

## Weight on the Lord: Sin as Burden in the New Testament and Beyond

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### Introduction

THE BIBLICAL sinner bears a multitude of images: he is guilty in court, a trespasser, lost, in debt, enslaved, heavy burdened, stained, sick, blind, dead. Each description bears the seed of a theological tree, or treatise, about sin and salvation: if the sinner has trespassed, we should ask whose land he trespassed, what land was rightfully his to use, and what the boundary was between them; if he is enslaved, we should ask by whom, how, and by what right; if he is dead, we want to know what it meant for him to live, how he died, and whether these dry bones can live again. Man today may well think of sin primarily as a sickness—this could be one reason so many find Anselm's debt-based argument disturbing, because he seems to portray God as not the doctor of souls but a cosmic collection agency.

Gary Anderson's achievement in *Sin: A History* is to recover the biblical roots and theological importance of Anselm's debt metaphor.<sup>1</sup> The image of sin as debt is not one metaphor among others, but is woven into the everyday language that Jews of Jesus' day used to speak about sin when they were not conscious of using imagery. In this respect, as Anderson shows, the debt

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). I use the term "metaphor" without meaning to adopt the philosophical positions of Lakoff and Johnson, quoted by Anderson. These authors seem to reduce all human language to metaphor, and they thereby seem to overlook the possibility of analogy which is nonetheless direct speech. To borrow the terminology of Thomas Aquinas, saying that sin incurs a "debt" is analogy, although when one introduces bankers, ledgers, and coins then one has passed into the realm of the species of analogy called metaphor.

metaphor replaced the earlier image of sin as a burden, most clearly represented in the ceremony of the scapegoat, which was loaded up with the people's sins and sent far away to a realm imagined as beyond God's gaze.<sup>2</sup> The phrase "to bear a sin," *nasa awon*, applied to the people in the sense that they bore the weight of their own sins, but then the same phrase *nasa awon* applied to the goat in the sense that it removed the weight of sin from the people.<sup>3</sup> Even though this idiom "to bear a sin" occurs six times more frequently in the Hebrew Bible than the nearest competing metaphor, by the time of the New Testament it had "by and large fallen out of use" except for "those Second Temple texts which quote biblical texts that use the image of 'bearing one's sin.'" <sup>4</sup> Highlighting the parable of the servant who owed his master an enormous debt, Anderson notes that "Jesus does not compare a sinner with individuals who are struggling under a heavy burden."<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, I want to ask about the fate of the burden metaphor. Did an image that so dominated the Hebrew Bible bear no theological fruit? Has it completely vanished in the New Testament except as dead weight in quotations? Does it exercise any influence on subsequent Christian thought? In "A Meditation on Human Redemption," Anselm, the champion of the debt metaphor, exhorts the Christian:

Consider what your condition was and what has been done for you; reflect upon how worthy of love is He who has done this for you. . . . You were in darkness, on slippery footing, on the downward road to the chaos of Hell, from which there is no return. An enormous lead-like weight hanging from your neck was causing you to stoop. A burden too heavy for your back was pressing upon you. Invisible foes were urging you onward with all their fury. . . . O good Lord Jesus Christ, in this state I was neither seeking nor deliberating; but like the sun You shined forth upon me and showed me my plight. You cast off the leaden weight which was drawing me down; You removed the burden which was pushing me down.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, Christians have continued to think of sin as a burden. But, as I will argue, the burden metaphor also survives in unexpected places, transformed by the work of Christ, where it makes a specific contribution to theology.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of this ceremony in Anderson, *Sin*, 22–23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 43 and endnote 1 to that page.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Anselm, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning, 2000), 424–25. See also chapter 21 of *Cur Deus homo*: "You have not as yet estimated the great burden of sin."

