**Theories of Redemption**

In this section, we will attempt to investigate how different thinkers in church history understood salvation. After a summary treatment of the topic, we will pinpoint for more extensive analysis a set of influential positions that have come to be known as “theories of redemption.” All these theories seek an answer to the question, “What exactly did Jesus accomplish on the cross?”

Jesus’ death is a historical event. As a rule, historical events do not interpret themselves. We must ascribe a significance to these events. Christ’s death, as a historical event, requires an interpretation. The “theories of redemption” we will discuss in this section offer various interpretations of that momentous event.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**1. Historical Survey**

In this survey, we will rely heavily on the research of Robert Franks.[[2]](#footnote-2) He notes, first of all, that the Apostles’ Creed treats the redemptive work of Christ only superficially, that He “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” Franks feels that the early Fathers only weakly developed this doctrine. They seemed to devote more attention to the revelation Jesus brought of the Father, His provision of immortality, and His example of righteous living. Nevertheless, we do discover in the writings of some early Fathers mention of Christ’s sacrifice for sin (for example, *Barnabas*, 5.1; 7.37.5; *Pastor Hermas*, *Similitudes*, 5.6.2; *1 Clement* 49.6; 7.4).

Early in church history, some began to advance the theory that salvation was provided not so much through the death of Christ as through His incarnation. At the incarnation, His deity supposedly penetrated His humanity and deified it. Consequently, human nature as a whole has been deified and this can now be the potential experience of every human individual. This theory is discussed in detail in chapter 7 on “Deification.” The early church also embraced the “ransom theory,” discussed below.

Let us turn our attention to the views of specific early teachers of the faith. Along with other thinkers of his day, Irenaeus emphasized obtaining immortality and practicing morality. He was also one of the first to develop the understanding of salvation through the incarnation. Salvation for Irenaeus also included redemption from the devil’s power. Franks offers this critique of Irenaeus’ teaching and of that of the Church Fathers in general: “Still on the whole the practical Christianity of Irenaeus, like that of the Apologists, is a moralism very different from Pauline Christianity.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Clement of Alexandria looked at salvation from two vantage points. More “simple” believers are obliged to keep the moral teachings of Jesus and by that means will merit eternal life. More “advanced” believers can acquire salvation by a mystical approach by obtaining “gnosis.” Origin shared this view, yet he doubted that many would find salvation by this second avenue:

Blessed are they, as many as needing the Son of God have become such as no longer need Him as a physician healing those who are ill, nor as a shepherd, nor as redemption, but as wisdom and word and righteousness, or anything else to those who through perfection can receive of Him what is best (*Commentary on John,* 1.22).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Origen developed the “ransom theory” more than any other early Christian teacher (see discussion below). Along with this, though, he also acknowledged Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross for sins.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, for Origen Jesus’ death was not so much a propitiation for sins, but rather he spoke of the “mysterious cleansing power of the shed blood of sacrifice.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Athanasius, in turn, basically followed Irenaeus’ teaching on salvation through the incarnation of Christ, but also saw value in the death of our Lord. Jesus’ death and resurrection perfected the restoration of human nature begun at the incarnation. However, Christ’s redemptive work concerns only the transformation of human nature and the cancelling of God’s death sentence. Athanasius saw no need in propitiation through a substitutionary sacrifice. In his view, God is able to forgive without receiving retribution for sins committed.

In many ways, the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa resonates with Athanasius’ teaching. The goal of Christ’s death was to cleanse people from depravity and conquer death. We observe the same view in the works of Gregory Nazianzen and Cyril of Alexandria. Nonetheless, we also see in Cyril’s teaching an approximation of the concept of a substitutionary sacrifice:

He who knew no sin, that is Christ, has been brought under the judgment, having endured an unrighteous sentence and having suffered that which became those under the curse, in order that He who is of equal worth with the whole of humanity… might free all from the accusation of disobedience and therewith redeem the terrestrial world by His own blood (*De recta fide ad reginas*, 2.7).[[7]](#footnote-7)

John of Damascus echoes the idea of substitution:

Since our Lord Jesus Christ was without sin… He was not subject to death, since death came into the world through sin. He dies, therefore, because He took on Himself death on our behalf, and He makes Himself an offering to the Father for our sakes. For we had sinned against Him, and it was meet that He should receive the ransom for us, and that we should thus he delivered from the condemnation (*Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 3.27).

The Western Church, however, embraced a more legal approach to salvation. Tertullian viewed Christianity as a new law that would grant merit to those who kept it. He recognized, of course, the death of Christ, but only weakly developed his understanding of its significance. For him, repentance was the way to forgiveness of sins committed after water baptism.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Hilary of Poitiers ascribes more significance to the cross of Christ:

Thus He offered Himself to the death of the accursed that He might break the curse of the Law, offering Himself voluntarily a victim to God the Father… securing complete salvation for the human race by the offering of this holy, perfect victim (*Commentary to Ps 53:13*).

