

THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF ATONEMENT IN PAUL'S WRITINGS

Esteemed friends, dear ladies and gentlemen,

this afternoon we want to focus on the both fundamental and challenging topic of atonement in Paul. Nobody who studied Paul's letters to some extent would deny that atonement is a very foundational topic of Paul. Again and again, the apostle points us to the fact of forgiveness through Jesus Christ by similar expressions, such as:

1. The *hyper*-Formula in the Pauline Corpus

Rom 8:32: He who did not spare His own Son, but **delivered Him up for us all** (ὕπερ ἡμῶν πάντων παρέδωκεν αὐτόν).¹

Gal 1:4: **Who gave himself for our sins**, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father.

Gal 2:20: the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me **and gave Himself for me**.

Eph 5:2: And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and **given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God** for a sweet-smelling aroma.

1 Tim 2:6: **who gave Himself a ransom for all**, to be testified in due time.

Tit 2:14: **who gave Himself for us**, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

Based on this similarity of expression in Paul's letters, theological literature speaks of a *hyper*- or *delivering-up*-formula consisting of the Greek preposition ὑπερ with the basic

meaning "over" and the verb (παρα)δίδωμι "deliver up, hand over".²

The Verb "deliver up, hand over" has been traced back to Isa 53:6,12 at the beginning of the 1950s,³ where it is used in the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, for the rendering of the Hebrew verb עָנַן in the causative Hifil-stem, which can also mean "to strike with" besides "to deliver, hand over". The renowned New Testament Scholar *Peter Stuhlmacher* from Tuebingen traced the origin of the preposition ὑπερ back to Isa 43:3f.⁴ Yet, this attempt of explaining the origin of the preposition ὑπερ was not without problems since in the LXX ὑπερ usually translates the Hebrew preposition עַל with the basic meaning of "on, over"⁵. Furthermore, the Hebrew text of Isa 43:3f does not contain עַל but תַּחַת "under; instead of"⁶. The LXX, which has coined and paved the way for many idiomatic expressions in the New Testament, usually translates תַּחַת with ἀντί "instead of".⁷ Hence, Stuhlmacher's explanation does not work and it is not astonishing that alternative explanations for the hyper-formula in the Pauline Corpus have been investigated and found in Pagan Greek literature in the more recent discussion. For there the heroic self-sacrifice of one person for another is expressed in similar wording with the preposition ὑπερ.⁸

A solid Biblical Theology, which has been advocated by Philipp Jakob Spener in his *Pia Desideria* as an answer to the undesirable developments in the theology of his time,⁹ there-

fore, requires a more precise and foundational linguistic anchoring in the Old Testament than we have at our disposal in the current scholarly discussion as for example in Stuhlmacher's *Biblische Theologie zum Neuen Testament*.

Hence, we want to further investigate the Old Testament background of the hyper-formula and the related topic of atonement and demonstrate the overlap of expression between Paul and the Biblical-Semitic wording of the Gospels and the Old Testament. In a first step we must treat parallel passages in the Gospels.

2. The *hyper*-Formula in the Gospels

The discussion of the Semitic background of the Pauline *hyper*-formula was mostly coined by New Testament scholar *Joachim Jeremias* in the 1950s and 1960s. In his article on the Servant of God in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* he traced the different variants of the Greek *hyper*-Formula back to the Hebrew source text of Isaiah 53:10.¹⁰

In Isa 53:10 we read the following on the suffering Servant of God: **when his soul makes an offering for guilt** (ישׁוּבַנְּךָ עֲשֶׂה חֲטָאתֵינוּ), he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand (ESV). Jeremias lists the following variants of the hyper-formula in the gospels as stemming from Isa 53:10:

Mt 20:28 || Mk 10:45: the Son of Man did not come to be served, **but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many** (ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν).

In comparison to Paul, we can note the usage of the preposition ἀντί “instead / in place of”. A more precise translation would therefore be “to give His life/soul a ransom *instead/in place of* many [...]”. A further notable difference is that Mt and Mk use the more Semitic expression τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ “his soul” instead of (ἐ)αυτὸν “himself”, which is the more Greek way of expression.¹¹

From the Gospel of John Jeremias lists Jn 10:11[15,17]; 15:13 as well as 1 Jn 3:16 when discussing the *hyper*-formula.¹² For us it shall suffice here to discuss Jn 10:11 as representative example. There we read:

Jn 10:11: **The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep** (τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ τίθησιν ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων).

