




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘He laid His hand upon both’: Self-punishment, vicarious punishment and Gregory’s spirituality of the cross in the *Moralia in Job*

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## Abstract

Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job* has been said to mark a transitional phase in the development of atonement doctrine. I argue that the *Moralia* cohesively portrays Christ’s redemptive work as achieving something in two directions: towards God, a vicarious payment of humanity’s debt of punishment; towards humanity, an efficaciously convicting and restorative example. This sustains a spirituality in which exacting and self-denying moral effort rests on freedom from judgement and on the death accomplished by the Mediator. Engaging the *Moralia* in this manner illuminates patristic exegetical sensibilities and proves instructive about how the fathers fit into later taxonomies of atonement models.

**Keywords:** atonement; cross; Gregory the Great; Job; punishment

Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job* is probably best known for expansive allegorical exegesis, intensive theological psychology and extensive length. But the *Moralia* also merits attention in several standard histories of the doctrine of the atonement, in which it is cited as marking an important transitional phase of development of that doctrine between Augustine and the Middle Ages: the ‘beginning of a tendency’ or ‘inchoate expression’ of what would later be expressed in terms of vicarious penal suffering.<sup>1</sup> It is notable that some of those writers are keen to characterise this as merely an ‘approximation’ of similar language,<sup>2</sup> and others who acknowledge the superficial similarity are confident that ‘substitutionary atonement...was far from Gregory’s mind’.<sup>3</sup> Gregory’s understanding of the atonement, however, is worthy of investigation in its own right,

<sup>1</sup>The former is the phrasing of L. W. Grensted, the latter of Robert S. Franks. See L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: The University Press, 1920), p. 99; Robert S. Franks, *The Work of Christ: A Historical Study of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>Grensted, *Doctrine of the Atonement*, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Green, ‘The Theology of Gregory the Great: Christ, Salvation and the Church’, in Bronwen Neil and Matthew J. Dal Santo (eds), *A Companion to Gregory the Great* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 152.

and particularly in the context of the place it occupies in the spirituality of the *Moralia*. In what follows, I outline how Gregory understands Christ's redemptive work to achieve something in two directions simultaneously: towards God, a vicarious payment of humanity's debt of punishment; towards humanity, an efficaciously convicting and restorative example. This sustains a spirituality in which exacting and self-denying moral effort rests on freedom from judgement and on the death accomplished by the Mediator, which is to be thankfully contemplated. Engaging the *Moralia* in this manner both illuminates patristic exegetical sensibilities and proves instructive regarding perennial questions of where (and whether) the fathers fit into later taxonomies of atonement models.

### Situating the *Moralia* and Gregory's hermeneutic

According to Gregory he delivered the bulk of his reflections on Job to his monastic brethren prior to his elevation to the papacy, and later edited them into the thirty-five books and six volumes of the *Moralia*.<sup>4</sup> Gregory records how at first he 'sank' under the 'burden' of expounding so 'obscure' a work, 'which hitherto had been thoroughly treated by none before'. However, raising his hopes 'to Him, by Whom the tongue of the dumb is opened', he pressed on, despite being 'afflicted with frequent pains in the bowels'.<sup>5</sup> While he pleads the latter as an excuse for any deficiencies in the work, he also remarks that 'Divine Providence designed, that I a stricken one, should set forth Job stricken, and that by these scourges I should the more perfectly enter into the feelings of one that was scourged'.<sup>6</sup> According to Wilken, 'no exegetical work from the early church was more admired, studied, excerpted, and cited'.<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, introducing his own commentary on the literal sense, declaims any necessity of explaining the mystical sense on the grounds that this has been done so 'accurately and eloquently' by 'the blessed Pope Gregory...that nothing further need be added to this sort of commentary'.<sup>8</sup>

Gregory sets out his exegetical approach succinctly in his preface. He follows traditional patristic practice in discerning two layers of meaning in the text: the historical and the allegorical or spiritual. The allegorical meaning is further subdivided into a typical sense, conveying spiritual truths, and a moral sense. Thus, Gregory can explore any given passage from one, two or all three of these angles. Usually, this follows a standard order: 'first, we lay the historical foundations; next, by pursuing the typical sense, we erect a fabric of the mind to be a strong hold of faith; and moreover as the last step, by the grace of moral instruction, we, as it were, clothe the edifice with an overcast of colouring'.<sup>9</sup> However, following Origen, Gregory is plain that not every text contains

<sup>4</sup>Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, Epistle, II [henceforth *Mor*, followed by book, chapter, section]. Where not otherwise stated, I use the widely available older translation (with some archaic expressions modified) in *Gregory the Great: Morals on the Book of Job*, vols. 18, 21, 23, 31 of *Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church* (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1844). I have also consulted the recent translation in Gregory the Great, *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*, trans. Brian Kerns OCSO, 6 vols. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014). The introduction to the first volume provides extensive historical context to the *Moralia*. For the Latin I have used Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, 1862, vols. 75–76.

<sup>5</sup>*Mor* Epistle, II.

<sup>6</sup>*Mor* Epistle, V.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Louis Wilken, 'Interpreting Job Allegorically: The *Moralia* of Gregory the Great', *Pro Ecclesia* 10/2 (2001), p. 213.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super Iob ad Litteram*, Prae. 6.