Ambrose, who considered Christ’s death a ransom paid to the devil and a means to overcome death, also acknowledged the substitutionary value of Jesus’ sacrifice; “What greater mercy was there than that He offered Himself to be sacrificed for our crimes, that He might wash with His blood the world, whose sin could be blotted out in no other way” (*Commentary on Ps 47:17*).[[9]](#footnote-9)

The soteriology of Augustine is multifaceted. He agreed with Ambrose that Jesus was a ransom paid to Satan for the redemption of humanity. Yet, His death also satisfied God’s wrath. In Augustine’s thought, these two views are interrelated in that Satan had grounds to accuse people before God. When Satan accepted Jesus’ death in exchange for the condemnation of humanity, he lost the right to accuse since God’s wrath for sin was now satisfied.

In addition, Augustine thought that Christ’s sacrifice was not absolutely necessary. In His almighty power, the Father could have come up with another means to save the world (see *On the Trinity*, 10.10.13). Furthermore, for Augustine, Christ’s sacrifice inspires us to love God more. Finally, along with other Fathers, Augustine taught that Christ’s redemptive work was received through the sacraments.

In Augustine’s wake, Peter Lombard taught that Jesus’ sacrifice satisfied the devil’s accusations and inspires us to love the Lord. Lombard’s contemporary, Peter Abelard, more extensively developed this last feature. He constructed the theory of redemption called the “moral influence theory,” which we will soon examine.

Lombard, along with the later thinkers Alexander of Hales and Thomas Aquinas, taught that because of His sinless life and voluntary death, Jesus received “merit” before the Father of sufficient quantity that He can credit it to believers in Him, which results in their justification. This idea of “merit” became one of the key elements in Anselm’s “commercial theory” of redemption, which we will discuss below.

Finally, we will briefly touch on the theology of two well-known liberal theologians on the theme of salvation. Albrecht Ritschl, for example, considered that humanity’s goal was to develop moral character. Christ’s death has no relation to propitiation or forgiveness of sins before God. God simply forgives all who ask Him to forgive. He has no need for retribution or satisfaction for sins by means of sacrifice. The death of Christ serves as an example of the operation of God’s kingdom through patient enduring of suffering.

Friedrich Schleiermacher held to a more existential understanding of God’s salvation plan. For him, Jesus’ death was chiefly a source of inspiration. Christ invites us to a mystical participation in His perfect “God-conscience.” According to the teaching of Schleiermacher (who cites Leitsatz), “The Redeemer receives believers into the fellowship of His undisturbed beatitude, and this is His reconciling activity.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

**2. Theories of Redemption**

**а. Accident Theory**

Unbelievers in the Lord and some liberals claim that Jesus’ death was just a chance event in history and has no special significance. Jesus was not the Son of God, but a mere human. Religious leaders of the time had Him executed out of jealousy. Christ’s death was tragic, but not redemptive.

However, the New Testament clearly states that Jesus’ death has redemptive significance. Jesus Himself claimed that his blood would be shed “as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). We may also appeal to Old Testament prophecies about the death of Messiah. Isaiah 53, for example, clearly indicates that the sufferings of Messiah would lead to the salvation of sinners.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**b. Ransom Theory**

The ransom theory appeared in various forms. One variation of it proposed that humans became slaves of Satan because of the Fall. God was unable to rescue humans directly because they by right belonged to Satan. Therefore, in order to liberate people, He was obliged to pay a ransom to the devil. Satan demanded the life of Christ in exchange for humanity, intending to gain mastery over Jesus. Yet, the Father knew that the devil could not hold Christ and that through the resurrection the power of Satan would be broken. Through the cross, God liberated humanity, and through the resurrection – His Son. Therefore, the cross of Jesus was a trap for Satan. Augustine, in fact, compared the cross with a mousetrap, and Jesus with the bait.[[12]](#footnote-12)

According to the second version, Satan is the one who possesses the power of death. Therefore, he had authority to kill due to the sinful state of humanity under God’s curse. Yet, when the devil killed Jesus, he overstepped his authority because Jesus death was undeserved. As a result, Satan lost his authority and the power of death. Now, through Christ, humanity is liberated from his hand.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The ransom theory is much discussed since it was a prominent view among the Church Fathers. At that time, they named it “Christ the Victor.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Some of the leading theologians of the time refer to it. We will highlight a few of them.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In the second century, Irenaeus refers to this teaching: “And since the apostasy tyrannized over us unjustly… righteously turn against that apostasy, and redeem from it His own property, not by violent means… but by means of persuasion” (*Against Heresies,* 5.1.1).

Possibly the most ardent defender of this theory in the Early Church was Origen. He writes,

If therefore we were bought with a price, as Paul also agrees, without doubt we were bought from some one, whose slaves we were, who also demanded what price he would, to let to from his power those whom he held. Now it was the devil who held us, to whom we had been sold by our sins. He demanded therefore as our price, the blood of Christ (*Commentary on Rom 2:13*).[[16]](#footnote-16)

Additionally, Origen introduced the idea that God tricked Satan: “(The devil) was deceived by thinking that he could have dominion over (the soul of Jesus) and did not see that he could not bear the torture caused by holding it” (*Commentary on Matt 16:8*).[[17]](#footnote-17)

Gregory of Nyssa joined in support of the ransom theory. He advanced the idea that Satan thought that he would receive some kind of power through Christ’s death, but did not foresee that he could not contain the divine power that Jesus possessed. We can also include Ambrose among the ransom theory’s adherents (see *Concerning Virgins,* 19, 126*; Letter to Constantine,* 72, 8).

