THE EXPIATORY SACRIFICE OF CHRIST

By MARTIN HENGEL

PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT IN THE FACULTY OF EVANGELICAL
THEOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF TÜBINGEN

THE death of no one man has influenced the history of mankind as much as the death of the Galilean carpenter who was crucified before the gates of Jerusalem in A.D. 30 as a rebel. Thousands of Jews were crucified by Roman procurators during the 60 years between the time when Judea became a Roman province and the outbreak of the Jewish War. The names of a few of those crucified were recorded by Josephus; most were forgotten. The fact that the death of this Galilean Jew was not only not forgotten but had such a unique effect is something which is inextricably bound up with the interpretation of his death. Hence the question before us is: How did the utter loss of Jesus' execution come to be proclaimed by his disciples as a supremely saving event? In other words, how did the crucifixion become the centre of early Christian preaching?

Let us begin with a few preliminary remarks. One of the most important distinctions made by New Testament scholars since the Religionsgeschichtliche School has been the sharp separation between "Old Testament and Jewish" tradition and "Hellenistic" tradition. In Germany this distinction became almost a confession of faith, separating so-called "conservative" from "critical" theologians. Fortunately, however, in the last few years, this distinction has been regarded as being too imprecise, because the Jews at the time of Jesus had been within the sphere of influence of Greek culture for almost 400 years, crossing the language barrier, so that it is possible to assert that Late Antiquity formed a sort of spiritual unity. But now, oddly enough, the growing interest in the origins of the soteriological interpretation of the death of Jesus has rekindled in Germany the old controversy between the "Hellenists" and the "Juda-

1 The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Manchester on the 1st of November 1979. An enlarged version of the lecture will appear in German in Communio during 1980.
ists” with renewed sharpness. In contrast with the more traditional view that the interpretation of Jesus’ death as a vicarious sacrifice stems from the Old Testament and Jewish sources, the opinion has been put forward that the concept of “Jesus’ death for us” can ultimately be traced back only to Greek sources and was developed within the Hellenistic community. Older, typically Jewish, non-soteriological categories of interpretation, on the other hand, can be traced back to the oldest Palestinian community, but these are the idea that the eschatological prophet is to be killed by his people, or the idea that the righteous will be raised to God only through suffering and death.

This conflict points to a real problem: If the interpretation of Jesus’ death on the cross as a universal saving and sacrificial event can be traced back to the Aramaic-speaking community in Palestine, or even to Jesus himself, it is then difficult to understand why this interpretation has its strongest emphasis in the New Testament “missionary literature” directed to the gentile Christians (corpus Paulinum, Hebrews, and I Peter), whereas it is only occasionally found in the Palestinian Jesus-tradition of the synoptics. It is indeed the case that the motif of the murder of the prophets is predominant in the Q tradition, and that of the “righteous sufferer” in the passion narrative. On the other hand there do exist numerous analogies in the Greek world for the interpretation of Jesus’ death as a vicarious dying or atonement for others.

We have, however, no record of death as glorification or indeed of divine veneration of the dead in Ancient Israel. Death in the Old Testament was robbed of its special religious power in a radical way that is unique in the ancient world. The fact that the deceased forefathers did not become heroes or divine beings can be regarded almost as a revolutionary development. The “community of the fathers” in Sheol was entered through death, it is true, but there are no references to veneration or cultic and magical contact with the dead in the official religion of Ancient Israel.

The Old Testament therefore contains no accounts of apotheosis or superhuman transfiguration of the martyrs. The
martyrdom of the pious first becomes an independent problem in the latest book of the Old Testament in Daniel xi, and then only because in the end the hope of the resurrection of the dead comes to some extent as God’s answer (Dan. xiii. 1 ff.). Martyr accounts as a literary form were something new for Israel. II Maccabees vi and vii, our first descriptions of martyrdom, were written by a Greek-educated Jew. Ancient Israel did not understand death as a heroic act for the people, the law, or the temple. Death for the will of God, as reflected in Psalm xlv. 23: “Nay, for thy sake we are slain all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter”, does not praise the martyrs killed by the enemies but rather accuses God of refusing to help the innocent people.

It thus follows that vicarious death as sacrifice for the guilt of others is, at best, a very peripheral concept in the Old Testament (as in Isaiah liii, which K. Koch has correctly characterized as an “erratic block”). The idea of vicarious sacrifice is usually rejected: “... every man shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deut. xxiv. 16).

Examples of heroic death for one’s own people or for the law first appear in the Maccabean, i.e. the Hellenistic, period. In I Maccabees, which was originally written in Hebrew, Mattathias admonishes his sons: “But now, my sons, be zealous for the law and give your lives for (υπέρ) the covenant of your fathers” (I Macc. ii. 50). Josephus’ version of this command is formulated after Aristotle:1 “Being so prepared in spirit as to die for (υπέρ) the laws if necessary” (Ant. xii.281). That is really a new idea in Ancient Judaism.