<sup>9</sup>*Mor* Epistle, III. As most editors point out, this pattern holds more true for the first few books of the *Moralia*, after which Gregory moves more swiftly to the spiritual senses.

a historical sense, for ‘the plain words of the historical account ... sometimes ... cannot be understood according to the letter, because when taken superficially, they convey no sort of instruction to the reader, but only engender error’. In such places, the words of the text themselves indicate they should be read spiritually ‘as if with a kind of utterance they said, “Whereas you see our superficial form to be destructive to us, look for what may be found within us that is in place and consistent with itself.”’<sup>10</sup> So Gregory is justified in taking different texts from these three different angles. Moreover, as the goal is edification, not exhaustive explanation, ‘sometimes happens that we neglect to interpret the plain words of the historical account, that we may not be too long in coming to the hidden senses’.<sup>11</sup> However, this patristic commonplace regarding the relation between the historical and spiritual senses should not be misunderstood as affording the interpreter carte blanche to ditch the historicity of the biblical text where it seems convenient to do so. Gregory warns explicitly against such practice, both out of reverence for the history,<sup>12</sup> and because in rushing over the history the interpreter may miss simple benefit from it in search of deeper truths.<sup>13</sup>

The fathers also recognised that the thematic centre of a given biblical text was important to grasping the meaning of the parts.<sup>14</sup> Job the book revolves around the sufferings of Job the character, and the great question for all readers is why righteous Job should suffer. Gregory addresses this at the outset. He notes first that there are many kinds of suffering that relate to human sin: ‘the scourge whereby the sinner is stricken that he may suffer punishment without withdrawal, another whereby he is smitten that he may be corrected; another wherewith sometimes a man is smitten, not for the correction of past misdeeds, but for the prevention of future...’<sup>15</sup> Job’s comforters erred in ascribing Job’s suffering to reasons directly connected with some sin belonging to Job. But, Gregory continues, ‘sometimes the person is stricken neither for past nor yet for future transgression, but that the alone mightiness of the Divine power may be set forth in the cutting short of the striking’.<sup>16</sup> It is this case that applies to Job: the true purpose of Job’s suffering is not to rectify his own sin, past or future, but in what he and subsequent generations of the faithful would learn through his experience and his words. Job was struck ‘that the stroke might redound to the praise of God’s glory’.<sup>17</sup>

What is it that we learn that resounds to God’s glory from Job’s afflictions? Gregory sets out two foci, corresponding to his twofold spiritual sense: extensive moral instruction about the life of the faithful under affliction and the benefit gained by suffering; and a typical demonstration of the sufferings of Christ. The two are not separate, for it is in his moral example of bearing righteously under affliction that Job points forward to Christ, whose life is that same example to us perfected. Indeed, Job takes his place in the line of Old Testament saints who all ‘gave promise of Him by prophesying both in

<sup>10</sup>*Mor* Epistle III.

<sup>11</sup>*Mor* Epistle III.

<sup>12</sup>‘this we most earnestly entreat, that he that lifts up his mind to the spiritual signification, do not desist from his reverence for the history.’ *Mor* 1.37.56.

<sup>13</sup>‘sometimes, he who neglects to interpret the historical form of words according to the letter, keeps that light of truth concealed which is presented to him, and in laboriously seeking to find in them a further interior meaning, he loses that which he might easily obtain on the outside.’ *Mor* Epistle, IV.

<sup>14</sup>This is explored in Mark DelCogliano’s introduction to Gregory the Great, *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*, pp. 24–5.

<sup>15</sup>*Mor* Preface 5.12.

<sup>16</sup>*Mor* Preface 5.12.

<sup>17</sup>*Mor* Preface 5.12.

deeds and words',<sup>18</sup> each showing us some facet of holy living (Abel, innocence; Enoch, purity; Noah, endurance; Abraham, obedience; and so on), 'till the true Morning Star should rise, Who, being the herald to us of the eternal morning, should outshine the other stars by the radiance of His Divinity'.<sup>19</sup> All these saints were types of Christ therefore, but Job in particular 'by all that he underwent should show forth what were to be His sufferings; and should so much the more truly foretell the mysteries of His Passion, as he prophesied then not merely with his lips but also by suffering'.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Job is a type of the whole Christ, both head and body, and so he prefigures sufferings in both: 'either our Mediator's Passion, or the travails of Holy Church, which is harassed by the manifold toils of this present life'.<sup>21</sup> Job's comforters, in like fashion, are typical of heretics, for 'they address the blessed Job as though in behalf of the Lord, but yet the Lord does not commend them, that is, because all heretics, while they try to defend, only offend God'.<sup>22</sup>

This tight web of concepts is at the heart of Gregory's approach to Job. The flow of his commentary is dictated by the biblical text, so following his train of thought can prove challenging.<sup>23</sup> But the *res* of the text, the reality to which it points (in which Gregory is most interested), provides the continuity. The central summary concept or 'scope' of Job at the historical level is Job and his suffering; the centre of the spiritual meaning is Christ, the whole Christ (unfolded as head and body). Christ, of course, is the scope of scripture, and so in this way Job is also keyed in to the cohering centre of scripture as a whole.<sup>24</sup> This foundation gives Gregory immense confidence that the entire text in front of him will naturally yield both spiritual truths relating to Christ's work of redemption (which, characteristically of the fathers, focuses as much on the incarnation as a whole as it does on the passion) and thoroughly applicable moral lessons for the church throughout the ages, as he works through the historical, typological and moral angles text by text.

