

# Did Christ Pay for Our Sins?<sup>1</sup>

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If we had kissed, it would have been the miracle to  
make us human in each other's eyes.

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*.

AMULEK ASKS US A RHETORICAL question, "Now, if a man murdereth, behold will our law, which is just, take the life of his brother?" (Alma 34:11). Obviously the answer is no, and Amulek says as much. We don't think it is just to punish innocent people for crimes they did not commit. And we are right to think so. But Amulek concludes, "The law requireth the life of him who hath murdereth therefore there can be nothing short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world" (Alma 34:12). Somehow Amulek thinks that from the principle that we do not punish innocent people for what guilty people have done, it follows that there needs to be an infinite atonement. This seems baffling to me. After all, by "infinite atonement" we are referring to the fact that Christ *has paid for our sins*, aren't we? And isn't Christ innocent? Not only does the principle that we don't punish the innocent not entail that Christ *must* atone for our sins, but it seems to entail that he *cannot* atone for our sins.

Let us try to make this paradox explicit. Amulek seems committed to a general principle, which I will call the *innocence principle*. It states that *if X is guilty of crime A, then for all Y not identical with X, Y cannot be justly punished for A*. In other words, anyone who has not committed a particular crime should not be punished for it. We aren't just committed to this principle because we believe everything we read in the Book of Mormon. It is obviously true. The very foundations of our judicial system rest on such a principle. We are always appalled when we learn of persons who have been wrongly convicted of crimes. We are appalled because we believe the innocence principle.

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Salt Lake City Sunstone Symposium in July 1998.

On the other hand, we Mormons also believe that for every sin there is a punishment affixed. After all, Alma says so (Alma 42:18). And someone must pay for our sins. We can't. So, Christ does. In other words, you and I accept the *penal substitution principle*: Christ, who is innocent of every sin, paid the price (suffered the punishment) for every sin. So, take one of the sins you have committed. You are guilty of committing that sin. The innocence principle says that if you are guilty of committing sin A, then for all Y not identical to you, Y cannot be punished for A. Christ is someone who is not identical to you (unless you happen to think like David Koresh or Jim Jones). Hence, it follows that Christ cannot be punished for your sin. Yet, the penal substitution principle states that he can. And logically we cannot accept them both.

You might wonder whether I have abandoned ship too soon. After all the innocence principle speaks of *crimes*, and we are now talking about *sins*. Perhaps different standards of justice apply to sins and crimes. To see why this objection is wrong, consider *the case of the pelagian world*. Pelagius (my favorite heretic) thought that people could live sin-free lives if they tried hard enough. So, suppose that he is right in some alternate universe, and there are some people (albeit very few of them) in this alternate universe who live sin-free lives. Now, in this other world, the punishment for sin is severe physical pain. And suppose that the deity in this other world decides that it does not matter who suffers punishment as long as someone does. So, he decides to punish all the sin free people for what the sinners have done. What should we think of such a deity? Obviously, we should think that such a deity is unjust, and we should think this because we believe a version of the innocence principle that uses the word "sin" in place of the word "crime."

Of course, the sin-free people punished in the case of the pelagian world did not suffer such punishment voluntarily. Christ did suffer punishment voluntarily. So there is a difference. However, consider *the case of the Timothy MacVeigh sympathetic world*. In that world there are plenty of people who hate the federal government and would like to blow up as many federal buildings as they can. These people are sympathetic to MacVeigh. In that world, just as in ours, MacVeigh is found guilty of murdering federal agents and is sentenced to death. Yet, in that world one of MacVeigh's admirers tells the judge that he would like to be sentenced in MacVeigh's place. The judge allows it. What should we think of the judge? Clearly, we should think that she has failed to carry out justice. And this holds even though the penal substitute is a volunteer.