The case with the Greeks, however, was quite different. From the classical period on, ἀποθνῄσκειν ὑπέρ, so familiar from the New Testament, was an accepted expression for voluntary sacrifice of life in the interest of the polis or friends or family, or even of philosophical truth. A compound verb, ὑπεραποθνῄσκειν, was even coined especially for this. The concept often appears in Euripides’ Alcestis, where the wife is prepared to die for her husband out of love, or in the Phoinissai, where Kreon’s son Menoikeus departs secretly, against the will

1 Nic. Eth., 1169a 20.
of his father: "I will go and save the town,/ And give my soul to death for this land's sake." (p. 997 f.). Pindar refers to the death of men "on behalf of the State" as a "holy sacrificial death". The ideal of a sacrificial death for the community in the sense of "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" (Horace, *Od.* 3, 2, 13) was very familiar to every Roman and Greek.

The motif of vicarious sacrifice to appease the wrath of the gods for human transgressions was also a part of the Greco–Roman tradition, particularly in connection with archaic human sacrifice as "an extraordinary atonement" (K. Fauth, *KP* 4: 309). Although this type of sacrifice was rejected as a barbarian practice relatively early, we nevertheless find the idea throughout the Hellenistic–Roman period. The sacrifice of Iphigenia was supposed to reconcile the angry Artemis, the sacrifice of Polyxena was to appease the spirit of Achilles. A considerable number of these traditions involve commands to sacrifice a person, often a ruler (as king Kodros in Athens), or a member of his family (as the daughters of King Erechtheus), in an atoning act to save the community. These commands are revealed by a seer or an oracle, i.e., with divine authority.

These few examples from a far larger number of Greek analogies show that the gentile hearers of the Gospel could be expected to accept not only voluntary death for one's own people as a way of apotheosis as a hero, but also vicarious death for others out of love, and the ideal of voluntary death as an atoning sacrifice.

Here, however, three questions arise:

1. What was the special character of the early Christian message of the vicarious atoning death of Jesus that distinguished it from analogous Greek (or perhaps Jewish) understandings?

2. To what extent is there a connection between the soteriological interpretation of Jesus' death and the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, since at its outset early Christianity was a Jewish–Palestinian movement with a messianic–apocalyptic character?

3. This then raises the question of the dating of this tradition. Did it permeate the early Christian kerygma relatively late in the
so-called Hellenistic community as a secondary interpretation, or was it a constitutive part of the Christian message from the very beginning? Can it be traced back to Jesus' own preaching and activity?

If the third question can be answered, the other two are also solved.

The best way to begin is to look at the earliest texts, the authentic Pauline epistles which were written little more than twenty years after the original events constituting the church. The oldest kerygma of the primitive church can be grasped approximately through these texts.

We find in them two types of Pauline statements about the atoning death of Jesus:

1. Sentences expressing the delivering up of Jesus for our salvation with παραδίδοναι or δίδοναι. This so-called "delivered-up formula" (Dahingabeformel) appears in many different forms; it is therefore possible to speak of a set formula only to a limited extent. God himself is "the sacrificing one" in two cases: He is the subject of the verb in Romans viii. 32 ("he who . . . gave him up for us all"), and his action is indicated by the passivum divinum in the couplet: "who was delivered to death for (dia) our trespasses and raised for (dia) our justification" (Rom. iv. 25). The preposition expressing "for us" is hyper in nearly all Pauline and deuteropauline texts, except here, where the use of dia is dependent on the Septuagint of Isaiah liii. 12. The origin of this "delivered-up formula" is disputed. When searching for an Old Testament model, Isaiah liii at once comes to mind. The verb paradidonai is used three times in the Septuagint to refer to the delivering up of the Servant of the Lord; this is in relation to "the iniquity of us all" (Isa. liii. 6) and "our sin" (Isa. liii. 12). But all this says nothing about the date of the tradition, for it is still disputed when Isaiah liii came into use in early Christianity. We therefore turn our attention to the second, more important, group of Pauline formulations, since this group provides us with some historical insight into the dark "pre-Pauline period" during which the early Christian confession developed.
2. The “death formula” occurs primarily in Paul. Its most familiar form is contained in the set catechetical formula recorded in I Corinthians xv. 3b: \( \chi \rho \iota \sigma \tau \sigma \delta \) \( \alpha \pi \epsilon \beta \delta \alpha \nu \varepsilon \nu \) \( \Upsilon \pi \varepsilon \rho \tau \omega \nu \) \( \tilde{\alpha} \mu \alpha \tau \tau \iota \omega \tilde{\alpha} \nu \) \( \tilde{\eta} \mu \omega \nu \). Elsewhere Paul uses a shortened version of this formula: \( \chi \rho \iota \sigma \tau \sigma \delta \) \( \alpha \pi \epsilon \beta \delta \alpha \nu \varepsilon \nu \) \( \Upsilon \pi \varepsilon \rho \) \( \tilde{\eta} \mu \omega \nu \). The constitutive parts of both versions are (1) \( \chi \rho \iota \sigma \tau \sigma \delta \) the subject; (2) the aorist \( \Upsilon \pi \varepsilon \rho \tau \omega \nu \) \( \tilde{\alpha} \mu \alpha \tau \tau \iota \omega \tilde{\alpha} \nu \) \( \tilde{\eta} \mu \omega \nu \), which refers to a once-and-for-all event in the past; and (3) the preposition \( \Upsilon \pi \varepsilon \rho \) with the genitive, which conveys the soteriological meaning. The formula can be varied, and the form depends on the context in each case. For Paul, the long version in I Corinthians xv. 3b is a part of the “paradosis” which he proclaimed to the Corinthians at the founding of the community in A.D. 49/50; it is a summary of his gospel. He was thereby able to give expression to an event which occurred in space and time and which, at the same time, contained the ultimate “eschatological” meaning of salvation. Strictly speaking, I Corinthians xv. 3-5 is a condensed historical account in confessional form which is inseparably bound up with theological interpretative elements, i.e., \( \Upsilon \pi \varepsilon \rho \tau \omega \nu \) \( \tilde{\alpha} \mu \alpha \tau \tau \iota \omega \tilde{\alpha} \nu \) \( \tilde{\eta} \mu \omega \nu \) and the subject \( \chi \rho \iota \sigma \tau \sigma \delta \), which is used here in its original sense of a title and refers to the death of the messiah.