### The language of punishment and Job's sufferings

The question of God's justice in permitting Job's afflictions is as central to the book as the sufferings themselves. It is the issue over which the comforters stumble, and key to whatever lessons are to be drawn from the narrative. Given the connection Gregory makes between Job and Christ, the question also naturally transfers over to God's justice in relation to the sufferings of Christ. We have already noted Gregory's taxonomy of reasons for affliction within the divine purpose, and that he denies that Job's afflictions are retribution for specific sins (which is the mistake made by the comforters). For some interpreters, once the first of Gregory's list (direct punishment for specific personal sin) has been ruled out, we have left the domain of punishment all together: 'When our

<sup>18</sup>Indeed, 'there never was any Saint who did not appear as His herald in figure.' *Mor* Preface 6.14.

<sup>19</sup>*Mor* Preface 6.13.

<sup>20</sup>*Mor* Preface 6.14.

<sup>21</sup>*Mor* Preface 7.16.

<sup>22</sup>*Mor* Preface 6.15.

<sup>23</sup>Wilken, 'Interpreting Job Allegorically', p. 216.

<sup>24</sup>On scope or *skopos*, there is a useful discussion in Kathryn Greene-McCreight, 'He Spoke Through the Prophets: The Prophetic Word Made More Sure', in Christopher R. Seitz (ed.), *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), pp. 167–75. See especially p. 171: 'we can see that speaking of the *skopos* of Scripture assumes an objective reality not entirely identifiable with the text itself but related to it and borne by it'.

sufferings function in a way in which the divine glory is revealed in us they lose their penal character.<sup>25</sup> We have seen that Gregory undoubtedly views Job's sufferings as functioning to reveal God's glory in Job, and yet as he exegetes the book of Job he continues to use the vocabulary of punishment applied to a wide range of situations of affliction, including Job's, Christ's and the believer's.<sup>26</sup> How can this be consistent?

One of Gregory's key theological notions is the divine order of the universe and of all events in history. God, the divine light, which 'abides unchangeable in itself', 'orders all things that are subject to change'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, when commenting on the heavenly scene in which Satan appears before God in Job 1, Gregory points out that all language in scripture ascribing temporal attributes to divine acts is a condescension so as to 'gradually transfer to the eternal world those who are habituated to the things of time'.<sup>28</sup> There is no 'lapse of time' from God's simple and eternal point of view, just one instantaneous immutable beholding of all things in the divinely decreed order.<sup>29</sup> This naturally encompasses the order of justice. It is axiomatic that God 'can will nought that is unjust'. This is the primary comfort to sufferers such as Job: that 'what is disagreeable to us... comes to us by His disposal, to Whom nought but justice is pleasing'.<sup>30</sup> We cannot suffer unjustly in an absolute sense, for God would permit no injustice. Even what Satan 'unrighteously desires to do, God does not allow to be done except with justice'.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, God's punishments are always carried out with order: 'Almighty God, Who punishes evil things well, never permits even the torments to be "without order"'; and 'according to the measure of his guilt is likewise the recompense of vengeance which pursues every one of the damned'.<sup>32</sup>

When God seems to admit, then, that he has afflicted Job 'without cause' (Job 2:3), Gregory is at pains to explore how this is compatible with God's justice. On the one hand, this is explained simply in line with Gregory's comments in his preface that we have already noted: there was not a cause in the sense of a specific sin that justified retributive suffering, but there was another kind of cause in God's purpose for Job and the enduring lessons his sufferings would provide.<sup>33</sup> But that is not the complete answer. Explaining Job's reply to his wife (2:10), Gregory considers how Job could rightly say that anyone receives 'evil' from the Lord. Clearly evil, which 'does not subsist by its own nature', cannot be created by God; rather, God 'turns into a scourge the things that have been created good for us, upon our doing evil'.<sup>34</sup> Such things are evil from the point of view of the pain they inflict, though good 'by the nature whereby

<sup>25</sup>Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "Bearing the Marks of Christ's Passion": Aquinas' Soteriology', in Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph P. Wawrykow (eds), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2010), p. 287.

<sup>26</sup>*Poena* and passive forms of *punio*.

<sup>27</sup>*Mor* 2.20.34.

<sup>28</sup>*Mor* 2.20.35.

<sup>29</sup>*Mor* 2.20.34, 2.20.37. Similarly, 'For He that creates all things marvellously, Himself regulates them, that after having been created, they should agree with themselves.' *Mor* 9.5.5.

<sup>30</sup>*Mor* 1.18.31.

<sup>31</sup>*Mor* 1.10.17.

<sup>32</sup>*Neque enim omnipotens Deus, qui mala bene punit, inordinate esse ullo modo vel tormenta permittit, Mor* 9.65.98 (PL 75:913b); *damnatum quemque juxta modum criminis et retributio sequitur ultionis, Mor* 9.65.98 (PL 75:913b). See also *Mor* 15.33.39: 'the strict justice of Almighty God exacts punishment from lost sinners for their froward deeds'.

<sup>33</sup>*Mor* 2.3.3.