As was mentioned above, Augustine and Peter Lombard held to a unique variant of the ransom theory – Jesus became the ransom paid to Satan to deprive him of the right to accuse people in sin.

The following arguments support the position “Christ the Victor.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The Bible speaks of Satan’s authority over the present age (2 Cor 4:4; 1 Jn 5:19). Jesus came to destroy the devil’s works and remove his authority (1 Jn 3:8; Col 2:15; Heb 2:14; Gen 3:15). During the earthly ministry of Jesus, this conflict raged (Mk 9:25; Lk 13:11-16; Acts 10:38; Jn 12:31). Believers in Jesus are already delivered from the power and authority of the devil (Col 1:13; Acts 26:18).

The key to the liberation of human souls is the redemptive work of Christ (Rom 3:24; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 1:7). Our Lord Himself referred to Himself as a “ransom”: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Paul states, “You have been bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20), and, “…Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5-6).

Supporters of this theory declare that Jesus’ death on the cross was the ransom price for the liberation of humanity from Satan’s power. They feel that Paul hints that God did indeed outsmart the devil: “If they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8).

We can affirm that this theory does make some positive contributions to our understanding of redemption. First, it declares the victory that Jesus won over the devil. Satan can no longer exercise control over followers of Jesus by means of temptation. In addition, we rejoice that Satan can no longer accuse us before the Father since we have received forgiveness of sins in Christ.

However, this teaching encounters serious theological problems. First, none of the proof texts cited in its support directly confirm its claims. We acknowledge that the devil rules over the present age and that believers are delivered from his dominion through Christ. Yet, the Bible does not confirm that God gained this victory or liberated humanity by paying a ransom price to Satan.

Second, it is improper to claim that sinners *belong* to the devil and need to be delivered from that condition. Sinners do not belong to Satan – all things belong to the Lord. The Prince of darkness exercises control indirectly by manipulating people’s sinful desires. Ephesians 2:2 is insightful here: “…in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.” Here, we learn that unbelievers are under Satan’s control. The next verse, however, describes *how* the devil exercises that control: “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.”

Therefore, we can conclude that, strictly speaking, the unbelieving world is not enslaved to Satan, but to sin. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin” (Jn 8:34). The devil exercises control over souls indirectly through enticement of sinful desires.

However, when people receive forgiveness of sins and deliverance from its power, they are liberated from Satan’s accusations and enticements. We cite Colossians 1:13-14: “He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom *we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*.” Redemption consists not in paying Satan a ransom, but in providing forgiveness of sins.

Another defect in this theological system is that it does not address the issue of humanity’s guilt. Our main problem is not slavery to Satan, but our separation from God because of sin. Isaiah instructs, “But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden {His} face from you so that He does not hear” (Isa 59:2). If the blood of Jesus only frees us from the power of the devil, we would still remain in a position of condemnation before the Father.

Moreover, evidence exists that God paid the ransom price not to Satan, but to Himself. During the first Passover, the Israelites slaughtered a lamb and painted their doorframes with its blood. When the Lord saw the blood, He passed by the homes of the Israelites. It is important to note that the blood was not for Satan, but for God. It was not the devil, but God who said, “When I see the blood I will pass over you” (Ex 12:13). In addition, the “destroyer” mentioned in Exodus 12:23 is in Hebrew הַמַּשְׁחִית (*hamashihith*). This word also refers to the Angel of the Lord in 2 Samuel 24:16 and 1 Chronicles 21:15.

Also significant is a text addressing redemption from death: “But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, For He will receive me” (Ps 49:15). Earlier, though, we read, “No man can by any means redeem {his} brother or give to God a ransom for him – for the redemption of his soul is costly, and he should cease {trying} forever” (v. 8-9). Note that again the ransom is paid to God. Therefore, we conclude that God both pays the ransom and receives it.

We also take into consideration Paul’s teaching in Romans 3:24-25: “…being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. {This was} to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed.” We observe in this passage that redemption is accomplished through Christ’s sacrifice. The goal of that sacrifice is the propitiation of the Lord’s righteous demands so that He can forgive transgressions. This is the biblical view of “redemption.”

Finally, we note that not all Church Fathers embraced the ransom theory. For example, Gregory Nazianzen unapologetically rejects this position (see *Orations*, 45.22). John of Damascus comments, “For we had sinned against Him, and it was meet that He should receive the ransom for us, and that we should thus he delivered from the condemnation. God forbid that the blood ofthe Lord should have been offered to the tyrant” (*An Exact Expositon of Orthodox Faith,* 3.27). In the West, Peter Abelard joined those in opposition to this teaching.