Our next question is, when the paradosis in I Corinthians xv. 3 f. is to be dated. Paul proclaimed it to the young Christians at the founding of the Corinthian church in a set formula. It had surely been tested many times during the long years of his missionary activity. Probably he had used it already during his fourteen years of missionary activity in Syria and Cilicia. It thus formed the common starting point for Paul, Barnabas and the authorities in Jerusalem (Gal. ii. 1-10) in their attempt to achieve unity. The content of it was the basis of the “gospel” which Paul proclaimed to the gentiles and which he “laid before” the “ones of repute” in Jerusalem (Gal. ii. 2). A concrete reference to it is found in the concluding words of I Corinthians xv. 11: “whether then it was I or they, so we preached and so you believed”. The \( \varepsilon \kappa \epsilon \iota \nu \omega \omicron \omicron \), who preached the same thing as Paul, are those beginning with Peter, who are listed as witnesses of the resurrection and preachers of the Gospel. It is reasonable to assert that, whereas the form of
the paradosis goes back to the early period of Paul's mission in Antioch, the content of it nevertheless points towards Jerusalem. For we know that the Greek-speaking Jewish-Christian community had its roots in Jerusalem itself, which was a multilingual city with a large Greek-speaking minority. It can thus be assumed that, since the time of the church's constitution in Jerusalem through the Pentecost event, there was also a Greek-speaking group which rapidly became independent and translated the new gospel and the Jesus-tradition into Greek. The contradiction between the "Hellenistic" and the "Palestinian-Jewish" origin of I Corinthians xv. 3 is therefore reduced.

These general considerations give only an approximate date for the paradosis. It may stem from the circle of the Jerusalem Hellenists, but it need not do so. A thorough analysis of the individual components of the paradosis is necessary, if it is to be dated more precisely. The subject and predicate: Χριστός ἀνέθανεν, i.e., "the messiah died" may provide the answer.

We know that the messianic title Christos became a proper name after the mid-thirties through the mission to the gentiles in Antioch. This process must have taken some years, and the messianic-titular meaning of Christos was also retained in the church for some time afterwards. In exactly the same way as the formula "God raised (the man) Jesus from the dead", the other formula "the messiah died" also expressed something unique. While it was expected that God would grant the messiah the victory, the humiliating death of the messiah on the cross was an offence. So far as is known, there was no traditional figure of a suffering and dying messiah in first century Judaism. Hence "The messiah died..." must have been something altogether new and even shocking for Jewish listeners, for it contradicted the popular messianic expectations. The historical point of departure for this statement, so offensive to a Jewish audience, is not difficult to discover. According to the passion narrative in Mark, Jesus was delivered by the priestly authorities as a messianic pretender, sentenced by Pilate on the basis of his own confession, ridiculed by the soldiers as "King of the Jews", and finally crucified. The causa poenae on the inscription nailed to the cross combines both the ridicule which the popular
leaders heaped upon the crucified messiah and the total human failure of Jesus, which led to his cry of dereliction in the words of Psalm xxii. 1.

Many German scholars in recent years have refused to understand Jesus' death as a symbol of the suffering messianic Servant of the Lord, preferring instead the image of the "righteous sufferer" to explain the passion narrative. The use of the Psalms of Lament in Mark is cited in support of this. The intention of Mark's passion narrative, however, is misinterpreted when it is assumed that the evangelist is only making use of the motif of the humiliation and exaltation of the righteous sufferer. This image is much too general to explain the event recounted so impressively by Mark. Mark was concerned with the absolute once-and-for-all event of the passion and crucifixion of the messiah of Israel. He understood the few Psalms of Lament which illuminate individual features of Jesus' suffering and death, such as Psalms xxii and lxix, exclusively as messianic psalms, just like Psalms cx and cxviii. The "Righteous One" (δικαίος) does not appear in any of these Psalms, and Mark never used this word in reference to Jesus. Jesus was first called the exemplary saddiq in Luke and Matthew. For Mark he was the suffering messiah.

The dominating question in the entire second half of the Gospel of Mark is: Why should the Messiah-Son of Man suffer according to God's will, contrary to contemporary Jewish messianic ideas? Mark answers this question in x. 45, which he intentionally places at the conclusion of Jesus' public ministry outside Jerusalem, and also in the account of the Last Supper (xiv. 22-25), which constitutes the final instruction of the disciples before the passion. Here, by means of references to Isaiah liii and to "the blood of the covenant" (Ex. xxiv. 8, cf. also Zech. ix. 11), the impending death of Jesus is interpreted as the vicarious atoning death "for many", i.e., in the inclusive, universal meaning of "for all men".