In the Gospel of John, we find the same Greek preposition ὑπέρ as in Paul's letters with the basic meaning „over”. Yet in John ὑπέρ is used together with the Semitic phrase τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ „his soul” as in the Synoptics. One peculiarity of the Johannine hyper-formula is the usage of the verb τίθημι “set, put, lay down”, which corresponds more precisely with the Hebrew verb שׁוּבַנְּךָ “set, lay down” used in Isa 53:10. In Greek this corresponds with δίδωμι „give” of the Synoptic Gospels Mt and Mk. From all parallels in the gospels the Johannine *hyper*-Formel therefore corresponds the most with Isa 53:10, which could indicate the antiquity of Johannine expression.

However, in all our comparisons of the Gospels with Isa 53:10 we could not identify a Hebrew source for the Greek preposition ὑπέρ. Therefore, we once more have to turn to Paul's letters and the Old Testament in order to establish a Biblical-Semitic approach to the *hyper*-formula.

3. The *hyper*-Formula in its Biblical-Semitic Context

3.1. The Culmination of ὑπέρ in Romans 8:26–34

If we take a closer look at the context of the *hyper*-formula in Romans 8:32, we can observe that Paul is using the preposition ὑπέρ throughout Rom 8:26–34 more than five times in a row:

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit also **helps** (ὑπερεντυγχάνει) in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes interces-

sion for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He **makes intercession** (ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ) for the saints according to the will of God.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is **for us** (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν), who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but **delivered Him up for us all** (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν πάντων παρέδωκεν αὐτόν), how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also **makes intercession for us** (ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν).

In comparison with the LXX we could already observe, that the preposition ὑπὲρ is most commonly translated with על. Now we want to investigate this Hebrew preposition in the Old Testament more thoroughly.

3.2. The Biblical-Semitic Background of על

In his comparative Semitic grammar *Carl Brockelmann* defined על as one of the few Semitic prepositions, which have preserved their original connection to its verbal stem.¹³ Accordingly, על seems to be related to the verb עלה “to ascend” and to the noun עלה “burnt offering”. The burnt offering was probably the oldest and most original sacrifice in the Old Testament and served primarily to avert God's wrath.¹⁴ It is first mentioned by Noah in Genesis 8:20.

As derived meanings of the preposition על stemming from its basic meaning “on, over”, Brockelmann mentions (1) to cover, (2) to overarch and (3) to overshadow.¹⁵ In our context, I would like to focus on aspect (1) to cover in the broader context of divine protection or wrath, as it becomes evident in the following examples:¹⁶

Ps 72:13: He will be gracious [over] the poor and needy, and he will save the souls of the

needy (יחס על-דל ואביון ונפשות אביונים יושיע).

Neh 13:22: My God, remember me and have mercy [over] me according to your great compassion (זכרה-לי אלהי וחוסה עלי כרב חסדך). Ps 103:13: As a father has compassion [over] his children, so the LORD pities [over] those who fear him (כרחם אב על-בנים רחם יהוה על-י). (יִרְאַי).

An important reference is found in Jer 18:23, which is quoted almost verbatim in Neh 3:37: Jer 18:23: **Do not cover their sin** nor blot out their guilt before you (אל-תכפר על-עוונם וחסא אתם מלפניך אל-תמחה) || Neh 3:37: **Do not cover their sin** nor blot out their guilt before you (ואל-תכס על-עוונם וחסא אתם מלפניך אל-תמחה).

The key feature of the older attestation in Jer 18:23 is the use of the verb כפר “to forgive sins,” which is replaced by the verb כסה “to cover, conceal” in the younger attestation in Neh 3:37. This could indicate that the verbal root כפר was no longer as common during the time of Nehemiah as it still was during the time of Jeremiah. The context of these verses refers to the persecution of Jeremiah and Nehemiah, and their curse prayer can be related to the legal case of “sinning with raised hand (= presumptuously)” in Numbers 15:30f, for which there is no atonement according to God's law in the Old Testament.¹⁷

The verb כפר combined with the preposition על occurs particularly frequently in the sacrificial provisions of Leviticus and Numbers. In the Mosaic law, however, the use is somewhat different than in Jer 18:23, because in the Mosaic law the object following the preposition על always refers to a person who is being expiated (*type I*), while in Jer 18:23 sin is named as the object of כפר (*type II*).¹⁸ These two variants of the OT *kipper* formula can also be found in the variants of the *hyper* formula in Paul:

Type I (Object of Atonement is a “Person”)
Leviticus 16:30: For on this day **shall atone-**

ment be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins. (כִּי-בְיוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל (חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תִּטְהָרוּ).