**c. Moral Example Theory**

The next theory, the “moral example theory,” was advanced in the Middle Ages by the 12th-century thinker Peter Abelard. The Enlightenment greatly enhanced the popularity of this view due to that movement’s rejection of the deity of Christ and His substitutionary sacrifice for sin.[[19]](#footnote-19)

According to this teaching, people suffer from carrying the weight of their guilt and shame. People avoid God out of fear of punishment. We see this fear in action when Adam and Eve hid from God in the Garden. However, exponents of this position feel that such a fear of God is unfounded. What separates us from the Lord is not guilt for our sins, but fear of His wrath. Yet, God does not desire to punish sin, nor is it necessary for Him to do so. He is simply waiting for us to return to Him. So then, the human dilemma is not a future punishment from God, but an unfounded fear of Him.

Jesus came to show us the Father’s love. He displayed this in His ministry when He taught the Word, fed the multitudes, healed the sick, etc. The ultimate expression of God’s love, however, was Christ’s death on the cross. He died not to satisfy God’s justice or wrath, but to demonstrate God’s love toward us. God’s desire is that we take this demonstration of love to heart and turn to Him in repentance, faith, and love. Thus, people can overcome their unfounded fear of God and be reconciled with Him.

Abelard describes his system in the following words:

Our redemption is that supreme love manifested in our case by the passion of Christ, who not merely delivers us from the bondage of sin, but also acquires for us the liberty of the sons of God, so that we fulfill all things from love rather than from fear of Him.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The moral example theory remains popular among liberal Christians, who seek support for their theory in the parables of the Prodigal Son and the lost sheep. In both cases, God is waiting and even seeking to restore the wanderer.[[21]](#footnote-21)

As in the ransom theory, we can highlight both positive and negative aspects of this teaching. On the positive side, we see emphasized God’s desire to restore sinners to Himself through His Son. In addition, the Father’s role in salvation is spotlighted. One might be tempted to think of the Father as the demanding God of judgment in the Old Testament, while Jesus is the kind and merciful God of the New Testament. Yet, the moral example theory stresses the biblical teaching that the cross was an expression of the Father’s love as well. We recall John 3:16: “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” In John 8:42, Jesus again identifies the Father as the initiator of salvation’s plan: “I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me.”

On the other hand, this theory ignores the clear biblical teaching of God’s justice. In other words, the Scriptures unmistakably declare that the righteous Judge must receive full retribution for sins committed. Consequently, Christ’s sacrifice was necessary not only to demonstrate the Father’s love, but also to satisfy God’s so-called “retributive justice.”

Let us more clearly define the concept of “retributive justice.” This means that for every transgression of the Law, a full punishment must be meted out. God never forgives sins without enforcing the prescribed punishment for them. As it is written, God will “render to every man according to what he has done” (Rev 22:12), and, “He will by no means leave {the guilty} unpunished” (Ex 34:7). The historian Berkhof provides a fine description of God’s distributive justice, which “demands that the requirements of the law be met in every particular, and which, in case of transgression, makes full satisfaction by punishment imperative.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Another weakness in this position is that it can be classified as a “subjective” approach to salvation. This means that Christ’s death only produces a personal, subjective effect on those who learn of it. Christ’s death has no “objective” value in affecting God’s relationship with people by removing the sin-barrier. It only subjectively motivates people to seek the Lord. Even though Jesus example of love on the cross does indeed subjectively move us toward God, the main purpose of His redemptive sacrifice is to satisfy God’s justice.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**d. Moral Influence Theory**

The moral influence theory was popularized in the sixteenth century by Laelius and Faustus Socinus. In brief, they taught that Jesus’ death serves as an example of devotion to God. It resonates with the teaching of Pelagius, who claimed that Adam’s sin has no direct effect on his descendants. Persons are born with a will free from the domination of sin and are able to resist sin. By means of personal discipline and the inspiration of Christ’s example, we can lead righteous lives and merit our inclusion in God’s kingdom.

This theory also asserts that God requires no retribution or sacrifice for sins. He has no need to execute punishment for every transgression, but freely forgives sins out of His mercy. In addition, Jesus in not the incarnate Son of God, but merely a good teacher and example of moral living.

A person’s main shortcoming is a lack of dedication to the Lord. We lack the discipline and motivation to worship and serve God with a whole heart. God is ready to forgive sins and does so without requiring a sacrifice. However, He still desires that people would serve Him and seeks an effective means to motivate us to do so.

Jesus was a special individual in that He demonstrated an exceptional degree of devotion to God, which was reflected in His teaching and manner of life. The greatest expression of His devotion, though, came when He took up the cross. His death was an expression of love for God, whom one should love with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength. Through the cross, Jesus displayed this kind of love. We are called to imitate His example.

Additionally, since Jesus was a mere mortal, but not God, we all have the potential to reach the same level of devotion that He did. This is why the Scripture declares, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps” (1 Pet 2:21). If we commit ourselves to God in faith and love, following the example of Jesus, God will accept us, and we will enjoy fellowship with Him.

In summary, adherents of the moral example theory claim that through Jesus’ death we are shown a magnificent model of dedication and devotion to God. This serves to motivate and inspire the Christian to imitate Christ’s commitment to God.