I also believe that this motif is present in the account of the passion which follows: the tearing of the temple curtain in front of the Holy of Holies (Mark xv. 38) can only be interpreted to mean that the way into the Holy of Holies, which is the place of
atonement for the sins of Israel and of the presence of God, has been opened through Jesus' death, and so the old rite is abolished. Mark's reference in xi. 17 to the temple as a "house of prayer for all peoples" (Isa. lvi. 7) prepares the way for this event, and the words of the gentile centurion, who first uttered the saving confession of faith in the name "of all peoples" and "for many", indicate that such atonement is effective here and now. It also shows why the "passio iusti" interpretation is inadequate. The righteous sufferer only obtains salvation for himself; he is an example, or he turns the tables on his accusers. The familiar formula "per aspera ad astra", which is also used in reference to Greek heroes, basically applies to him as well.

Mark persistently depicts the death of Jesus as the dying of the crucified messiah. He uses the verb σταυροῦν eight times after xv. 13. Only when we understand just how offensive this word was for ancient Jewish and Gentile listeners, can we truly appreciate the implications of its use. The skandalon of the cross is not a matter of hagiographical detail, but something that is to be taken seriously. The implications of Deuteronomy xxi. 23 meant that talk about a crucified messiah must have sounded like blasphemy to a Jew, because "a hanged man is accursed by God".

Although countless Jews were crucified under the Seleucids, the Hasmoneans, and particularly the Romans, and although many pious teachers were crucified, only one reference to a crucified martyr is found, to the best of my knowledge, in the rabbinic literature: Jose ben Joezer, the legendary teacher during the Maccabean period. Because of Deuteronomy xxi. 23 it was almost impossible to make a religious or heroic portrayal of crucifixion. For this reason Paul purposely defines his gospel in a polemical manner as ὁ λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ (I Cor. i. 17). Here he proclaims nothing other than the χριστὸς ἐσταυρωμένος, i.e., the crucified messiah (i. 23; cf. ii. 2, Gal. iii. 1)—a religious offence for the Jews and a phantasy for the Greeks. At this point we reach our original problem, that the proclamation of universal atonement through the Crucified One is unmistakable, but has to contend with an insurmountable barrier because of its offensiveness to the audience in the Ancient World.
If we go now from the Paul of the epistles back to his conversion between 32 and 34, just a few years after the Easter event, another question arises: why was this young Pharisaic student Sha'ul-Paúlos so actively involved in the persecution and destruction of Christian “Hellenists” in Jerusalem? Was it not the blasphemous gospel of the crucified messiah which Paul found so offensive? In Acts vi. 13, Stephen, the leader of these “Hellenists”, is accused of speaking against “the holy place”, i.e., the temple, and “the law”. The “zeal” of Paul the persecutor (Phil. iii. 6) must have been directed against activities which threatened the very foundation of Israel’s existence. What is the basis of these attacks against the sanctuary? Apparently, it is that the temple, regarded as the site of perpetual atonement for the sins of Israel, has been rendered obsolete through the death of this crucified messiah, who vicariously took the curse of the law upon himself. By the same token, the ritual law of purity, which was so closely linked with the temple, has also lost its significance.

In Philippians iii. 8, the Apostle states that the goal of his radical conversion was to “gain Christ” and thereby to receive a new “righteousness from God”. These words, ἵνα χριστόν κερδήσω, primarily mean appropriating the death of Christ, through which God’s righteousness is revealed as the power of salvation. In Romans iii. 21-26, Paul describes the revelation of this righteousness and closely relates it with the death of Jesus as vicarious atonement. Here we find terminological similarities with the rite of Yom Kippur in the Holy of Holies. In his article “Hilasterion”, written more than thirty years ago, Professor Manson said everything decisive there is to say about these disputed verses: “Christ crucified... like the mercy-seat in the Holy of Holies... was the place where God’s mercy was supremely manifested” (JTS 46, 1945, 4). These verses are one of the pieces of evidence which show that Paul described the death of Jesus in categories associated with the end of the temple cult. He no doubt used an older traditional formula, because he knew that such language would be well understood in Rome. Paul himself placed no particular value on this cultic vocabulary; the Jerusalem temple had disappeared from his
horizon, and his face was turned towards the West, i.e. towards Rome and Spain.

Nevertheless the Apostle sometimes uses cultic language in set formulas to interpret the death of Jesus as a vicarious sacrifice. References to Jesus’ blood shed on the cross are found not only in the context of Yom Kippur (Rom. iii. 25) but also in the Lord’s Supper paradosis (I Cor. xi. 25), where it is a sign of the new covenant. Here Jesus’ self-sacrifice is interpreted as the atoning act whereby the new covenant is sealed. In Romans v. 9 the blood of Jesus is the medium of justification. In Romans viii. 3, after mentioning the sending of the incarnate Son, Paul describes him as the atoning sacrifice for sin (περὶ ἁμαρτίας = ἁτταΐ) through which God “condemned sin in the flesh”.