A paradox is an apparent contradiction derived from apparently true assumptions. To solve the paradox, we must either show that there is no contradiction (i.e., show that the innocence principle and the penal substitution principle can both be true) or show that one or the other of the apparently true assumptions is false. The above objections are attempts

to take the latter tack. If we can show that the innocence principle is false (i.e., there are exceptions to the rule), then we can defend our theory of the atonement. Before we go on to pursue this task a bit more, let us consider our theory of the atonement in context.

It is a hazard of philosophy that when one finds a new paradox, one inevitably realizes that others already knew about it. I wish I could say that I was the first to see the problem that I have pointed out here, but I can't. The theory of the atonement which claims that there must be a payment for sin and Christ offers this payment is traditionally attributed to St. Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo* (of course, it might appear that Amulek and Alma beat the great medieval philosopher by more than a millennium). Hence, this theory of the atonement is prominent in Catholic circles. And so it should not be surprising that Catholics have seen the problem with it. Phillip Quinn, for example, says "[T]o the extent that we think of serious sins as analogous to crimes and respect the practices embodied in our system of criminal law, we should expect the very idea of vicarious satisfaction for sin to seem alien and morally problematic."<sup>2</sup>

Eleonore Stump puts it in a different way. She says, "Suppose that a mother with two sons, one innocent and one very disobedient, inflicted all her disobedient son's justly deserved punishment on her innocent son, on the grounds that the disobedient one was too little to bear all this punishment and her justice required her to punish someone. We would not praise her justice, but rather condemn her as cruel and barbaric, even if the innocent son had assented to this procedure."<sup>3</sup>

Both Stump and Quinn eventually reject the penal substitution aspect of the Anselmian theory of the atonement. And this rejection is for the very reason that it contradicts something like the innocence principle. Nevertheless, the idea that the atonement is some sort of vicarious punishment holds much sway in Christian thought, and especially so in Mormon thought. I don't need to cite examples since the reader will be familiar with many of them.<sup>4</sup> It seems that this theory holds such sway in Mormon circles due to the debt metaphor that inevitably accompanies it. So, let us explain this aspect of the theory and see why it may seem to help when in reality it does not.

One might think, as Anselm actually did, that in sinning against God

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2. Phillip Quinn, "Aquinas on Atonement," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, edited by Cornelius Plantinga and Ronald Feenstra (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 172.

3. Eleonore Stump, "Atonement according to Aquinas," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, Thomas Morris, ed. (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 62.

4. Even so, see James Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952), 77-78.

we incur a debt. This debt is very large for some reason,<sup>5</sup> and so it is not a debt that we can pay. Creditors can cancel debts, but that would not be just in this case. But they can allow the debt to be paid by a third party. So, in steps Christ to pay our debt incurred by sin. He is like the charitable benefactor who intervenes and saves us from financial ruin. The sinner-as-debtor theory solves our original paradox by showing how penal substitution might hold (and hence how the innocence principle might fail).

Clearly, it is just for a debt to be paid by a third party. Or at least that is the practice. So, something like the penal substitution principle is true of debts—call it the *debt substitution principle*: it is just for X to pay Y's debts to Z, even when X is not identical to Y. And if we assume that every state of sin is just a state of debt, then it might seem that we would get the penal substitution principle out of the more minimal debt substitution principle. Of course, even assuming this, there are problems with the above picture. First, it is not at all clear that it is unjust for a creditor to forgive a debt without payment. Clearly, the creditor does nothing wrong by deciding that she does not want her money. Yet it does seem to be the case that justice is not served if a sinner goes unpunished. Second, the above picture does not make sense out of the idea that God forgives us. Indeed, if I forgive a debt I do not require that it be paid. But apparently God does require that the debt be paid, and so in what sense can it be said that he is forgiving?<sup>6</sup> A third problem is that it is not clear who the creditor is. Is it Satan? Is it God? Or is it someone (something?) else? And what is it that we owe? It is certainly not currency! But if not then can it properly be called "debt"?