<sup>34</sup>*Mor* 3.9.15.

they have their being', and good in the restorative impact of which they are divine means. 'For we by the love of things present have been led away from the love of our Creator... by the same means whereby man in his pride was not afraid to commit sin, he might find a punishment to his correction.'<sup>35</sup>

What is vital to note here is that for Gregory, even corrective afflictions are justified partially in that they are penal responses to our own sinful turning away from God. The principle is succinctly put: 'For we are become at variance with God by sin. Therefore it is meet that we should be brought back to peace with Him by the scourge.'<sup>36</sup> Gregory clearly views the everyday suffering of humanity as penal: 'our life is every day bruised with the scourge of vengeance on account of sin'.<sup>37</sup> This is not punishment for specific sins, but for the primordial sin of Adam: 'for we are born condemned sinners after punishment has begun [*post poenam*], and we come into this life together with the desert of our death'.<sup>38</sup> It is instructive to compare Van Nieuwenhove's treatment of Aquinas' view of suffering here: he acknowledges that Aquinas connects original sin with afflictions in a general way but leaves the connection swiftly behind on the basis that the traditional understanding of original sin is 'in need of reinterpretation, to put it mildly' (a view Van Nieuwenhove assumes to be self-evident and in need of no defence).<sup>39</sup> The connection between original sin and suffering disappears from view in the rest of his argument, even though original sin is the key notion that confirms a penal aspect of general suffering. Gregory, in contrast, speaks of God explicitly as the one who 'condemns even without works some that are only bound with the guilt of original sin'.<sup>40</sup> Although it is not front and centre in Gregory's explanation of Job's suffering, it is an essential part of the theological matrix within which he justifies it.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, throughout his commentary on Job's words, although Gregory is adamant that Job is not being punished for specific sin, he is equally insistent that Job is a sinner. When Job says of God that 'He destroys the perfect and the wicked', Gregory concludes:

The 'perfect man is destroyed' by the Creator, in that whatever his pureness may have been, it is swallowed up by the pureness of the divine immensity. For though we take heed to preserve pureness, yet by consideration of the interior Perfection it is shown, that this which we practise is not purity.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup>*Amore enim praesentiam ab auctoris nostri dilectione recessimus... ut unde homo culpam non timuit superbus admittit, inde poenam corrigendus inveniret. Mor 3.9.15 (PL 75:607a).*

<sup>36</sup>*Per culpam quippe Deo discordes exstitimus; dignum ergo est ut ad pacem illius per flagella redeamus. Mor 3.9.15 (PL 75:607b).*

<sup>37</sup>*Mor 9.27.42.*

<sup>38</sup>*Mor 4.24.45.*

<sup>39</sup>Van Nieuwenhove, 'Bearing the Marks of Christ's Passion', p. 187. Van Nieuwenhove's discussion is particularly relevant as he connects Aquinas' logic to Gregory's taxonomy of causes for affliction.

<sup>40</sup>*Mor 9.20.31.*

<sup>41</sup>Carole Straw is technically right, then, in saying that 'original sin is not critical in solving the question of God's justice' for Gregory in the same way as it might have been for Augustine, in that Job's suffering is more crucially explained by divine purposes other than retribution. However, this downplays the importance of original sin in justifying God's ways with humanity and the existence of suffering in general. Carole Straw, 'Job's Sin in the *Moralia* of Gregory the Great', in Franklin T. Harkins and Aaron Canty (eds), *A Companion to Job in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), p. 88.

<sup>42</sup>*Mor 9.26.40. Similarly, Mor 9.18.28: 'as we have often said, all human righteousness is proved unrighteousness, if it be judged by strict rules'.*

Gregory even seems to come close to ascribing sin to Job in his approach to his sufferings. While he repeatedly affirms that Job did not sin in his words (as per Job 1:22, 42:7), he is finally 'reproved in his own person' (while being defended against Satan and preferred to the comforters) and 'blamed for imagining that the intention of the scourging was different' to what it was (i.e. believing it was a punishment). After all, although 'the holy man surpassed all men by the virtue of his merits', 'yet, inasmuch as he was man, could not possibly be without blame before the eyes of God'.<sup>43</sup>

These are the conceptual underpinnings for Gregory's continued use of the vocabulary of punishment to describe Job's sufferings, even though he sees it as crucial to the meaning of the whole narrative that Job is not suffering as a specific punishment for some specific sin that he refuses to confess. It is in this manner that Gregory can speak of Job's sufferings as 'a punishment to his correction', and apply the language of punishment to the sufferings of temporal human life in general. Moreover, that Job is part of sinful humanity is a crucial part of the justification for God afflicting him.

### Vicarious punishment

What then of the analogous question of justice in the sufferings of Christ? Gregory puts the question lucidly as he turns from the historical to the allegorical sense of Job 2:3: 'But we must consider how He is righteous and orders all things righteously, if He condemns Him that deserves not to be punished. For our Mediator deserved not to be punished for Himself, because He never was guilty of any defilement of sin.'<sup>44</sup> We have seen that Job was afflicted both 'without cause' (in that his sufferings were not specific punishment for specific sins) and yet 'with cause' (in that his sufferings were just owing to Job's original and general sin, and were ordered towards a good end of increasing his merit). The same logic applies to the suffering of Christ insofar as he suffered both 'with' and 'without' cause in difference senses:

For 'he was destroyed without cause', who was at once weighed to the earth by the avenging of sin, and not defiled by the pollution of sin. He 'was destroyed without cause', Who, being made incarnate, had no sins of His own, and yet being without offence took upon Himself the punishment of the carnal.<sup>45</sup>

Christ was not punished for cause of his own sin, but because of the sin of humanity: 'He never was guilty of any defilement of sin', but he 'underwent the penalties of our unrighteousness'.<sup>46</sup> Unlike Job, however, Christ is punished wholly vicariously on

<sup>43</sup>*Mor* 35.7.9. I am not persuaded by Straw's argument that this is a major change of mind for Gregory (though in such a long work a change of mind is hardly inconceivable). Rather, I think Gregory is simply wrestling with the traditional problem for commentators of how to square the assertion of Job's innocence in 1:22 and 42:7 with his repentance in 42:6. His discussion in *Mor* 32.4.5 (to which Straw refers) of the way Job speaks of the injustice of his punishment seems to me to cohere fully with his discussion of how the sufferings can be said to be with/without cause in Book 1. Straw, 'Job's Sin in the *Moralia*', p. 93.