The positive elements of this teaching include the following. It reveals Jesus’ motivation for going to the cross. We typically think that the Lord went to the cross out of love for people, and that is so. Yet, the Scriptures also testify that love for the Father motivated His obedience: “…so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me. Get up, let us go from here” (Jn 14:31).

Nonetheless, this theory is also not above criticism. First, the Bible contradicts the teaching that Adam’s sin had no effect on his offspring. Paul clearly taught in Romans 5:19, “For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.”

Second, Scripture clearly affirms that God is holy and has wrath against sin. He says to Ezekiel, “They have defiled My holy name by their abominations which they have committed. So I have consumed them in My anger” (Ezek 43:8). Moreover, God is a righteous Judge and punishes every transgression: “In the day when I punish, I will punish them for their sin” (Ex 32:34). Furthermore, the Old Testament sacrificial system testifies that God requires a sacrifice for sin. Therefore, the moral example theory contradicts the doctrine of God’s retributive justice.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In addition, the Bible unquestionably affirms that Jesus died for sins. We will cite only three examples. Isaiah writes, “Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa 53:6), and Paul affirms, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3), and testifies of Him, “who was delivered over because of our transgressions” (Rom 4:25).

We also note that the very passage used to support this view in reality refutes it. In 1 Peter 2:21, the apostle writes, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.” Supporters of this teaching claim that this text proves that the goal of Jesus’ death was simply to be an example. Yet, just a few verses later Peter writes, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross” (1 Pet 2:24), and in the subsequent chapter, “Christ also died for sins once for all” (1 Pet 3:18). The Lord Jesus Himself claimed that He came to die for transgressors (Matt 26:28).

Another weak point in this view is its subjective nature. Subjective views of redemption only concern how the death of Christ personally affects the believer, not how it affects God. In addition, this teaching does not address human guilt and denies the deity of Christ.

**e. Governmental Theory**

The next theory of redemption for our consideration is the governmental theory. Unlike the previous theories, it takes into consideration God’s justice. According to this teaching, God is the Ruler over creation and therefore is committed to maintain order in it. If someone sins, He will punish that individual in order to enforce His law and maintain order. If He would fail to do so, the creation would degrade into chaos.

However, the Lord also loves people and wants to save them. He is free to forgive sins if He so desires. He does not require a sacrifice for sins. He can forgive without retribution. At the same time, He must maintain order in His creation. Therefore, Jesus died in order to demonstrate the serious nature of sin. Through the cross, God shows that He is willing to punish sin. Jesus’ suffering is meant as a warning to those who choose to continue in sin. If people turn from sin to God, He is ready to forgive them.

This theory proposes, then, an atypical view of God’s justice. Unlike the concept of “retributive justice,” justice in the governmental theory does not require a full punishment for every infraction. God punishes only to the decree that He deems necessary to maintain order in the world and prevent further transgressions. He seeks no satisfaction for sins committed, but merely seek to keep sin under control.

Of interest is the fact that the individual who promoted this theory was not a theologian, but a lawyer, Hugo Grotius, who lived about the time of the Socinus brothers. It concerned Grotius that God’s righteousness was being undervalued in discussions about redemption. Therefore, he emphasized law and order in his system. In Grotius’ words, “The end of every punishment is merely to maintain and exemplify order.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Grotius supported his position by observing that governmental systems work this way – they do not punish because the infraction was a personal insult to government leaders, but merely to maintain order. Grotius also appealed to the teaching “voluntarism,” according to which God’s laws are not based on His nature, but on His will. He is not obligated to fully punish sin, but may punish to the decree He desires. Grotius regarded requiring full retribution for sin “irrational.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Some final arguments supporting this theory go as follows.[[27]](#footnote-27) We read in Romans 3:25-26 that Jesus died “to demonstrate (God’s) righteousness,” which is interpreted in the sense of maintaining order. Finally, adherents of the governmental theory see in the Old Testament sacrificial system not a requirement for full retribution for sin, but merely a system warning people of the consequences of sin and turning them from it.

On the one hand, we see value in the governmental theory’s caution about the seriousness of sin. In addition, Grotius’ system, more than the previous theories, makes an attempt to acknowledge God’s justice. Yet, his understanding of redemption is still incomplete. He fails to appreciate that God does indeed require full retribution for sin and does not seek merely to control it. Through punishment, God intends not only to warn sinners, but also to satisfy His justice. The crucifixion of Jesus accomplished those goals.

Another weakness in this position is that it is a subjective view of redemption. Again, the death of Christ has no direct effect on God, but merely prompts a subjective reaction in those who hear of it. Also problematic is the question, “If God’s only purpose was to warn sinners, then why was the sinless Son of God punished? Why did God not punish someone worthy of punishment?”[[28]](#footnote-28)

**f. Satisfaction Theory**

The author of our next option, the “satisfaction theory,” was the famous 11th-century theologian Anselm, which he proposed in his work *Cur Deus Homo,* i.е., *Why God became Man*.[[29]](#footnote-29) Anselm lived during the time of the European feudal system. At that time, people highly valued their personal honor. If someone offended another’s honor, it could result in a duel unto death. Honor was even considered more essential than law. As we shall see, Anselm’s thinking was clearly affected by the thinking of his day.