One response to the first problem says that it is both just for God to forgive the debtor and for him not to do so. God has chosen the more severe of the two routes of justice. On this modified version of the theory, God could forgive our debts without an atonement, but he decides not to do so. I will deal with something like this option later in the paper. Another response says that creditors *can* typically forgive debts (without payment) justly, but this does not hold in the case of a debt due to an action that is wrong. Indeed, sometimes our incurring of a debt is not due to something we have done which is wrong, but just due to our need for money. Other times the incurring of a debt is due to our doing something wrong, e.g., in the case of a parking violation. Perhaps one can say that the incurring of a debt by a wrongful action is not forgivable without payment. Such a debt is usually called a fine.

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5. One might think that it is large because sinning against God is sinning against an infinite being, and so the debt must be infinite. I do not think this will work for Mormons, since God is not infinite in the requisite sense. I do not know what reason could stand in its place.

6. See Stump, 62.

We might employ the same strategy in answering the second of the above problems. It might be said that there is a sense in which one is forgiven for one's offense (e.g. a parking violation) once one has paid the fine, although one really isn't forgiven the debt *per se*. This version of the above picture makes the atonement like the payment of a particular kind of debt: the debt incurred by doing something wrong. Before we discuss the third problem with the sinner-as-debtor theory, let us examine more closely where our responses to the first two problems leave us.

Now it is natural for Anselm and the other medievals to think the "debt" of punishment to be like a pecuniary punishment. For in medieval legal codes, the debt of punishment for even the most serious of crimes was pecuniary.<sup>7</sup> And this is where we find ourselves after trying to solve the first two problems posed for this theory: the debt we incur by sin is like a fine we receive for a crime we commit. Clearly, fines *can* be paid by third parties, i.e., innocent parties.<sup>8</sup> But the real question is whether or not such fines *should* be paid by third parties. Indeed, the fact that fines can be paid by third parties is less a function of what we think is just than it is a function of expediency. It would take too much to ensure that fines are paid by the guilty party. Indeed, it would probably be impossible to ensure such a thing due to our practice of allowing gifts.

It probably does not seem unjust to us for a third party to pay our parking fines. However, if a fine were the means of punishment for murder, would we say the same? Clearly, we would not say that an innocent person should be punished, even if voluntarily, for a murder committed by another. We don't want murderers to get off scot-free. And any system in which they can get off scot-free is unjust by our lights. Such is the medieval system of justice which informed Anselm's theory. It is simply not a just system of punishment, and that is why we don't use it. But if it is not a just system of punishment, then how can we accept the claim that the sinner is really just in debt to the celestial department of transgression? If we think it unjust to allow the murderer to walk, don't we think a God is unjust who allows someone else to pay the fine incurred for his crime?

We have seen some reason to undermine the innocence principle. It is a practice of our society to allow innocent people to pay the fines of guilty parties; and insofar as these fines are themselves punishment for the crimes committed, then it seems that the innocence principle does not hold universally.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is in itself reason to reject the paradox that I have stated at the outset of the paper. If one thought this, however,

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7. Quinn, 57.

8. See David Lewis, "Do We Believe in Penal Substitution?" *Philosophical Papers* 26 (1997): 207–208.

9. On this point see Lewis, 203–209.

one would be wrong. Indeed, we have shown that even if there is an exception to our innocence principle, it is not enough of an exception to allow for a violation of the principle on the scale of the sort required for Anselm's theory of the atonement. Indeed, Christ, it is said, *paid* for all our sins—whether it be a parking violation, a theft, or even a murder. Unless we think it is okay to violate the innocence principle in all of these cases, the Anselmian theory of the atonement is really in a bad way.