## The Gospel of John

Anderson offers a hint about where to begin. As an example of the burden metaphor appearing in a New Testament quotation, he points to John 1:29, “Behold the lamb of God, who bears away the sins of the world!” Anderson suggests that this acclamation is a conflation of the scapegoat of Leviticus 16 and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.<sup>7</sup> Most modern interpreters agree that there is some reference to Isaiah 53: only there in the Old Testament do we find a man compared to a “lamb” and explicitly said to “bear away” sins.<sup>8</sup> Most see a connection with the Passover lamb; some do suggest a connection to the scapegoat, which carries sins away into the desert; the lambs sacrificed daily in the Temple may also be in view.<sup>9</sup> The Fathers saw all of these references in John 1:29; some saw as well an allusion to Isaac, the beloved son who carried the wood for his own sacrifice, and to the ram caught in the thicket who took Isaac’s place.<sup>10</sup>

This last point is instructive, because an overwhelming majority of the Fathers also see the story of Isaac behind John 19:17, where Jesus goes out “bearing his own cross.”<sup>11</sup> In the Passion above all, Christ bore our sins as the suffering servant, and the Cross he bore is a symbol of his entire Passion. As Cyril of Alexandria says, “Condemned to death though innocent, he went forward bearing on his shoulders the cross on which he was to suffer. He did this for our sake, taking on himself the punishment for the law justly imposed on sinners. . . . And so, Christ carried the cross, a cross that was rightfully not his but ours, who were under the condemnation of the law.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Sin*, endnote 1 to page 43.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), I:297–301; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 52–53; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 176–77. Although the Masoretic Text says that the servant bore our “sorrows,” the Septuagint explicitly has “sins” as in John’s Gospel. Schnackenburg points out that the word used in John for “bear away” is not the same as the word used in the Septuagint of Isaiah, but this does not affect the connections perceived by the Church Fathers of the West, where the Latin translations have *tollere* in both places.

<sup>9</sup> See the commentaries above; for the scapegoat possibility, see the comments of Barrett.

<sup>10</sup> See the texts in *John 1–10* vol. 4A, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 68–71.

<sup>11</sup> This is despite the fact that the word for “bear” is not the same in John 1:29 and 19:17 in either the Greek or Latin texts. See the texts in *John 11–21*, vol. 4B, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 307–8, as well as the references in Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John XIII–XXI*, vol. 29A, *Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 917.

<sup>12</sup> Elowsky, *John 11–21*, 307–8.

Here one might say that the burden metaphor gains in location what it lost in frequency. If in the Hebrew Bible it was numerically strong, in the New Testament it stands at the very center of Christian piety. No image could burn itself more deeply onto the Christian imagination than that of Jesus carrying his Cross—our cross.

### **The Synoptic Gospels**

And yet at exactly this point we meet a paradox. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus is not depicted as carrying the Cross; Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry the Cross behind him. As both ancient and modern commentators observe, this relates to a powerful theme of discipleship in the synoptic tradition: Jesus turns to the multitude and says, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34; Mt 16:24; cf. Lk 9:23); “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple”; “He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:38). Whatever may have been his state of mind when the Romans pressed him into service, Simon has been pressed into service by the evangelists as an icon of the disciple who takes up the Cross and follows Jesus on the road to calvary.

It seems absurd. The Johannine picture is of the suffering servant who bears the Cross on the sinner’s behalf, but in the synoptic gospels the suffering servant never carries the Cross, and in fact appears to insist that the sinner bear it himself. If this is so, how is the sinner any better off than before?

Of course, it is not difficult to reconcile John’s Gospel with the synoptic portrayal in historical terms. Luke’s phrasing even suggests that Jesus carried the Cross for some while before Simon was pressed into service. The question is not one of historical fact but of theological understanding: John chooses to picture Jesus as carrying the Cross, while the synoptics, although they may assume that he did, never put that picture in front of us. Again, it is not a question of authorial intention but of canonical meaning: John portrays Jesus as carrying his own Cross because it is part of his view of Jesus’ “hour,” his death, as his glorification, and so the Johannine Jesus is entirely in control of his own fate: he overwhelms the soldiers, then allows himself to be taken; speaks as a master to Pilate, then submits to his judgment; carries his own Cross, then allows himself to be nailed to it. As Jesus says in John’s Gospel, he has the power to lay down his life and the power to take it up again (Jn 10:18).

But when the resulting image comes alongside the synoptic picture, it raises questions about the meaning of the Cross. Who carries the burden, theologically speaking? What precisely is this burden?

The Fathers find a clue to the solution in Matthew 11:28–30: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Here Jesus says on the one hand that he will take our heavy burden away, and on the other hand that he will give us a new, lighter burden. What is the burden Jesus takes away? Most modern commentators take it to be the burden of observing the numerous precepts of the Mosaic law, complicated by Pharisaic additions.<sup>13</sup> Most of the Fathers agree, but they say further that it is the burden of sin, and that in fact the demands of the law are burdensome precisely because of sin.<sup>14</sup> As St. Paul says, mysteriously, “Law came in, to increase the trespass” (Rom 5:20).