Leviticus 17:11 For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar **to make atonement for your souls**; for it is the blood that makes atonement, because it has the life [soul] in it (כִּי נַפְשׁ הַבְּשָׂר בַּדָּם הוּא) וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם כִּי-הַדָּם (הוּא) בַּנֶּפֶשׁ יִכַּפֵּר.

Rom 8:32: He did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up **for us** all (ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν πάντων παρέδωκεν αὐτόν) [...]

Type II (Object of Atonement is "Sin")

Jer 18:23: **Do not cover their sin** nor blot out their guilt before you (אַל-תִּכַּפֵּר עַל-עוֹנֵיהֶם וְחַטָּאתָם מִלִּפְנֵי אֱלֹהִים)

Ps 79:9: Help us, O God, our helper, for the glory of your name! Deliver us, and **forgive us our sins**, for your name's sake (עֲזַרְנוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְשַׁעֲנוּ עַל-דַּבָּר כְּבוֹד-שְׁמֵךָ וְהַצִּילֵנוּ וְכַפֵּר עַל-חַטֹּאתֵינוּ (לְמַעַן שְׁמֵךָ).

Gal 1:4: who gave himself **for our sins** (τοῦ δόντος ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν) [...]

Through this twofold overlap in content between the hyper-formula in Paul and the kippur-formula in the Old Testament, it seems that an Old Testament connection is much more likely than an interpretation of ὑπὲρ in the context of pagan Greek literature, and this despite the lack of a Greek equivalent for the verb כָּפַר. The decisive question, however, is why Paul omits the verb כָּפַר “to cover, make atonement” in his hyper-formula when he builds its content so strongly on the Old Testament terminology of atonement?

In this context, it is noteworthy that the translation of כָּפַר prefigured in the LXX (Septuagint) with (ἐξ)ἰλάσκομαι does not appear at all throughout the New Testament.¹⁹ There are only two occurrences of the related noun ἰλασμός “atonement, reconciliation” (1

John 2:2; 4:10), and two more instances for ἰλαστήριον “expiatory covering” (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 9:5). The LXX has chosen this word as translation for the כַּפֶּרֶת, which is the “mercy seat” or “seat of atonement” of the Ark of the Covenant. The observation made by comparing Jeremiah 18:23 and Nehemiah 3:37 that the verb כָּפַר could be replaced with הָפַח in post-exilic times could therefore explain why the verb כָּפַר appears only sporadically in post-exilic reports on the restoration of the Temple service:

Ezra 6:17: And they offered for the dedication of the house of God a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and **for a sin offering for all Israel** (לְחַטֵּאתָם עַל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל) twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

Ezra 8:35: At that time the men who had come out of the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve young bulls **for all Israel** (עַל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל), ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, twelve male goats for a sin offering, all for a burnt offering to the LORD.

Neh 10:34 For the showbread, for the daily grain offering, for the daily burnt offering, for the Sabbath offerings, for the new moon offerings, for the appointed feasts, for the most holy things, and **for the sin offering, to make atonement for Israel** (וְלַחַטֵּאות לְכַפֵּר עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל), and for all the work in the house of our God.

Within these three comparable examples, the verb כָּפַר appears only in Nehemiah 10:34. Since it is missing in the other two passages, it is reasonable to assume that the verbal use of the root כפר with the meaning “to cover, make atonement” declined due to the formative influence of Aramaic. Indeed, in Aramaic, כפר has a completely different meaning, namely “village”, which we are familiar with from the well-known NT place name Capernaum, or Nahum's village.²⁰ A more detailed investigation into the use of the root כפר in the Qumran scrolls could further confirm this assumption. However, for our purposes today, the tendency to replace and omit כָּפַר in the late writings