Of course, we might even claim that the innocence principle isn't being violated in the case of paying fines. We might argue that fines are not really punishments after all. Indeed, it hardly seems to be the case that parking fines are punishments. They are just fees that we must pay if we wish to park in such locations for a longer period of time. The quantity of the fees serve to deter our doing so, but they aren't really appropriately called a "punishment." In response to this objection, David Lewis admits that parking fines are not punishments, but points out that we nevertheless *do* use fines for more serious violations of the law—in this respect maybe we are more like the medievals than I admitted above. And even if we try to keep such persons from having friends pay their fines, we cannot do so since friends can always give gifts of the amount for the fine.<sup>10</sup> This raises the issues in *the case of the popular and unpopular criminals*.

In the case of the popular and unpopular criminals, we have a man who is not extremely wealthy, but has many friends who are. This man repeatedly gets busted for drug use and each time incurs fines as a result (perhaps in addition to community service or even jail time). His friends always pay his fines for him. On the other hand, we also have a street urchin who also uses drugs and is convicted several times. He receives exactly the same punishments as his more popular counterpart. Now the law allows the popular criminal's friends to pay his fines. The unpopular criminal has to pay them himself. Is this just? It seems not. But it is legal. So, with respect to how our legal system treats penal substitution relative to fines, we might wonder whether it is just. Indeed, we might think that the same reasons for thinking that the medieval system is unjust apply to the aspects of our current system which mirror it. There must be some reason other than ensuring justice for the use of fines in our penal system. It is clear what this other reason might be: money. The system itself needs cash flow. And what better way to increase this than to tax the persons who make the system necessary? Given the need for cash flow, we can tolerate a little infringement on justice in order to keep it coming.

It might seem that even in the limited cases of fines as punishments the innocence principle is still a condition of what is just even if it is not a condition on what is expedient. David Lewis sees the possibility, and

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10. Lewis, 208–209.

he connects the thinking behind such expediencies to the belief in the Anselmian theory of the Atonement:

Here we have the makings of an explanation of why we sometimes waver in our rejection of penal substitution. It would go something like this. In the first place, we tolerate penal substitution in the case of fines because it is obviously impractical to prevent it. Since in the case of punishment by fines, the condition of being sentenced to punishment is the condition of owing a debt—literally—, the metaphor of a ‘debt of punishment’ gets a grip on us. Then some of us persist in applying this metaphor, even when it is out of place because the ‘debt of punishment’ is nothing like a debt in a literal sense. That is how we fall for such nonsense as a penal substitution theory of the Atonement.<sup>11</sup>

Lewis doesn’t really buy this explanation, since he thinks that it involves too much sloppy thinking to be plausible. I am not so sure.

We can see that there are some serious problems with using the debt metaphor to bolster our acceptance of the penal substitution principle. These problems are magnified when we consider the third of the previous problems posed for the theory. The problem is with filling out the theory. If the Atonement is the payment of a debt that we have incurred, then there must be someone to whom the debt is owed. Really, this is not much of a problem. It seems clear that our creditor could be God, since our sinning offends God. Some have suggested that the creditor is Satan, since by sinning we have borrowed from Satan.<sup>12</sup> But this would entail that Satan justly holds us in debt and that God pays Satan off to get us back. This picture is inconsistent with the idea that God and Satan are at odds. Instead, God and Satan, like a bank and a creditor, are just trying to work out a just arrangement. It is hard to believe such a picture.

Instead we might say that God is the creditor. In that case, we might wonder about the fact that he himself pays the debt. Indeed, traditional Christianity says God himself pays the debt that he himself demands. This seems odd, but perhaps not any odder than the doctrine of the Trinity itself. Whatever the case, Mormons need not worry about this as we assert the separate identity of the creditor and the benefactor.

The real problem comes with explaining what it is that is owed. Is it currency? Obviously not. But then what is it? We might think that what Christ *paid* with was pain. Perhaps pain is the currency of celestial economics. Perhaps when we sin we are spared a certain amount of pain that we should have “paid” and, thus, we incur a debt. Finally, Christ pays off this debt for us by suffering our pain for us. But this seems

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11. Lewis, 208.