<sup>44</sup>*Sed pensandum est quomodo justus sit, et omnia juste disponat, si eum, qui non debet puniri condemnat. Mediator etenim noster puniri pro semetipso non debuit, quia nullum culpae contagium perpetravit. Mor* 3.14.27 (PL 75:613b).

<sup>45</sup>Or 'the punishment of the flesh'. *Frustra quippe afflicto est, qui et culpae ultione pressus est, et culpae contagio inquinatus non est. Frustra afflicto est, qui incarnatus, propria admitta non habuit, et tamen poenam carnalium sine culpa suscepit. Mor* 3.14.26 (PL 75:613a).

<sup>46</sup>*damna injustitiae nostrae sustineret, Mor* 3.14.27 (PL 75:613c). Kerns does not employ the vocabulary of punishment for *damno* in this locus as the older translation does, but still renders the summary *Pater*

account of the sins of others, and wholly for the good of others (whereas Job's sufferings were partly justified by his own general sinful state, and increased his own merit).<sup>47</sup>

It should be noted that Gregory's language of vicarious penal suffering is repeated multiple times, with some precision. It is not accurate to Gregory's mode of expression to simply state that Christ's sufferings were 'on our behalf' in a nebulous way: Gregory is explicit that Christ suffered humanity's punishment in place of humanity to free us from the same. Consider such expressions as:

'the Mediator, Who was without guilt, discharged the guilt of that pride';<sup>48</sup>  
 'He Who is above all underwent the penalties of our unrighteousness';<sup>49</sup>  
 'He took upon Him the punishment due to wickedness... and moderated the wrath of the Judge by undergoing death';<sup>50</sup>  
 'He underwent our punishment out of pity for us';<sup>51</sup>  
 'the Creator of our life would come even to the punishment of our death';<sup>52</sup>  
 'to gain propitiation for mankind... a way of justly propitiating for him... the Lord endured our punishment in His death...';<sup>53</sup>  
 'He then came without sin, Who should submit Himself voluntarily to torment, that the chastisements due to our wickedness might justly loose the parties thereto obnoxious...'.<sup>54</sup>

Note the unmistakable logic of substitution: justice is maintained when Christ suffers our punishment in our stead, setting us free.<sup>55</sup> In addition to these texts, there are multiple places in which Gregory refers to sin as incurring a debt of penalty.<sup>56</sup> This debt

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*ergo cum justus sit, justum puniens* as 'The Father is just; he punishes the just one.' Gregory the Great, *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*, Vol. 1, 205.

<sup>47</sup>though in respect of Himself He was "afflicted without cause", in respect of our deeds it was not "without cause". *Mor* 3.14.27.

<sup>48</sup>*sed tamen culpam hujus superbiae sine culpa Mediator exsolvit. Mor* 3.14.26 (*PL* 75:613b).

<sup>49</sup>*Quo is qui est super omnia damna injustitiae nostrae sustineret. Mor* 3.14.27 (*PL* 75:613c).

<sup>50</sup>*poenam malitiae suscepit... et iram judicis moriendo temperavit. Mor* 9.38.61 (*PL* 75:894a).

<sup>51</sup>*poenam nostram miserando suscepit. Mor* 24.2.3 (*PL* 76:238b).

<sup>52</sup>*nisi vitae nostrae conditor ad poenam usque mortis nostrae venire. Mor* 29.10.22 (*PL* 76:489b).

<sup>53</sup>*ad propitiandum hominibus... in quo juste hominibus propitiatar inveni... Dominus... poenam nostram moriendo toleravit. Mor* 24.3.6 (*PL* 76:290b).

<sup>54</sup>*Venit itaque sine vitio, qui se subjiceret sponte tormento; ut debita nostrae iniquitati supplicia eo reos suos juste amitterent, quo hunc a semetipsis liberam injuste tenuissent. Mor* 3.14.27 (*PL* 75:613c). Kerns renders this: '[He] came without vice, so that the punishment our sins deserved might justly be escaped by us, the guilty ones, by dint of having laid hold of him, the unjust one, unjustly.' Gregory the Great, *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*, vol. 1, p. 204.

<sup>55</sup>While I am not interested in claiming that Gregory held to a penal theory identical with Reformation thought, Carole Straw's description of this aspect of Gregory's thought is striking: 'Man's predicament with God must be rectified as well, for every sin offends God and demands its recompense. Though deeply indebted for his sins, man alone cannot make satisfactory compensation. For this reason, Christ takes on suffering and death in payment of man's sins. Though perfect himself, he deigns to take on the punishment and chastisement due man's iniquities. This sacrifice of his unjust suffering substitutes for man and propitiates God's wrath. As both a rational creature and a sinless one, only Christ could be man's substitute. His sacrifice atones for man's sin because he has suffered the punishment that cleanses and removes man's transgressions.' Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 155. This could be lifted straight from a textbook description of penal substitutionary atonement.