In II Corinthians v. 21, his statement that God made Christ, who was without sin, “to be sin” “for our sake” should be understood to mean that Christ was sacrificed on our behalf as the perfect atoning sacrifice. This reminds us of I Corinthians v. 7 (“Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed”) and of the intercession of the heavenly high priest at the right hand of God in Romans viii. 34. The examples are not numerous, but for this very reason the variety of the motifs is all the more striking. Generally Paul preferred to use the brief “death” and “delivered-up” formulas.

The cultic terminology in the deuteropauline epistles, in I Peter, I John, Revelation, and particularly Hebrews, also varies considerably, and is sometimes even more strongly emphasized than in Paul. It therefore may be assumed that this cultic terminology together with the “death” and “delivered-up” formulas stem from a common source and were not accidental occurrences peripheral to the development of christology. Indicative of this common origin is also the application of the metaphor of the spotless sacrificial lamb to the Crucified and Exalted One, which occurs independently in I Peter, John i. 29, and Revelation, and which is also presupposed in I Corinthians v. 7.

The common root behind these references is to be sought in the break with the idea of the atoning efficacy of sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple cult and the theological treatment of this
break, which certainly must have met with considerable resistance. This break was produced by the revolutionary realization that Jesus’ death on Golgotha was a universal once-and-for-all (ἐφάπαξ) atonement for all transgressions.

As mentioned above, the Hellenists associated with Stephen, whom Paul passionately resisted in Jerusalem in defence of the law and the temple, must have taken this step already. If this were not the case, Paul’s conversion would be incomprehensible. This puts us relatively close to the original events on which the church was founded, give or take two to three years. On this basis we are in a position to reframe our third question more precisely:

1. Was this soteriological interpretation of the death of Jesus, which led necessarily to the break with the sacrificial cult of the temple, the result of a secondary and scholarly activity of reflection on the part of the Hellenists, which would inevitably entail some measure of delay in the short period of time available, or was it a realization of the atoning effect of Jesus’ death “for all” which was as primitive as the sense of assurance that God had raised Jesus from the dead?

2. Is it possible to assume an analogous theological realization also in the Aramaic-speaking church under Peter and the Twelve? In other words, was there a basic unity of early Christian kerygma, such as is attested by Paul in I Corinthians xv. 11?

3. Can the soteriological interpretation of Jesus’ death be traced back to the initiative of Jesus himself with any degree of historical probability? If this were the case, questions 1 and 2 would also be answered in principle.

The solution to these problems is inextricably bound up with the question of Jesus’ messianic claim. If, as the radical German critics assume, Jesus never spoke of himself as messiah or Son of Man; if he was crucified as “rabbi and prophet”, as a ḥāsid and ṣaddiq, in short as a religious martyr; then the appearances of the Risen One may only be understood as a confirmation of his perfect piety, of his being taken up into Paradise to join the pious fathers resting there, and as proof of the veracity of his
preaching about the Kingdom of God. After Jesus had been taken up to God, his case could have been happily closed and the beginning of God’s rule awaited. Easter, the fact attested by the appearances of the Risen One mentioned in I Corinthians xv. 4 ff., in no way explains how the messiah and Son of Man, who is the exalted Lord (maran) of the Community, arose out of this alleged “rabbī and prophet”. The development of the Christian kerygma and the idea of universal atonement through the death of Jesus would be completely inexplicable if Jesus were totally unmessianic. It is also highly improbable that the tradition took years to develop after the Easter appearances, as if first the basic tendencies of the early Christian kerygma, as reflected in I Corinthians xv. 3, slowly evolved, and then the various christological titles were gradually applied to Jesus. This process, in all probability, took months or possibly even weeks, but most certainly not years. Of course we cannot be more precise where such short intervals are involved.

The decisive statements must have been formulated in Greek some time prior to Paul’s conversion. Otherwise the activities of Stephen and his friends would not have created such an uproar in the Greek-speaking synagogues of Jerusalem. We have already seen that the kerygma of the Hellenists, who were resisted and persecuted by Paul in Jerusalem, was founded upon the offensive words: “the messiah died for us”. This “death” formula is certainly striking. There is nothing similar to it in the Old Testament or in contemporary Jewish Semitic texts, though parallels are found in Greek texts which speak of dying for one’s polis or the law or Israel. This distinguishes it from the “delivered-up” formula, the origin of which is certainly Semitic, as is proved by the oldest form, recorded in Mark x. 45, which clearly goes back to a genuine Hebrew or Aramaic original. The Hellenists in Jerusalem, however, who first transferred the early Christian kerygma (and with it the Jesus-tradition) into the Greek language, translated the new message in a creative manner. Apparently, it is to them that we owe the new, specifically Christian meanings of εὐαγγέλιον, ἀπόστολος, ἐκκλησία, παρουσία and so on. This creative work of interpretative translation can be regarded as the fruit of the experience of the
Spirit in the primitive church. In this form the new Gospel was proclaimed not only to the Greek-speaking Jews and the God-fearers in Jerusalem, in the coastal region and Syria, but also to the Diaspora in general. It can therefore be assumed that the truly “pre-Pauline” formula \( \chiριστός \, \απέθανεν \, \υπὲρ \, \ημῶν \) was formulated in the course of this creative translation of the new kerygma into Greek.