12. Ronald Heiner in “The Necessity of a Sinless Messiah,” *BYU Studies* 22 (1982): 5–30.

patently wrong since one of the main reasons we are given for avoiding sin is that it brings pain to the sinner as well as others. And the above picture requires the opposite to be the case. I don't know how the defender of the debt metaphor can get out of this problem, although I am willing to entertain suggestions.

So far, we have considered a way out of the central problem of this paper by attempting to deny the truth of the innocence principle. This way out appears to be a dead end. Instead, we might try to reconcile the apparent contradiction itself, i.e., show that we can accept both the innocence principle and the penal substitution principle. Although he does not explicitly acknowledge the possible paradox involved, Stephen Robinson does offer a theory that might appear to reconcile the two principles. In *Believing Christ* he says,

Jesus Christ did not just assume the punishment for our sins—he took the guilt as well. The sin, the experience itself with all its negative consequences and ramifications, and not just the penalty for sin, became his. . . . [H]e becomes the guilty party in our place—he becomes guilty for us and experiences our guilt.<sup>13</sup>

It appears that Robinson argues that Christ becomes guilty for us and is, thus, justly punished for us. The substitution is not just penal but “culpable” as well. Thus, the innocence principle is not violated since an innocent person is not punished. This has strange implications. First, it seems to imply that Christ was not innocent. But even worse, by my lights, it implies that Christ was not innocent even though he did nothing wrong, that is, that generally speaking a person can be guilty without having done anything wrong. In my view, this is to misunderstand the meaning of the word “guilt.” Indeed, a guilty person, by definition, is someone who did something wrong. Robinson's claim is, thus, false by the very meaning of the terms employed.

Now perhaps Robinson means to be referring to that psychological state in which we “feel guilty” or “feel bad” about something we have done. He asks:

How can the savior understand human beings if he has never experienced human sin and guilt?<sup>14</sup>

and he says:

In Christ there is a real transfer of guilt for innocence. Through the oneness of our covenant relationship, my guilt becomes Jesus Christ's guilt, *which he experienced* and for which he suffered.<sup>15</sup> (my emphasis)

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13. Stephen Robinson, *Believing Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1994), 117.

14. Robinson, 116.

15. Robinson, 117.



So, it seems to be clearly the case that by “guilt” Robinson means the feeling that someone has when one believes that one has done something wrong. And clearly it *is* the case that someone can have this sort of guilt without ever having done anything wrong.

To see this point consider *the case of the amnesiac*. The amnesiac does not remember anything she did before today. She is told that she drove her car into a day care center, killing several children. She may feel very bad about this. She feels guilty, i.e., she thinks she did a very bad thing and has negative feelings as a result of this belief. But since she has been lied to and has in reality not caused any harm to anyone, the belief that underlies her feeling of guilt is in error. And hence her having that feeling itself is in error. Perhaps Robinson wants us to say that Christ can feel guilty for something he did not do. Christ is like the amnesiac. Of course, then Christ is wrong for having the experience of feeling guilty, since he is not really guilty. But, more importantly, this move does nothing to help solve the paradox. The innocence principle applies to people who feel guilty but are innocent just as much as it does to people who do not feel guilty and are innocent. Indeed, we should not condemn a man just because he thinks or feels that he is guilty. We need evidence for the claim that he really is guilty.