of the OT which tell us about the restoration of the temple will suffice. I would like to conclude this section on the biblical-Semitic context of the preposition על with a quote from E. Kautzsch, who was an outstanding expert in the ancient biblical languages and particularly in Biblical Aramaic. In his grammar of Biblical Aramaic, he noted the following about על in Ezra 6:17: “The meaning ‘for, in favor of’, comes from the concept of covering someone protectively.”²¹ This points to the fact that the Semitic preposition על, with its basic meaning of “covering protectively”, overlaps in meaning with the verb כָּפַר, which can also be understood in the sense of a “covering that averts anger”. This can be seen in the first OT appearance of כָּפַר in the story of Jacob, when he said before meeting his brother Esau: “I will make atonement for him [cover his face] (יִכַּפֵּרָה אֶת־פָּנָי) with the gift” (Genesis 32:21).²²

4. The hyper-Formula in the Context of Romans 8

If we return to Romans 8 with the biblical-Semitic background of the hyper-formula that we have worked out so far and the clear parallels to the cultic language of the Old Testament, it becomes clear that this OT background helps us to better understand the context of Romans 8. For right at the beginning in Rom 8:3, Paul himself gives us a decisive clue as to the context in which we should interpret what he writes in the further course of Romans 8: Rom 8:3: For what the law could not do, in that it was weakened by the flesh, God did: He sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and **for sin** (περὶ ἁμαρτίας), condemning sin in the flesh.

Unfortunately, the translation of the Greek phrase περὶ ἁμαρτίας as “for the sake of sin” in the German Luther Bible does not make it clear what Paul is talking about in this verse. In his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Stuhlmacher interprets περὶ ἁμαρτίας as “sin offering” (Hebr. אֶת־חַטָּאת), because περὶ ἁμαρτίας is a fixed expression for the sin offering in

the LXX (cf. e.g. περὶ τῆς ἁμαρτίας in Lev. 4:3,14,28,35; 5:8,9,10,11,13 and περὶ ἁμαρτίας in Lev. 5:6,7,11; 7:37).²³ The sin offering was probably the most important sacrifice for atonement in the Old Testament, especially on the great Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16).²⁴

It is therefore clear from the original Greek text of Romans 8:3 that even before he uses the hyper-formula in the further course of the chapter, Paul already opens the topic of sacrifice and atonement with the sacrificial terminology pre-determined by the LXX.

But Paul would not be Paul if everything were already clarified with that. There is a second way of interpreting the Greek term περὶ ἁμαρτίας. This phrase also appears in Isaiah 53:10 LXX,²⁵ where it is to be understood as an idiomatic translation of the Hebrew word חַטָּאת, which is defined in Leviticus 5:14–26 as the “guilt offering” associated with a monetary restitution. An equally possible translation of περὶ ἁμαρτίας in Romans 8:3 is therefore “as a guilt offering”. According to Leviticus 14:10–18, the חַטָּאת guilt offering was offered, for example, when a recovered leper was readmitted to the people of God.²⁶

The question of whether Paul understands Jesus’ atoning death as a sin offering or a guilt offering is therefore not easy to answer. As is often the case with Paul, we can only come to a solution to this question if we are prepared to delve as deeply into the Old Testament as Paul did. If we look more closely at the question of sin offerings and guilt offerings in the Old Testament, it becomes clear in Leviticus 7:7 that both types of sacrifice had one thing in common, namely that the meat of these sacrifices became the property of the priest who offered them up:

Leviticus 7:7: As the sin offering is, so is the guilt offering; one and the same law shall apply to both; they shall belong to the priest who makes atonement with them.

Therefore, the crucial question for Paul in Romans 8:3 is not whether Jesus is to be understood as a sin or a guilt offering, but rather what the transfer of the meat of these sacrifices to the priest offering them means spiritually. And it is precisely this question of sacrificial meat or flesh that Paul deals with in Romans 8:4ff when he writes: **so that the righteousness required by the law might be fulfilled in us, who now live not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.** One conclusion of his theology of atonement according to Romans 8 is therefore that as Christians we should no longer live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit, since our body has been transferred to Jesus, our high priest in heaven, by faith in his vicarious sacrificial death on the cross.

So, we see how, by working out the biblical-Semitic background of the hyper-formula, we have now an exegetical tool at hand to better understand how Paul advances his argument in Romans 8. And that is a significant advantage over conventional university theology with its predominantly Hellenistic research approach, which does not help us to understand Paul's argumentation, but rather leads to dismissing many of his letter's forgeries under his name. However, we want to believe in the word of God as it has been revealed to us in the Bible. And in order to spell out this belief in the Bible, we have to engage with the biblical-Semitic background of the hyper-formula.