In adopting this formula, another possibility was thereby rejected. The Septuagint often uses \( \epsilon\xiλάσκεσθαι \, \περι \) to translate the Hebrew kipper 'al in relation to persons or their sins. This Septuagint usage was more closely related to the sacrificial atonement cult of the temple than the essentially Greek formula used by Paul and the Hellenists. It is not difficult to explain why the uncultic Grecized formula was adopted in preference to one which was more closely connected with the Jerusalem cult. The formula \( \chiριστός \, \απέθανεν \, \υπὲρ \, \ημῶν \) expressed the uniqueness of the death of the messiah Jesus and its soteriological significance in contrast with the essentially Greek formula.

Compared with the universal atoning effect of Jesus' death, the temple sacrifice was limited in its efficacy and so had to be constantly repeated. Simply taking over \( \epsilon\xiλάσκεσθαι \, \περι \) from the Septuagint would thus have encouraged the misunderstanding that Jesus’ death had a meaning similar to that of the temple cult, as if both were equally valid. This explains the remarkable frequency of the preposition \( \upsilon\epsilon\rho \) to interpret Jesus' death over against the use of \( \pi\epsilon\rho \), which is normal in the Septuagint.

On the other hand, the application of an astonishing variety of Old Testament references to sacrifice in connection with the death of Jesus is dictated not only by the obvious analogy, but even more by the christological interpretation of the Bible in terms of consistent eschatology. Since the Old Testament texts were written for the eschatological present, statements about sacrifice, if understood properly, must point beyond their present application and towards their eschatological fulfillment in Christ.

However, our investigation must be taken further back still. Can the soteriological interpretation of Jesus' death be
traced back only as far as the "Hellenists", or are there indications that this confession of faith stems from the original event which actually constituted the church? The "delivered-up" formula, such as occurs in Mark x. 45, points back to an original Semitic form which must have originated in the Aramaic-speaking church. In this connection it is striking that two texts ascribed to the Petrine tradition, i.e. the Gospel of Mark and I Peter, both emphasize the interpretation of Jesus' death as an atonement sacrifice, though each does it in its own way. I Peter does it by means of explicit quotations of Isaiah liii, and the Gospel of Mark uses a saying in archaic Semitized form. Although we know sadly little about Peter's activity as a church leader in Jerusalem and later as a missionary, his authority for early Christianity during the first generation can hardly be questioned. Hence the conclusion follows inevitably that the Petrine kerygma must also have contained the atoning death of Jesus as its central feature. If this had not been the case, Paul's heated argument with Peter in Antioch would never have taken place, as there would have been no common ground between them. Conversely, it is hardly conceivable that Peter took over this central confession at a later date from the Hellenists who were driven out of Jerusalem. Its origin must have been inseparably bound up with his own experience of faith.

Three objections, however, may be raised against the above argument:

1. The fact that, according to Acts xxi. 18-25, James requested Paul to pay the expenses for the completion of the vow of the Nazirites, references in the sayings of Jesus (e.g. Matthew v. 23 f.) and the information in Acts about acceptance of priests and Pharisees "zealous for the law", all indicate that the cult was still important to some extent for Jewish Christians in Judea. On the other hand, we know from Paul and Josephus that the Judean churches were persecuted by Sadducees until the execution of James the brother of Jesus in A.D. 62. The opposition of the Sadducean priestly nobility is best explained by continual criticism of the temple cult on the part of the Christians. Moreover the later Ebionites disapproved of temple sacrifice. It is therefore highly probable that Jewish Christians were basically
critical of the temple cult, but were prepared to make concessions on account of the hostility of their environment. The Essenes, who rejected the real cult in Jerusalem, were also prepared to honour the temple with votive offerings (ἀναθήματα, Jos. Ant. xviii. 18). In my opinion, this attitude is also expressed in the reworked temple-tax tradition of Matthew xvii. 24-27, which originated prior to A.D. 70. Here Jesus tells the disciples that they are exempt from the temple tax because they are sons of God, but, to avoid trouble, the tax should be paid.

2. The second and third objections are more complex, because they concern the history of traditions. Was it possible for the understanding of a universal, vicarious atonement through the death of the messiah to develop in the Aramaic-speaking milieu of Jewish Palestine around A.D. 30? Here the second objection involves the history of the interpretation of Isaiah liii, the only Old Testament text capable of explaining this development. The pre-Christian history of its interpretation is open to question. But the highly original Septuagint translation, which differs considerably from the Hebrew text, already shows that Isaiah liii was an intensively disputed text. In addition, J. Starcky (RB 1963) reported an Aramaic text describing an eschatological figure who "‘atones for all the sons of his generation’", who "‘teaches the will of the Lord’", and whose message "‘reaches all corners of the earth’". This redeemer, however, encounters resistance and hostility: "‘and he will be surrounded by deception and violence’". Abbé Starcky told me that another fragment described a persecuted person; here the word mak'ôbin "‘pains’" is used twice. Since the rarely used word mak'ôb appears twice in succession in Isaiah liii. 3,4, there is probably a relationship between the two texts. The Servant of the Lord is "‘the man of pains’". Our knowledge here, however, is purely a matter of "‘patchwork’", doing our best, as so often, with the fragments of the ancient manuscripts that have been left to us by worms and beetles.

