealment).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Hos 6:4; 11:8; Is 6:8; Jer 6:11.

<sup>13</sup> See Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36:24-26, 33.

<sup>14</sup> See Is 8:17; 54:7-8; 59:2; 63:17; 64:4, 6-7; Jer 33:5-10; Ps 27:9; 80:4-5; Dt 32:19-20; Ez 10.

<sup>15</sup> See Jer 12:7; 7:29; 2 Kgs 17:6-23; Lam 2:3, 14, 18; 4:11-12, 16, 22; Dan 9:16-19; Tobit 13:6.

<sup>16</sup> See 2 Kings 17:17-18; Ps 27:9; 44:9; 60:10; Ps 80:4-5; 106:40-42; 108:11; Is 1:15; 8:17; 54:7-8; 57:17; 59:2; 63:17; 64:4, 6-7; Jer 2:17, 19; 6:11; 12:7; 15:17; Dt 32:19-20; Ez 10; 39:29; Lam 2:3, 14, 18; 4:11-12, 16, 22; Dan 9:16-19; Tobit 13:6.

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In all of this, God exercises his power against sin in such a way that human freedom is not merely bypassed or overridden by a one-sided forgiveness. God's power of love is a forgiving power, but it takes full effect in His filial partner only by engendering a response of love that yields to and comes to reflect God's almighty *passio caritatis* in the face of sin.

### 1.5 Forgiveness and Atonement are two sides of reciprocal love.

*At a glance:*

#### **(1) God's sovereignly free initiative.**

\* *God offers the grace of initial forgiveness to sinners and thereby aims to regenerate filial love and induce a mirroring willingness to endure sin as separation unto its annihilation.*

#### **(2) God's passionate involvement.**

- \* *God's love as 'pained' in the face of sin.*
- \* *God's love freely bears being forsaken by sinners, there being no limit to its power of endurance.*
- \* *Its revelation has a potent capacity to evoke repentance, ignite filial love, and move His partner to imitate it in turn.*
  
- \* *God's love as wrath in the face of sin.*
- \* *God cannot be a 'partner' to sin, much less mistaken for the 'father' of sin-corrupted sons. So God withdraws His glory (His manifest presence) from counterfeit sons.*
- \* *God's love in the mode of self-concealment: God 'hides His face' in judgment against sin. In doing so, God lets sinners bear the state of God-forsakenness they have chosen for themselves.*
- \* *Yet God's aim is to enable converted sons to turn round sin's effects by bearing sin-wrought distance from God with regenerated filial love.*

#### **(3) Beloved's free collaboration.**

- \* *Filial (God-engendered) love willingly bears sin's effects (chiefly distance from God).*
- \* *Filial love takes the form of love-suffering that reflects back God's forgiving *passio caritatis*.*
- \* *Thus the converted sinner is rehabilitated as the image of God, in whom God's glory (God's loving presence and power) is visible in confronting and annihilating sin. Indeed he reveals God's power to shape His filial image under the conditions of a sin-marred relationship.*

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<sup>17</sup> See Hos 2:16-21; Lev 26:16-45; Is 1:25, 27; Is 45:15; 54:7-8; Jer 24:5-7; 31:31-34; 33:5-10; Ez 36:24-26, 33.