Now, I conjecture that since the experience of guilt can be had by someone who has done nothing wrong, and since it is easy to identify the experience of guilt with objective guilt (the state of actually being guilty of some crime or sin), it could be easy to make the mistake of assuming that Christ could be objectively guilty for our sins. This is a mistake, since being objectively guilty of something requires that one has done something wrong; and Christ has not done anything wrong.<sup>16</sup>

We have tried to reject the innocence principle and although we found some reason to doubt it in certain limited cases, these doubts were not enough to save the penal substitution principle. Next via Robinson’s theory we made one attempt at showing that the two principles can be reconciled. It seems to me that both of these routes have been dead ends. I think the best option (and maybe the only option) is to reject the penal substitution principle. I think we must say that Christ did not literally pay for our sins. This sounds like a fairly heretical claim, and so it would be good if I could mitigate the heretical effects of such a claim. To do so, I will first show how we can still make sense out of a significant and miraculous atonement without accepting the Anselmian model. Second,

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16. To be fair to Robinson, I must point out that he was not trying to solve this paradox. So the fact that his theory does not address the paradox does not show that his theory fails in its purpose. Nevertheless, the problems of identifying and defining guilt and determining whether Christ can have our guilt remain problems his theory must encounter. I think it is clear that he can only say that Christ has the experience of guilt and not the objective (or actual) guilt for our sins.

I will argue that the Anselmian theory really isn't in the Book of Mormon after all.

As a result of considering the paradox that presently concerns us, Phillip Quinn, a Catholic philosopher, rejects the penal substitutionary aspect of Anselm's theory of the atonement. He offers an alternative understanding:

One might suppose that God would have required condign satisfaction for the debt of punishment of all human sin as a condition of abolishing this debt if Christ has not reconciled us to God by his sacrifice, but that God does not in fact require condign satisfaction just because Christ's passion is such a pleasing sacrifice. On this view, Christ's passion works by prevailing upon God not to be severe in his dealings with sinners. Its effect is not to remove the debt of punishment for sin by paying it but to forestall the severe demand that the debt be paid in full. Rather than being severe, God is merciful toward some sinners; he forgives that part of the debt they cannot pay.<sup>17</sup>

Now this way of looking at the atonement may seem a bit foreign to Mormons, but I think that there is something right to it. Indeed, it strikes me as right that God can decide to forgive without punishment. Mormons might think that this idea is wrong because they are insistent on the idea that justice must be satisfied. After all, if it were not, then God would cease to be God! But this problem is easily disabused once the correct distinctions are drawn.

Mormons tend to identify justice with law. And the law is then identified with the commandments and their respective punishments. This is a very natural identification. However, there is a similarly natural understanding of justice in which the offended can forgive the offender without the need for the offender being punished. In *Les Miserables* the priest keeps Valjean from being prosecuted for stealing the former's silver. So, the letter of the law is not followed. Is the priest violating the demands of justice? Certainly not. It is perfectly permissible for the priest to forgive without the requirement of recompense since the priest is the victim of the crime. Of course, it would also be just for the priest to demand that the law deal with him to the fullest extent possible. The priest in the story has the option of being *severe* in fulfilling justice or being *merciful* in satisfying it. In Quinn's picture God has this same option. So, justice can be satisfied even if the law is not.

Of course, there is the problem of knowing when it is best to forgive someone's trespass and when it is best to demand that he or she be punished. Quinn's idea is that Christ's passion is such a pleasing sacrifice that it convinces God to forgive all those who recognize and accept it. It

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17. Quinn, 174.

is this idea in Quinn's theory that is in error. The problem can be seen again by considering our intuitive ideas about justice. The question is whether Jesus' sacrifice is the sort of thing that could justly convince God to pardon sinners. Pardoning a criminal usually takes into account two sorts of factors: (i) the circumstances which led the criminal to crime, i.e., whether they are mitigating or not, and (ii) the degree to which the criminal is remorseful and has reformed. So, an obvious problem arises. Why should facts about what Jesus did convince God to pardon *us*? Jesus' sacrifice tells God much about Jesus and nothing about us, much less anything about whether we should be pardoned. Instead, if Jesus wanted to help us to convince God not to be severe he should have helped God to understand why we did what we did and how remorseful we are for our actions.