<sup>56</sup>For example, *Mor* 4.35.27, 15.9.10.



ultimately can only be settled by Christ's death, in which 'our Redeemer by His own death paid man's penalty'.<sup>57</sup> It is this that lies behind the understanding of the death of Christ in sacrificial terms. Humanity, by sin, was 'made the debtor to death', and 'saving by sacrifice' this debt could not be paid. 'Thereupon in our behalf the Son of God came ... [and] offered a sacrifice in our behalf'; 'He set forth His own Body in behalf of sinners.'<sup>58</sup> Only the redemptive death of Christ is sufficient to meet this need: 'if He had not Himself undertaken a death not due to Him, He would never have freed us from one that was justly due to us'.<sup>59</sup>

This need is appreciated, at some level, by even Job himself. On several occasions, Gregory interprets Job's impassioned cries of need in his affliction as cries for the Redeemer to come. When Job 'demands the shadow of death' (Job 3:5), Gregory explains that 'for the obliterating of our sins in God's sight he calls for the Mediator between God and man, who should undertake for us the death of the flesh alone, and Who by the shadow of His own death, should do away the true death of transgressors'.<sup>60</sup> When Job asks of God, 'If he scourge, let him slay once for all' (Job 9:23), he 'begs the grace of the Mediator', '[a]s if he besought in plain words, saying, "Whereas our life is every day bruised with the scourge of vengeance on account of sin, let Him now appear, Who for our sake may undergo death once for all..."'<sup>61</sup> The 'eagle that hastes to the prey' (Job 9:26) is a picture to Gregory of all the Old Testament saints, who, like an eagle turning down from gazing at the sun to seek prey on the earth, turn from contemplating the sight of the Creator down to 'behold Him, Who was to suffer and to die for mankind, by which same Death they know that they are themselves restored and fashioned anew to life'.<sup>62</sup> They knew that they needed the death of the Redeemer.

To conclude that 'substitutionary atonement... was far from Gregory's mind', then, is simply mistaken.<sup>63</sup> On the contrary, vicarious penal suffering or substitutionary atonement plays a vital role in his understanding of how Christ's death meets the need of humanity. The Old Testament saints knew it was needed; Job's sufferings richly prefigured it. Naturally, it does not stand alone, nor exhaust Gregory's thought on the means by which the Redeemer meets the need of his church. It is particularly woven into his understanding of redemption alongside the notion of self-sacrifice, in a manner to which we will now turn.

### Self-punishment and vicarious punishment

While this reading of Job's sufferings as typological of the vicarious penal suffering of Christ is pervasive, it does not exclude from the *Moralia* equally pervasive parallel commentary on those same sufferings as typological and exemplary of suffering as a means of moral progress. Commenting on Job 1:5, which speaks of Job's continual sacrifices

<sup>57</sup>*Redemptor noster morte sua humani generis poenam solveret. Mor 4.29.56 (PL 75:666b).*

<sup>58</sup>*Mor 17.2.46.* Gregory even entertains, briefly, a form of the double punishment argument in *Mor 18.22.35.*

<sup>59</sup>*Mor 3.14.27.* Similarly, 'For so long as we are tied and bound by the penalty of a corrupt state, we never by whatsoever right works appropriate real cleanness to ourselves, but only imitate it...' *Mor 9.36.57.*

<sup>60</sup>*Mor 4.16.3.* This the Mediator does in that 'His own single Death He reckoned to our account.'

<sup>61</sup>*Mor 9.27.41 and 9.27.42.*

<sup>62</sup>*Mor 9.32.48.*

<sup>63</sup>Green, 'Christ, Salvation and the Church', p. 152.

for his sons, Gregory first explains that this refers to 'our Redeemer' who 'offers a holocaust for us without ceasing, Who without intermission exhibits to the Father His Incarnation in our behalf... washes out man's misdeeds, and in the mystery of His Humanity offers a perpetual Sacrifice'.<sup>64</sup> However, in returning to this verse from the moral angle, Gregory treats Job dwelling in the (wicked) land of Uz as allegorical of the elect person dwelling in temporal scenes but yearning for eternal things.<sup>65</sup> The interior mental state of the believer is the focus: Job's seven sons are 'the seven virtues of the holy Spirit [that] spring up in us'.<sup>66</sup> Job's offering of sacrifices, in turn, corresponds to when believers 'pour out our prayers to the Lord in behalf of each several virtue, that it be free from alloy', 'to light up the whole soul with the fire of compunction, that the heart may burn on the altar of love, and consume the defilements of our thoughts, like the sins of our own offspring'.<sup>67</sup>

Sacrifice, as Straw puts it, 'is the core of Gregory's moral theology'.<sup>68</sup> We have met this already in the notion of 'a punishment to his correction'. Job's sufferings, while extreme, represent the life of the believer, in which it is appropriate that 'every being created good turns to pain for us, [that] the mind of the chastened man may be renewed in a humbled state to peace with the Creator'.<sup>69</sup> What it also amounts to in the course of the *Moralia* is an exacting, demanding emphasis on the need for punitive self-correction. The consuming fire of sacrifice frequently signifies rigorous and painful internal purification.<sup>70</sup> By this work, we remove that in us which is liable to receive punishment at the final judgement: present enjoyment of sin 'will not be required by the Lord, if it be visited with self-punishment of our own accord, as Paul testifies, when he says, For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged of the Lord (1 Cor 11:31)'.<sup>71</sup> Gregory exhorts the reader stringently: 'the mind must be cleansed from defilement by being wrung harder with the hand of penitence, in proportion as it sees itself to be more foully stained by the yielding of the consent'.<sup>72</sup>

It would be unfair, however, to characterise this as a Pelagian tendency that makes the redemptive work of Christ in need of being supplemented by our own moral efforts, as part of a zero-sum game.<sup>73</sup> Even this self-punishment only permits the avoidance of divine wrath by mercy.<sup>74</sup> In one and the same place, Gregory both records Job's cry for the Redeemer to come who 'may snatch from the death of the flesh and of the spirit, us that are debtors thereto, [and] may, though no debtor, discharge the death of the flesh' and also immediately concludes:

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<sup>64</sup>*Mor* 1.24.32.