No unambiguous text from pre-Christian Judaism therefore is available which, in accordance with Isaiah liii, speaks of the suffering of the messiah. The question whether such a tradition did exist must thus be left open.
On the other hand the influence of Isaiah liii on the formation of the earliest Christian kerygma should no longer be disputed. After a long period in which the Servant motif in regard to Jesus himself was over-emphasized, it is understandable that there was a sudden urge among scholars to drive the Ebed Yahweh out of the New Testament with "swords and clubs". But this can only be done by force. Neither the formula of "delivering-up" Jesus nor that of his vicarious death "for us" are comprehensible apart from the background provided by this text. A quick glance at the "Old Testament Quotations" in the new edition of Nestle-Aland at once shows that the direct influence of this text was considerable. There are no fewer than ten formal quotations and thirty-two verbal allusions to Isaiah lii. 13-liii : 12 in the New Testament. As far as I can see, this is about the best "score" in the New Testament for any Old Testament text.

3. The third argument in favour of a Hellenistic-Jewish origin for the idea of the death of Jesus as a vicarious atonement is that pre-Christian references to the vicarious atoning efficacy of the death of a martyr are found exclusively in Jewish-Hellenistic texts. Klaus Wengst and others have stressed the fact that such an idea is only hinted at in II Maccabees vii. 32 f. and 37 f., and for a clear expression of the death of a martyr as a vicarious atonement sacrifice we have to wait for IV Maccabees (first century A.D.). But it is doubtful if such a sharp line of demarcation can be drawn between "Hellenistic" and "Pallstinian" Judaism, especially since there are hints of vicarious atonement in texts which can be demonstrated to have been composed in Palestine. These can be found, for example, in the Prayer of Azariah, which stems from the Maccabean persecution, and in the Septuagint translation of Job and also the Targum of Job from Qumran Cave 11.

Later the 'aqedat Yishaaq, the "binding" of Isaac for sacrifice according to Genesis xxii, was regarded as having vicarious atoning efficacy for all Israel. This is an important theme in rabbinic literature since the second century A.D., but isolated traces point to an even earlier period. The most important evidence for this is found in the Liber Antiquitatum Bibliarum
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(Pseudo-Philo), written in the first century A.D.; here the 'aqedat Yi$haq is accorded a special position. In a prophecy of Isaac, we are told: “And my blessing will come upon all men, for there will be no other sacrifice, and in me the generations will be instructed and by me the peoples will come to know that the Lord has counted the soul of a man worthy to be a sacrifice to him” (xxxii. 3). Additional evidence is found in the Oracle of Balaam, where it is said concerning Isaac: “And because he did not resist, his offering was acceptable in my sight, and on account of his blood I have chosen this people.” (xviii. 5). Here the vicarious saving efficacy of Isaac's sacrifice is clearly expressed.

Time does not permit us to discuss the complicated question of vicarious atonement in rabbinic literature in more detail. The argument, however, that this haggadic tradition first appears during the course of the second century should not be overemphasized, since very little haggadic tradition from scribes of the first century has been preserved. This might well be due to the fact that, in view of the many political martyrs of the first and second century, rabbinic tradition was subjected to strict self-censorship and tended to repress most of the nationalistic martyr traditions.

After careful consideration of all literary evidence in the sources, we must agree with Jeremias and Lohse that the vicarious atoning efficacy of the death or the suffering of a pious man was not totally unknown in Palestinian Judaism at the time of Jesus. Any objections against finding the origin of the soteriological interpretation of Jesus' death in the oldest Aramaic-speaking community are therefore unconvincing. The message of the death of the Messiah as an “atonning sacrifice” for our sins can be traced back to the original event which constituted the church.

What then was the relationship between this message of the vicarious suffering and death of Jesus and the event of his resurrection? The appearances of Jesus gave assurance to the disciples, who were devastated by the shameful death of their master, that God himself had acknowledged the executed messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. The oldest resurrection confession
was based on this experience: "God has raised up Jesus from the dead". The words are an allusion to the attributes of God in the Eighteen Benedictions, where God is described as the one who raises the dead (meqim metim). This experience meant more than just the assurance that Jesus had been "accepted" by God as a prophetic martyr or as the righteous sufferer and "taken up" into the heavenly abode of the righteous. For the disciples, the encounter with the risen Jesus meant that God himself had confirmed his messianic claim, the claim which had brought him to the cross, and, at the same time, it meant that God, through the resurrection, had shown that Jesus was the only one who had been without sin (he "who knew no sin", II Cor. v. 21). In these first post-Easter days and weeks the disciples can hardly be considered as a group of people coming together for quiet meditation; what they experienced should rather be compared to the force of an explosion which shattered their inherited ideas. Here a new dimension was brought into the lives of these Palestinian farmers and workers which radically transformed them. They had the inspiring assurance that heaven was open to them. It is no accident that the resurrection appearances were related to the eschatological experience of the Spirit, which they compared to the power of fire from heaven. The post-Easter Jesus-community understood this as the breaking in of God's Kingdom; the resurrection constituted the beginning of the general resurrection of the dead. Paul can still describe Jesus as "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (I Cor. xv. 20). In this way, the disciples became the eschatological remnant of Israel and the core of the new People of God; they were sent out by the risen Christ himself to call their brothers to faith in him as the exalted and coming Lord.