Thank you very much!

ENDNOTES

1 If not marked otherwise all scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version.

2 Cf. H. Riesenfeld, „ὁπέρ“, *ThWNT* 8:510–518, here 513f.

3 Cf. H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, ¹¹1951), 8f.

4 Cf. P. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Band 1, *Grundlegung: Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ru-

precht, ³2005), 294.

5 Cf. C. Brockelmann, *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen*, Band II, *Syntax* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1913), 391f.

6 Vgl. Brockelmann, *Grundriss* II, 416f.

7 On the linguistic correlation of $\epsilon\upsilon$ and $\upsilon\pi\acute{\epsilon}\rho$ see also GKC § 119 aa.

8 On this cf. Schlier, *Brief an die Galater*, 9 in connection with K. Wengst, *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums* (SNT 7), Gütersloh 1972, 66–71 as well as C. Eschner, *Gestorben und hingegeben „für“ die Sünder: die griechische Konzeption des Unheil abwendenden Sterbens und deren paulinische Aufnahme für die Deutung des Todes Jesu Christi*, Band 2, *Darstellung und Auswertung des griechischen Quellenbefundes*, WMANT 122 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 2010), 73ff, 360ff.

9 Cf. P. J. Spener, *Pia Desideria: Deutsch-lateinische Studienausgabe*, hg. v. B. Köster (Gießen: Brunnen, 2005), 48f.

10 Cf. J. Jeremias „παῖς θεοῦ im NT“, *ThWNT* 5:698–713, here 707f [= idem, *Abba: Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 206f] as well as idem., *Neutestamentliche Theologie: Erster Teil, Die Verkündigung Jesu* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971), 272–274.

11 On this difference cf. J. Jeremias, „Das Lösegeld für Viele (Mk. 10,45),“ in idem, *Abba*, 216–229, here 226 as well as C. Eschner, *Gestorben und hingegeben „für“ die Sünder*, 107ff.

12 One may add Jn 13:37f to this list.

13 On this cf. Brockelmann, *Grundriss* II, 259 in connection with H. F. Fuhs, „עֲלָה מֵעַל מֵעַל מֵעַל מֵעַל מֵעַל“, *TDOT* 11: 77–96, here 77f.

14 Vgl. hierzu D. Kellermann, „עוֹלָה/עֲלָה“, *TDOT* 11: 96–116, hier 98f im Zusammenhang mit G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 51–66.

15 Cf. Brockelmann, *Grundriss* II, 391.

16 Cf. on this GKC § 119 bb.

17 Cf. E. Riehm, *Der Begriff der Sühne im Alten Testament* (Gotha: Perthes, 1877), 9f.

18 On this difference in the Torah see Riehm, *Sühne*, 30–32.

19 On this see M. Vahrenhorst, „Levitikon Leviticus / Das dritte Buch Mose“, in *Septuaginta deutsch: Erläuterungen und Kommentare*, Volume I, *Genesis bis Makkabäer* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2011), 325–430, here 340.

20 Cf. C. Wassermann, *Das vierte Evangelium aus*

Sicht der semitischen Sprachen: Ein linguistischer Beitrag zur Klärung der johanneischen Frage, ABG 65 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 83f.

21 Cf. E. Kautzsch, *Grammatik des biblisch-Aramäischen: Mit einer kritischen Erörterung der aramäischen Wörter im Neuen Testament* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1884), 128.

22 Cf. C. F. Keil, *Biblischer Commentar über die Bücher Moses: Leviticus, Numeri und Deuteronomium*, BKAT 2 (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1870), 14.

23 Cf. Vahrenhorst, „Levitikon Leviticus“, 339–342.

24 Cf. R. Rendtorff, *Leviticus: I Teilband Leviticus 1,1 – 10,20*, BKAT III/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2004), 146, Wenham, *Leviticus*, 88–91.

25 Cf. E. Riehm, „Ueber das Schuldopfer,“ in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken: Beiträge zur Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* 27 (1854): 93–121, hier 106.

26 On this see A. Dillmann, *Die Bücher Exodus und Leviticus*, KEH 12 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1897), 473f und P. P. Jensen, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World*, JSOTSup 106 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 168–171.