<sup>65</sup>*Mor* 1.25.34.

<sup>66</sup>*Mor* 1.27.38.

<sup>67</sup>*Mor* 1.35.48.

<sup>68</sup>Straw, *Gregory the Great*, p. 179.

<sup>69</sup>*Mor* 3.9.15.

<sup>70</sup>For example, *Mor* 3.30.59.

<sup>71</sup>*Mor* 4.15.27.

<sup>72</sup>*Mor* 4.18.34.

<sup>73</sup>As Green rightly says, it would be a mistake to think that 'Gregory regarded Christ's saving work as inadequate and the efforts of Christians as separate and supplementary to it. He is absolutely clear that Christ's passion and death have redeemed humanity; he is equally clear that the Christian is sharing in that passion as they strive to fulfil it con-crucified with Christ.' Green, 'Christ, Salvation and the Church', p. 154.

<sup>74</sup>'We know well that we do not deserve pardon, but, by the grace of God preventing us, we are freed from our sins by His secret counsels'. *Mor* 4.16.29.

since the Lord lets no sin go unpunished, for either we visit it ourselves by lamenting it, or God by judging it, it remains that the mind should ever have a watchful eye to the amendment of itself. Therefore, in whatever particular each person sees that he is succoured by mercy, he must needs wipe out the stains thereof in the confession of it.<sup>75</sup>

Our own self-punishment alone cannot rescue us from divine judgement, for it only has efficacy when accepted by divine mercy and is not sufficient to cancel out the death that we owe as a debt of sin. 'Now any of the righteous may sometimes be able to resist the visitations of a present judgement, by the merits of a derived innocence, but they have no power by their own goodness to rid mankind of the woes of the death to come.'<sup>76</sup> But those whose death is discharged by the Redeemer still face a purifying judgement, and so are all the more eager to purge their sin now by moral effort. A clear distinction, meanwhile, is made between those who benefit from the death of Christ and those who do not. God's wrath will be visited on the unrighteous in hell, but for the righteous it is dealt with by the Redeemer.<sup>77</sup>

The two strands of Gregory's thought, then, do not simply sit side by side. The plight of sinful humanity is met by the action of the Redeemer, which cancels out the debt of death, and on that basis enables and inspires the life of the righteous to consist in moral progress away from present, temporal, sinful, earthy matters towards eternal things. The two elements are particularly unified in his notion of the 'double death' that humanity has incurred by sin, and the twofold manner in which Christ rescues us from this plight. As Gregory explains:

For in that we have both in spirit departed from God; and that in flesh we return to dust, we are obnoxious to the punishment of a double death. But there came unto us One, Who in our stead should die the death of the flesh only, and join His single Death to our twofold death, and set us free from either kind.<sup>78</sup>

The first death is a spiritual death, humanity's departure from God in sin; the second is the consequential and penal physical death, the return of human flesh to dust. Christ meets both of these, but in different ways. He only dies a single death: he comes in the flesh and dies physically to discharge our penal debt of death. Our spiritual death of sin, however, he reverses not by undergoing it himself (as he never sinned); rather, his sinless obedience turns us from sin and draws back to spiritual life. This

<sup>75</sup>Mor 4.16.31. Similarly, 'what we prosecute with weeping, will never be urged against us by the Judge to come'. Mor 4.18.36. 'For we offer our own selves a sacrifice to God, when we dedicate our lives to the service of God, and we set the members of the sacrifice cut into pieces upon the fire, when we offer up the deeds of our lives dividing them in the virtues.' Mor 9.55.84.

<sup>76</sup>Mor 9.38.61.

<sup>77</sup>For the wrath of Almighty God does herein execute the force of its severity every day, that those who live unworthily it swallows up in most worthy punishments. Which wrath now indeed "passes by", but at the end it "quite passes by", in that now it is executed, but at the end of the world it is finally consummated. Yet this wrath as to the souls of the righteous "quite passed by" on the coming of our Redeemer...' Of course, as Gregory cautions, wrath is spoken only analogically of God, 'in that no disquieting influence disorders the simple nature of God'. Mor 12.10.14.