One insurmountable barrier separating the disciples from their master, however, must not be overlooked. Between God's rule, which began with the resurrection of the messiah Jesus, and the disciples there was the awareness of utter failure and guilt. The passion narrative in Mark clearly describes the guilt of all over against the Anointed of God. This solidarity of sin unites all those involved: Pilate and the soldiers, the leaders
of the people and the crowd, the Twelve including Judas and Peter, and even the women at the tomb who fled full of terror and failed to obey the angel's command. With the coming of the Kingdom of God in the resurrection, the problem of guilt had to be solved. In the centre of the proclamation of the earliest community, just as it had been in that of John the Baptist and of Jesus himself, there was the forgiveness of sins. In fact the early church considered itself to be in a sense the heir to the movement of repentance inaugurated by John the Baptist; baptism, as with John the Baptist, became the eschatological sacrament of the coming Kingdom of God for the forgiveness of sins, though now it was baptism "in the name of Jesus the Messiah". The fact that baptism was already reinstated in the earliest period presupposes the recognition that past guilt had been atoned for through the eschatological event of Jesus' death "for us", and thereby "peace with God" had been achieved.

This fact also settles the urgent question of why the messiah had to die the shameful death on the cross: the one who was without sin had to atone for all those who were guilty, i.e. to bring about the forgiveness of sins. This belief of the disciples in the forgiveness of their own guilt through the death of Jesus certainly lies behind the older "delivered-up" formula and the credo of the dying of the messiah for us.

On what then did the disciples base this new assurance of forgiveness? How did they know that the Son of Man was delivered up for them? In contrast with the proclamation of the Baptist, who related forgiveness to one's own personal act of conversion, this new assurance was based on God's act of love through his messiah. Thus it was extra nos (in Luther's phrase) or, to use the oldest soteriological formula, it was based on the service of the Son of Man, who gave up his life as a ransom for many, i.e. for all (Mark x. 45). In other words, the assurance of forgiveness was not the result of a long period of development and scribal reflection preceding an originally "non-soteriological" interpretation of Jesus' death. Instead the messiah's death and resurrection were understood as an inseparable unity, as we can see in the early "delivered-up" formula used by Paul in Romans iv. 25.
The death of Jesus therefore could not be mentioned alone; it was inextricably bound up with the resurrection: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (I Cor. xv. 17). From the very beginning, it was through the resurrection that the death of Jesus was revealed to be valid and efficacious as the vicarious atonement of God himself. But if the kerygma of the death and resurrection of Jesus for our salvation joined these so closely together that it is impossible to separate them even in the most primitive stage of the development of the church, we have to ask finally: How was it that the disciples came to understand Jesus' crucifixion as the eschatological event of salvation, even though it flatly contradicted the previously known messianic tradition of the time?

Here the only possible course is to try to go back to Jesus himself. He was most certainly not an other-worldly enthusiast who walked without realizing it directly into the death awaiting him in Jerusalem. From the time of the violent death of John the Baptist at the latest, he must have expected his own execution. But the question of how he understood this death presents difficulties. The problem comes to the fore especially in the last events before his betrayal in Jerusalem. Here again we find that our oldest witnesses, Paul and Mark, are in agreement, and that is in their accounts of the Last Supper.

Since the late Joachim Jeremias has already said everything important that there is to say on this topic, I will be brief. Jesus, in the night before he died, "in the night when he was betrayed" (I Cor. xi. 23), celebrated the Passover supper with his disciples and, in a symbolic act, related the broken bread to the breaking of his body and, at the end of the supper, the wine in the cup to the shedding of his blood, which would institute the new eschatological covenant and would bring about atonement for all. He thus described his impending death as an eschatological saving event which, in accordance with Isaiah liii, would reconcile all men to God and seal God's new covenant with his creation. The encounter with the Risen One revitalized the legacy given to the disciples, the meaning of which they had originally hardly understood. Not so much their own later reflection, but basically Jesus' own words of interpretation showed them how
Jesus' death was to be understood as the necessary act of eschatological salvation. The saying of Jesus in Mark x. 45 probably belongs also to the context of the last night. With it, Jesus clarified his enigmatic symbolic act. The saying over the cup is related to the ransom saying by the universal "for many", apparently derived from Isaiah liii, in the sense of "for all". This universality of salvation corresponds with the freedom which characterizes the ministry of Jesus towards all sinners and outcasts of society.

Finally we return to our original question. Certain analogies may well exist between the understanding of atonement in Late Antiquity and the early Christian interpretation of Jesus' death as vicarious atonement. Considered as a whole, however, the New Testament event breaks out of the framework of Ancient Religion. There is involved here not only the scandal that God's Son died on the cross, the most shameful death known to the Roman world, but also the universality of the atonement, effected by the Son, whose sacrifice was not a matter of appeasing the wrath of individual gods for particular transgressions, but rather of making atonement on behalf of all human beings, and thereby, as the eschatological act of the coming Kingdom of God, reconciling fallen creation with its Creator.

For Paul, the voluntary once-and-for-all sacrifice of the life of the sinless Son of God was the ultimate expression of God's freely given love: "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans v. 8). This is not a mythical view which can be lightly set aside; here we encounter the centre of that Gospel which is the foundation and support of our faith, just as it was of that of the first witnesses.