In his opinion, when persons sin, they offend the Lord’s honor. Therefore, He is required to defend His honor by punishing the offender. Yet, the relationship between God and people is such that the latter is incapable of providing satisfaction to the former. God is already worthy of all that a person may give to Him. In Anselm’s words, “He who does not return to God this honour due to Him, takes away from God what is His own and dishonours God” (*Cur Deus Homo*, 1.11).[[30]](#footnote-30) Therefore, in order to satisfy the insult to God’s honor, one must give to God something more than all God is already due, which already consists of everything one has. Every sinner “must pay back the honour which he has stolen from God” (*Cur Deus Homo*, 1.11).[[31]](#footnote-31)

Unlike Tertullian’s view, Anselm taught that repentance alone was inadequate to remove a person’s offense, since the good works that result from repentance are already part of the debt humans owe to God. Another complicating factor is that the Lord is an eternal being. Human works, on the other hand, are finite and therefore unable to satisfy an offense to an infinite God.[[32]](#footnote-32)

So then, Jesus came in order to answer humanity’s offense of God’s honor. As a human being, He could represent humanity. As God, He possesses an infinite nature. As a human, Jesus was obliged to present to God a life of perfect obedience, and this He did. Since He deserved no punishment for personal sins, He voluntary death on the cross earned Him merit. Christ applied this merit to answer humanity’s offense and satisfy God’s honor. Since the Lord’s life is of infinite value, His merit can apply to all persons. Therefore, Christ’s death was not punishment from God, but the means to receive merit from Him.[[33]](#footnote-33)

In this system, Jesus’ death has its primary effect on God – to satisfy His honor and redeem people’s offense. God is therefore ready to forgive offenses and receive us. The satisfaction theory remains the position of the Roman Catholic Church.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In his day, Thomas Aquinas added several nuances to Anselm’s satisfaction theory.[[35]](#footnote-35) In Aquinas’ thought, Christ received merit not from His sacrificial death, but from His suffering prior to His death. Aquinas considered that death does not involve an individual’s participation and therefore cannot be worthy of merit. Suffering, though, is a heroic act deserving merit. Aquinas comments:

The passion of Christ wrought our salvation by the mode of merit; but the death of Christ could thus work nothing; for in death the soul, which is the principle of merit, is separated from the body; therefore the death of Christ wrought nothing for our salvation.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Along with Anselm, Aquinas saw no need for Christ to satisfy God’s justice through His death. Aquinas shared the opinion of many that God can forgive sin freely without need for a retributive sacrifice. Aquinas also added the thought that the merit Christ obtained is bestowed upon the Church. The Catholic Church developed the doctrine that it was the only channel through which grace flows from Christ to the believer.

The positive aspect of the satisfaction theory is its objective view of redemption. This means that Christ’s death has its primary effect on God. He receives satisfaction of His honor. Also of value is an indirect recognition of the concept of “retributive justice,” according to which every offense must be fully accounted for. God’s honor must be fully satisfied.

On the other hand, the Bible does not teach that Christ gave God something through His death, but claims that He removed something from people – guilt. Jesus’ death was not to atone for the offense of God’s honor, but to satisfy the requirements of His retributive justice. We recall here Paul’s words in Romans 3:25-26:

…whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. {This was} to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, {I say,} of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Note that in this passage, God is not concerned with defending His honor, but rather in manifesting His righteousness. In addition, the value of Christ’s death is not in its voluntary nature, but in its substitutionary nature. We will discuss further the idea of substitution in a later section.[[37]](#footnote-37)

We must reject Aquinas’ suggestion that the sufferings of Jesus saves us, not His death. The reformer Piscator offers the following convincing refutation:[[38]](#footnote-38) 1) If the life of Jesus saves, then His death was unnecessary, 2) this teaching contradicts Heb 9:22, and, 3) the Bible does not claim that Jesus *lived* for us, but that He *died* for us.

**g. Teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses**

A more recent distortion of the redemptive work of Jesus can be found in the teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a movement founded by Charles Russell (1852-1916). Russell was succeeded by Joseph Rutherfield. Russell and Rutherfield taught that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God, but a creation of God the Father (i.e. Jehovah). Jesus consequently occupies a position lower that Jehovah and has the status of a lesser “god.” When Jesus was sent from heaven by Jehovah, He fully abandoned His divine attributes and brought with Him only His “life force.” Only during His water baptism did He begin to recall His heavenly origin.