<sup>78</sup>*Nos enim quia a Deo mente recessimus, et carne ad pulverem redimus poena duplae mortis astringimur. Sed venit ad nos qui pro nobis sola carne moreretur, qui simplam suam duplae nostrae conjungaret, et nos ab utraque morte liberaret.* Mor 9.27.41 (PL 75:881b-c).

twofold aspect is further developed in Gregory's commentary on Job 9:23.<sup>79</sup> It is the work of the Mediator to deal with divine wrath and to turn us back from our sin, both of which he achieves by his death: 'brought to the punishment of sin, [he] did both convict man, that he might not sin, and withstand God, that He might not smite'.<sup>80</sup>

Gregory's musing over this theme (from a passage to which we have already referred) is worth quoting at length:

Thus by suffering He convinced both the One and the other, in that He both rebuked the sin of man by infusing righteousness, and moderated the wrath of the Judge by undergoing death; and He 'laid His hand upon both', in that He at once gave examples to men which they might imitate, and exhibited in Himself those works to God, by which He might be reconciled to men. For before Him there never was forthcoming One, Who interceded for the guiltinesses of others in such wise, as not to have any of His own. Therefore none could encounter eternal death in the case of others, in the degree that he was bound by the guilt of his own. Therefore there came to men a new Man, as to sin a rebuker, as to punishment a befriender. He manifested miracles, He underwent cruel treatment. Thus He laid His hand upon both, for by the same steps by which He taught the guilty good things, He appeased the indignant Judge.<sup>81</sup>

The death of Christ works in both God-ward and man-ward directions. It would be a mistake to conclude that one element of Gregory's thought here excludes, minimises or even relativises the other. As a true mediator, Christ works on both warring parties: dealing with punishment by acknowledging the justice of the sentence and undergoing it, he appeases the judge; dealing with sin by rebuking it by his perfect example, he restores and turns back humanity to good. Because the death of the Redeemer both achieves what needs to be done for humanity and enables the necessary completion in our own deeds, even that stringent effort (as Gregory goes on) is motivated by love, not fear. 'For the holy man, because he beholds the Redeemer of the world coming in meekness, does not assume fear towards a Master, but affection towards a Father'.<sup>82</sup> So while 'we do not render real service to God, so long as we obey His commandments from fear', 'when the love of His sweetness is kindled in our mind, all desire of the present life goes for little'. And in turn, when 'the present life has once begun to grow tasteless, and the love of the Creator to become sweet', this stirs up not complacency but action: 'the soul inflames itself against self, that it may accuse self for the sins, wherein it formerly vindicated itself, being ignorant of the things above'.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup>In Gregory's rendering, this verse reads: 'Neither is there any that is able to convict both of us, and to lay his hand upon us both.'

<sup>80</sup>*Mor* 9.38.61.

<sup>81</sup>*Nullus quippe ante hunc exstitit, qui sic pro alienis reatibus intercederet, ut proprios non haberet. Aeternae igitur morti tanto quis in aliis obviare non poterat, quanto hunc reatus de propriis astringebat. Venit itaque novus homo ad homines, contradictor ad culpam, amicus ad poenam; mira monstravit, crudelia pertulit. Manum ergo suam in ambobus posuit, quia unde reum recta docuit, inde iratum iudicem placavit.* *Mor* 9.38.61 (PL 75:894a-b).

<sup>82</sup>*Mor* 9.40.63.

<sup>83</sup>*Mor* 9.41.64, 9.42.65.

## Conclusion

In a lucid essay, Benjamin Myers argues that the concept of sacrifice functions in the patristic understanding of atonement only to prove the universality of the atonement, not to explicate the mechanism. To think it does the latter, and therefore find notions of substitutionary atonement in the fathers, is to project back on to them ‘Anselmian and Calvinist assumptions’.<sup>84</sup> It seems likely that similar reservations underlie the hesitance of some to allow the presence of substitutionary atonement in Gregory’s understanding. What we have seen in the *Moralia*, however, provides strong counter-evidence to Myers’ claim. Gregory’s understanding of the death of Christ as vitally involving vicarious penal suffering is expressed with clarity, and Christ’s sacrifice is specifically explained as the mechanism of the atonement. This should be instructive for these ongoing discussions of how the fathers fit into taxonomies of atonement models. Of course, Gregory’s doctrine of redemption is not formulated in terms identical to later Reformation and post-Reformation expressions, with the same weight and emphasis. It is not as if an idealised penal theory lay submerged *in toto* in the tradition, to be glimpsed under the waves in patristic sources, peek above the surface in Anselm, and only burst forth with the Reformers. The claim here is simply that Gregory’s reflections make use of substitutionary logic, explaining one aspect of the efficacy of the atonement in terms of Christ bearing punishment on behalf of humanity. This cannot be waved away by appeal to the context of his thought or the dominance of other themes (such as self-sacrifice), for this strand is well-integrated within his overall approach.<sup>85</sup>

The *Moralia* also illuminates how the mode of patristic exegesis guides the manner in which theological themes are incorporated into the whole. We have seen that Gregory does not merely hold simultaneously the twin themes of redemptive vicarious punishment and self-punishment towards moral improvement, but also integrates them; he knows how it is that both can be true. Together they comprise the notion of sacrifice that is so central to his commentary. But this kind of move arguably flows from his core assumption that the entire narrative is typological of the whole Christ, body and head, whose various sufferings cohere in ‘the grace of the Economy in his Flesh’.<sup>86</sup> If modern exegetes struggle with the seeming looseness of connection between Gregory’s exposition and the text, we should also note how in this way the focus on Christ and his body, the reality of which the text speaks, unifies and gives immediate relevance to every detail for the church throughout time.

<sup>84</sup>Benjamin Myers, ‘The Patristic Atonement Model’, in Fred Sanders and Oliver D. Crisp (eds), *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), p. 86.

<sup>85</sup>To claim that the presence or dominance of one theme excludes another is a fallacy, on which see Garry J. Williams, ‘Penal Substitutionary Atonement in the Church Fathers’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 83/3 (2011), p. 215.

<sup>86</sup>*Mor* 9.32.48.