What is the burden Jesus imposes on his disciples? It is, as Gregory the Great says, to avoid every disturbing desire, to turn away from the laborious paths of the world; or as Hilary has it, to become more worthy, to abstain from wickedness, to will the good and refuse what is evil, to love all, hate no one, to seek eternal things, not to be taken captive by present realities.<sup>15</sup> To deny oneself and take up one’s cross is, Gregory says in another place, to leave behind our sinful selves:

If we leave our very selves, where will we go outside of ourselves? Or who is it who goes, if he leaves himself? But we are one thing inasmuch as we are fallen through sin, and another inasmuch as we are established by nature. Therefore we leave our very selves behind and deny ourselves when we avoid what we were through oldness, and strive after that to which we are called by newness.<sup>16</sup>

The burden we bear is the “old man” who lives within us even after we have been renewed by Christ. This language of “newness” and “oldness” shows how the Christian tradition has turned to Paul to reconcile the Johannine and synoptic pictures of the Cross.

### Paul’s Contribution

Paul does not develop the image of Christ carrying the Cross. “The cross” in Paul’s letters always refers to the death of Christ, and the image

<sup>13</sup> See the summary in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 8–18* (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 288.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to the discussion by Davies and Allison cited above, see the patristic texts collated by Thomas Aquinas in the *Catena aurea in quatuor evangelia* (Rome: Marietti, 1953) I:188–89.

<sup>15</sup> See the texts in Aquinas, *Catena*, 188.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Aquinas, *Catena*, 255.

provoked is not the Stations of the Cross but a crucifix. However, he does speak about the exchange of Matthew 11:28–30 under the images of “life” and “death”:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. (Rom 6:4–8)

Commenting on this passage, Thomas Aquinas says that “Christ’s passion is communicated as a remedy to each of the baptized as though he himself had died. . . . And so the one who is baptized is freed from the guilt of every punishment owed to him [debitae] for sins, as though he himself had satisfied sufficiently for his own sins.”<sup>17</sup> The sinner brings his “old man” to Christ and receives from Christ in return a “newness,” because the sinner has died in Christ so that Christ may live in him. Up to this point, we see how Christ lifts our burden of sin. As Anselm says in his “Meditation on Human Redemption,” from which I quoted above, “The weight of original sin was dragging me down”; Anselm then says to Jesus, “You cast aside the leaden weight, the heavy burden . . . for You removed the sin in which I had been conceived and born.”<sup>18</sup>

But Paul goes on to say that the “old man” survives in some way. The law of the members still wars against the law of the mind. “If Christ is in you,” he says, “although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness” (Rom 8:10). In one respect the

<sup>17</sup> ST III, q. 69, a. 2 corp.

<sup>18</sup> Anselm, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises*, 426, “Meditation on Human Redemption.” Of course, our actual sin is also part of the Cross Jesus carried. In Newman’s meditation on the Second Station of the Cross, he says, “[T]hat heavy Cross is the weight of our sins. As it fell upon His neck and shoulders, it came down with a shock. Alas! what a sudden heavy weight have I laid upon Thee, O Jesus” (John Henry Newman, *Prayers, Verses, and Devotions* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 221). In his meditation on the Fourth Station, he writes, “He was now carrying the load of the world’s sins, and, all-holy though He was, He carried the image of them on His very face” (Ibid., 223). See also John Paul II, *Jesus, Son and Savior: A Catechesis on the Creed* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1996), 427: “He who ‘knew no sin’—the Son, consubstantial with the Father—took upon himself the terrible burden of the sin of all humanity, in order to obtain our justification and sanctification.”

believer lives, but in another he is still “dead because of sin.” His task now is “by the Spirit” to “put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom 8:13). Paul comes very close to saying that Jesus’ disciple must take up his cross and follow him: we are coheirs of Christ, he says, “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17). While baptism frees us from the punishment due to our sins, until the resurrection it does not take away all the damage caused by sin. Commenting on Paul, Thomas argues that this is a good thing, because by baptism one is incorporated into Christ as a member of his body:

It is fitting that what was done in the head be done in the incorporated member. Now Christ from the first moment of his conception was full of grace and truth, but he had a body liable to suffering, which through his suffering and death was raised to glorious life. So also a Christian in baptism obtains grace as regards his soul, yet still has a body liable to suffering, in which he can suffer for Christ; but eventually he will be raised up to an imperishable life.<sup>19</sup>

Here we see how Christ gives us a burden to carry. As he himself bore a human nature liable to suffering and death, so his members must bear the “old man,” fallen human nature with its passions and pain. As Edith Stein puts it:

The burden of the cross that Christ assumed is that of corrupted human nature, with all its consequences in sin and suffering to which fallen humanity is subject. The meaning of the way of the cross is to carry this burden out of the world. . . . The Savior is not alone on the way of the cross. Not only are there adversaries around him who oppress him, but also people who succor him. . . . Typical of those who submit to the suffering inflicted on them and experience his blessing by bearing it is Simon of Cyrene. . . .<sup>20</sup>

### **The Burden Transformed**

In a certain respect, therefore, the burden is the same as ever: we were subject to concupiscence and death, and we remain so now. But the burden is only materially the same; formally, it has been wholly changed: where before we carried this burden not only because of sin but in sin and sinfully, as a breach between us and God, now we carry the burden willingly, in conformity to Christ, and by the power of his indwelling. As Paul says, “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not

<sup>19</sup> *ST* III, q. 69, a 3 corp.

<sup>20</sup> L. Gelber and Michael Linssen, eds., *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1992), IV: 91–92.

do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:3–4), the Spirit that pours the love of God into our hearts (Rom 5:5). Thomas Aquinas, following Augustine, captures the same point when he says that Christ's commandments "are not heavy to the lover; whereas they are heavy to him who loves not."<sup>21</sup>

The "old man" is even the occasion for our glory. Augustine captures the tradition:

Our life in this wandering abroad cannot be without temptation, for our progress comes about through temptation; nor does anyone come to know himself unless he is tempted, nor can anyone be crowned unless he has overcome, nor can anyone overcome unless he fights, nor can anyone fight unless he has had an enemy and temptations.<sup>22</sup>

The believer's likeness to Christ goes even further. When Paul admonishes the Galatians to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2), Thomas Aquinas, following an ancient tradition, links this "law of Christ" to the figure of the suffering servant who "bore our weaknesses and carried our sorrows."<sup>23</sup> By carrying our cross, we become like Christ not only in his suffering, and not only in his triumph, but even in his power to help others: we ourselves become the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

### Conclusion

So we have seen that Jesus does in fact compare the sinner to individuals who are struggling under a heavy burden. In fact, what this comparison loses in frequency in the New Testament it may gain back in its centrality of location. But when Christ carries away the sinner's burden he transforms the metaphor, because he carries the burden not as a free-standing, autonomous savior, a sin-laden scapegoat one sends far away from the people, but as mystically identified with the believer; and the same union of head and member that allows Christ to carry the sinner's burden requires the believer to carry Christ's Cross. The believer passes, in effect, from the first to the second meaning of *nasa awon*: apart from

<sup>21</sup> ST I–II, q. 104, a. 4 corp.

<sup>22</sup> *Enarrationes in Psalmos LI–C* (CCL 39, p. 766); in the Latin liturgy of the hours, vol. 2, 70.

<sup>23</sup> See his commentary on Galatians, ch. 6, lect. 2; see also Blessed Isaac of Stella, Sermon 31 in PL 194:1292–93.

Christ he carries a burden of sin, but united to Christ he comes to share in carrying the burden away.

This transition is where the burden metaphor makes its specific contribution to Christian thought. Much of what is said about the burden of sin is easily translated into the language of debt and credit. Where Augustine says that the believer is crowned because he is victorious, one could say that fallen nature gives him an opportunity for merit, or credit. Thomas comments that one way we bear one another's burdens is by doing penance to make satisfaction for others' sins—to pay off their debts. But the transformation of the sinner's burden does not translate easily into other metaphors. Was I in debt? The debt has been paid in full. Was I stained? I have been washed clean. Was I lost? I am found. Debt, dirtiness, and being lost are bad in themselves, so I cannot say that Christ imposes on me a debt, or a filth, or that he sends me away to be lost. But to carry a burden is sometimes good; one might even argue that man was created from the beginning to carry burdens. **N.V.**