It was necessary for Jesus to abandon His divine nature and become a typical (yet perfect) human in order to become humanity’s representative: “To be the ransom Jesus couldn’t be more than a perfect man, the justice of God would not permit.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Jehovah’s Witnesses consider that there must be a total correspondence between the sacrificial victim (i.e., Jesus) and those whom He represented. The human Jesus is the appropriate ransom (see 1 Tim 2:5-6; Matt 20:28).[[40]](#footnote-40) Rutherfield comments, “A perfect man now, by voluntarily going into death, would provide the corresponding price for the redemption of mankind.”[[41]](#footnote-41) It is felt that a “god-man” could not represent typical humans.[[42]](#footnote-42) Schnell describes it in this way: Jesus “died for Adam as an exact replica of Adam.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Moreover, Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that when Jesus died, His human nature was completely annihilated (Matt 20:28).[[44]](#footnote-44) Only by this means could His death be considered a “sacrifice.” So then, Jesus did not bodily rise from the dead, since that would involve a restitution of His “annihilated” human nature. Jesus rose not physically, but spiritually.

Concerning the value of Christ’s sacrifice, the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim:

His sacrificial death opened the way for imperfect humans to have a good relationship with Jehovah and to be rescued from sin and death. Jesus’ death opens up to us the opportunity to regain what Adam and Eve lost​—the prospect of living forever in perfect conditions on earth.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Jehovah’s Witnesses emphasize redemption from physical death through the death of Jesus:

Adam passed on to all his descendants sin and its penalty, death. We need a ransom to release us from the penalty of death that we inherited from Adam.... Who could pay the ransom to free us from death? When we die, we pay the penalty only for our own sins. No imperfect man can pay for the sins of others.... Unlike us, Jesus was perfect. So he did not need to die for his sins​ – he never committed any. Instead, Jesus died for the sins of others.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Finally, according to the doctrines of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jesus died on stake, not a cross.[[47]](#footnote-47)

For a closer examination and refutation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ teaching on the deity of Christ, see Appendix B in volume 3 of this series. In refutation of their view of redemption, we can say the following. First, we reject the proposal that Jesus needed to abandon His divine nature in order to become a sacrifice for sin. All that was necessary was for Him to become a genuine human. In fact, His divine nature and the infinite value of His divine life made it possible for the benefits of His death to apply to all people.

Second, the Bible teaches that Jesus physically rose from the dead. We defend this truth in volume 1 of this series. Third, in accordance with biblical revelation, Jesus’ death provides not only deliverance from death, but also deliverance from the guilt and power of sin. We must not undervalue any of these elements.

Finally, Jesus did not die on a stake, but on a cross.[[48]](#footnote-48) From Matthew 27:37, we learn, “And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, ‘This is Jesus the King of the Jews.’” If Jesus was crucified on a stake, then it would have been impossible to fix the inscription above His head, but only above His outstretched arms. Moreover, John 20:25 speaks of “nails” affixing Jesus’ hands, not a “nail.” This means that there was a nail in each hand, which is more consistent with crucifixion on a cross.

**h. Substitution Theory**

Finally, we arrive at the theory that conservative Evangelicals embrace – the “substitution theory.” According to this teaching, the righteous God requires full retribution for every sin, as He said to Moses, “He will by no means leave {the guilty} unpunished” (Ex 34:7). Therefore, we sinful humans are in danger of condemnation. Even if someone turned to the Lord and fully observed the Law from that time, he or she would still have guilt from past sins. James wrote, “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one {point,} he has become guilty of all” (Jam 2:10).

However, God loves people and wants to rescue them. In His mercy, the Lord wants to save us, but in His justice, He must punish our sins. Therefore, He sent His Son to become the propitiating sacrifice for all of humanity. Christ died in our place to satisfy the justice and wrath of God against sin. So then, on the cross, Jesus carried the full weight of God’s wrath for the sins of all people. He was our “substitute.” By punishing His Son in our place, God can remain righteous and yet show His love for us by forgiving our sins for Christ’s sake. Paul affirms that God remains “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26).[[49]](#footnote-49)

Moreover, in exchange for our sin, believers receive the gift of God’s righteousness: “He made Him who knew no sin {to be} sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). We receive the same degree of righteousness that the Lord Jesus Himself possesses. According to 1 Corinthians 1:30, Christ “became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.” Unlike many other theories of redemption, the substitution theory is an objective view, where the death of Christ has its primary effect on God.

Many influential Church Fathers and the Reformers accepted the substitution theory. Even though many Fathers also held to other theories of redemption, such as the ransom theory, they nonetheless considered the cross the place of redemption, especially from death. For example, Irenaeus writes,

The Lord suffered that He might bring those who have wandered from the Father, back to knowledge… Our Lord also by His passion destroyed death, and dispersed error, and put an end to corruption, and destroyed ignorance, while He manifested life and revealed truth, and bestowed the gift of incorruption (*Against Heresies,* 2.20.3).

Athanasius holds a similar view:

He gave (His body) over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father – doing this, moreover, of His loving-kindness, to the end that, firstly, all being held to have died in Him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lord’s body…) (*Оn the Incarnation*, 8).

Moreover, Gregory Nazianzen considered that salvation was accomplished directly by Christ’s sufferings and death, and Maximus the Confessor speaks of redemption from death through Jesus’ death (*Questions Addressed to Thalassius,* 61).[[50]](#footnote-50)

Hilary of Poitiers speaks more specifically of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice:

Thus He offered Himself to the death of the accursed that He might break the curse of the Law, offering Himself voluntarily a victim to God the Father… securing complete salvation for the human race by the offering of this holy, perfect victim (*Commentary to Ps 53:13*).