So, it would seem that we need to have a theory of the atonement which both (i) explains why Jesus' sacrifice was necessary in order to convince our judge to pardon us and (ii) yet does this convincing by an appeal to our circumstances and the state of our repentance. This task is not as difficult as it may seem. Indeed, I think the answer is located in another very traditional Mormon understanding of the atonement. Unlike the Mormon belief in the substitutionary aspect of the atonement, the Mormon belief that Jesus endured a great deal of suffering in Gethemene and that this suffering helped him to understand our suffering is more particular to Mormons (as far as I know).<sup>18</sup>

I believe this idea, properly understood, can solve our problem. Notice that Jesus is among those who will judge us.<sup>19</sup> For a judge to pardon a criminal, the judge must know about the criminal circumstances, i.e., what led him to commit the crime. Can one person know the heart of another? Well, we say that Jesus can know our hearts. But how does he do this? I claim it is through the atonement. The suffering in Gethemene is a miraculous event in which Jesus experiences exactly what each of us experiences in our sinning. Only then can he fully understand why we do what we do. Only then can he fully understand the circumstances of our crimes. Only then can he know our remorse, and know whether our hearts have changed. The anguish that we feel at having wronged others weighs heavily on his heart. It is the bringing to his understanding the hearts and minds of humanity that is the atonement. The miraculous aspect of this experience is that Jesus feels as another does (something which we surely cannot do—and indeed seems to be impossible in some sense) and that he feels this for every other human being in the history of the world.

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18. That Jesus suffers in Gethemene and that it is through this act that Jesus "pays" for our sins is evident in James Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 568.

19. Alma 11:44.

Being one of the judges himself, this understanding of our hearts allows him to justly pardon us in the event that we feel remorse for our sins. And via his understanding and the fact that Jesus and the Father know each other's hearts, the Father can understand us as well. The atonement convinces the judge because the atonement makes the facts about our circumstances known to the judge. Thus, the atonement is necessary *and* the convincing of the judge is done by a knowledge of facts about the sinner.<sup>20</sup> So, this theory satisfies our above criteria. We might call this the *empathy theory* of the atonement.

Now one might accept the empathy theory of the atonement as a philosophically consistent model but yet reject it on the basis of revelation. Indeed, remember it was from the Book of Mormon that we first raised the issue about the Anselmian theory of the atonement. So, isn't it the case that although the empathy theory may be more philosophically satisfying than Anselm's and may even be present in our traditional discourse, it is not what we find in revelation and so we should reject it? Actually, I think that the answer to this question is no. The notion that the Book of Mormon contains the Anselmian theory of the atonement comes from reading the text from Amulek with certain presuppositions which we need not accept.<sup>21</sup> I will offer an alternative reading that shows the text to be consistent with the empathy theory.

Let's recall the text in question:

Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another. Now if a man murdereth, behold will our law, which is just, take the life of his brother? I say unto you, Nay. But the law requireth the life of him who hath murdereth; therefore there can be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Note that this can also explain why it is said in Alma 11:44 that we are "judged according to [our] works." If we think that the atonement convinces God to pardon us based on what we have done, both by way of leading up to sin and by way of repenting for it, then we are surely judged by works.

21. I think the idea that the Anselmian theory of the atonement is in the Book of Mormon descends from the fact that certain prominent Mormon theologians like James Talmage (e.g., in *Jesus the Christ*, 20ff) and Bruce McConkie advocated such a theory and used Book of Mormon passages to substantiate it. Additionally, anti-Mormons and others who want to show that the Book of Mormon is theologically anachronistic have emphasized the dependence of its soteriology on thinkers like Anselm and Arminius (e.g., see Melodie Moench Charles, "Book of Mormon Christology," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, Brent Metcalfe, ed. [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993], 88). I don't think these passages entail the Anselmian theory. Indeed, I think that Amulek explicitly contradicts an assumption of Anselm's theory.

22. Alma, 34:11-12.

This text has been read in the tradition of the penal substitution theory of the atonement for so long that it is hard to see how it could be read in any other way. Indeed, it seems to say that humans cannot pay for each other's sins and so there must be a non-human (someone who is infinite) who pays for them instead.

But let us be a bit more careful. Notice that it says that the law requires the life of the one who murders. It *does not* say that the law requires the life of the one who murders *or the life of an infinite God*. This implies that even though the infinite atonement is made, the law continues to require the life of the murderer. If the law is to be fulfilled, the atonement will do no work. So, the one who murders cannot pay for her sins unless she is to perish (verse 9). The purpose of God is to save us and to avoid our perishing. Therefore, Amulek claims, it follows that there must be an infinite atonement. On the traditional theory, the reason there must be an infinite atonement is that Christ must pay for our sins. Since we are rejecting this, what is the answer to the question as to why there must be an infinite atonement? The answer is that the atonement obviates the need for the law to be satisfied (Quinn's point). Consider another passage from the same book but a different prophet,

But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God.

But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement. . . .<sup>23</sup>

Here it seems quite clear that the law inflicts the punishment only if repentance is not granted and mercy claimed. Indeed, Alma uses the locution "otherwise" here, which indicates two distinct cases. The first case is the case in which someone repents; and in this case mercy makes her claim. In the second case, and only in the second case, does the law claim and then inflict the punishment. It seems clear that the law only has claim over the individual in the event that the individual has not repented of her sin. So, punishment is not inflicted come what may, but only on the condition of recalcitrance. Apparently, something has convinced God to take the less severe route regarding his just options in cases where people repent. And from the last sentence it is clear that it is the atonement that has done the convincing. Moreover, both mercy and the law are the "works of justice", i.e., justice is satisfied by forgiveness or by punishment. But the atonement is necessary for a satisfaction of justice by the means of mercy.

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23. Alma 42:22–23.

Clearly, Alma is saying that the law and mercy are mutually exclusive and conjointly exhaustive options for justice. Either way justice is satisfied, and justice must be satisfied one way or the other. But an atonement is necessary for the way of mercy to even be an option. The atonement obviates the need for punishment. Why should the atonement open up the possibility of mercy? Perhaps because the atonement makes our judge aware of our reasons for sinning (i.e., the mitigating circumstances), of our intense remorse for the harm that we have done, and of our willingness to change our hearts.

Now I admit that in the last step this reading goes a little beyond the actual text. Really, this text alone does not make it clear why the atonement paves the way for mercy. This is also the case with the penal substitution theory. Indeed, the Anselmian must assume that the reason the atonement paves the way for mercy is that it satisfies the law by punishing someone for what has been done. But this is to go beyond the text as well, since mercy is said to satisfy the demands of justice but not those of the law.<sup>24</sup>

So, let us review our progress. We have seen that there is a paradox that arises for those who would accept the penal substitution principle and the accompanying theory of the atonement. Moreover, we have seen that attempts to solve the paradox will probably be in vain. However, we have also seen that there is an alternative theory of the atonement (the empathy theory) which does not commit itself to the substitution principle. This theory is based on traditional Mormon claims about what happened in Gethemene. And moreover this theory is consistent with the very passage from the Book of Mormon which is so often cited in defense of the penal substitution theory—indeed, not only is it consistent with that passage, but much of it follows from the passage, once it is read without the assumptions of the penal substitution theory. So, it seems as if we should abandon Anselm's theory of the atonement since the Book of Mormon never really taught it and since philosophically it is very problematic. I recognize that it might seem problematic to some Mormons to get insight into our theory of the atonement from ideas formulated by a contemporary Catholic philosopher. But given the philosophical problems with the penal substitution theory, I think it is much better than getting our whole theory from a medieval Catholic philosopher! Of course, the real work to be done is to see whether there is a philosophically coherent and substantive account of the atonement in the Book of Mormon as a whole. It would be interesting to see how our substitute for the substitutionary theory would stand up.

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24. Alma 34:16.