In the following passage, John of Damascus writes not only of redemption from death, but also from condemnation:

Since our Lord Jesus Christ was without sin… He was not subject to death, since death came into the world through sin. He dies, therefore, because He took on Himself death on our behalf, and He makes Himself an offering to the Father for our sakes. For we had sinned against Him, and it was meet that He should receive the ransom for us, and that we should thus he delivered from the condemnation (*An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 3.27).

Cyril of Alexandria expresses a similar thought:

He who knew no sin, that is Christ, has been brought under the judgment, having endured an unrighteous sentence and having suffered that which became those under the curse, in order that He who is of equal worth with the whole of humanity… might free all from the accusation of disobedience and therewith redeem the terrestrial world by His own blood (*De recta fide ad reginas*, 2.7).[[51]](#footnote-51)

The Reformers, of course, vigorously defended the substitution theory. Luther affirms,

Here the first and principal article is: that Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, died for our sins, and rose again for our righteousness. And that He alone is the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, and that God hath laid upon Him the iniquities of us all (*Schmalkald Articles*, *pars II*).[[52]](#footnote-52)

Zwingli writes,

At last, therefore, wishing to help our hopeless cause, our Creator sent, to satisfy His justice by sacrificing Himself for us, not an angel, not a man, but His own Son (*Commentarius de vera et falsa religione*).[[53]](#footnote-53)

Finally, Calvin concurs,

Christ became human “that He might present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to the just judgment of God, and in the same flesh pay the penalty which we had incurred.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

In defense of this theory, we can appeal to the biblical revelation of God as a God of holiness and righteousness and, therefore, He responds to sin with wrath. The Lord’s righteous character is such that He must punish every transgression. The Bible declares that Jesus came to die for sins. He Himself was the ransom to satisfy the requirements of God’s justice. Therefore, the substitution theory full accords with the biblical doctrine of God’s “retributive justice.”

We can also appeal to the Old Testament sacrificial system.[[55]](#footnote-55) This system required the transgressor to bring a sacrifice for sin. Typically, the individual would lay his/her hand on the head of the sacrifice to indicate that the animal was the sinner’s substitute. Therefore, the death of an animal was considered a substitute for the death of the sinner. As a result, the sinner could receive forgiveness.[[56]](#footnote-56)

In a similar fashion, the Bible teaches that Jesus Himself became the sacrifice for sins. Hebrews 10:11-12 states, “Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.” Verse 14 continues, “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

Our comparison of Jesus’ sacrifice with the Old Testament sacrificial system affords strong support for the claim that He died in the place of others and in this way accepted the punishment due to others. Hebrews 9:22 confirms that a sacrifice is necessary for sins to be forgiven: “And according to the Law, {one may} almost {say,} all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” We also observe that the New Testament identifies Jesus with the Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5:7). The Passover Lamb, which was God’s means of delivering His people from Egyptian bondage, symbolizes the sacrifice of Christ – the means of freeing us from slavery to sin.

The New Testament confirms that Jesus died as a substitute for our sins. John the Baptist announced, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29). Paul wrote: “He made Him who knew no sin {to be} sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21), “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us” (Gal 3:13), and, “…having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col 2:14).

Peter joins this testimony: “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross” (1 Pet 2:24). We can appeal to the Old Testament as well, where the prophet Isaiah declares of the coming Messiah, “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa 53:6).

A key to understanding the substitutionary nature of Christ’s sacrifice is the use of certain prepositions.[[57]](#footnote-57) The preposition ἀντι (*anti*) means “in the place of.” An example would be Matthew 2:22, where we read, “Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of (ἀντι) his father Herod.” When Jesus spoke of Himself as a ransom, this word is used: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for (ἀντι) many” (Mk 10:45).

Also significant is the use of the preposition ὑπερ (*huper*), which typically means “on behalf of,” but can also be a synonym for ἀντι (*anti*). An example of this would be 2 Corinthians 5:15: “He died for (ὑπερ) all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”

The Fourth Gospel recounts an interesting story that relates to redemption. The Jewish leaders were trying to decide what to do with the Lord Jesus. The high priest feared that if Jesus’ popularity continued to grow, it would provoke a retaliation by Rome. Therefore, he unknowingly spoke by the Holy Spirit, “’Do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.’ Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation” (Jn 11:50-51). Here is a remarkable prediction of Jesus’ substitutionary death made unknowingly by his chief enemy.

We must, however, address certain objections to the substitution theory. First, it seems unfair to some to transfer the sins of others to an innocent individual. We would not expect this from a just God. Did not God say through Ezekiel, “The righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself” (Ezek 18:20)[[58]](#footnote-58). We respond that Jesus became a substitutionary sacrifice voluntarily. The Father did not compel Him to suffer for others.[[59]](#footnote-59) It is also improper to claim that God laid the punishment for sins on another party. God Himself, in the person of His Son, took the punishment for sins upon Himself.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Some also object that, although the preposition ἀντι (*anti*) means “in the place of,” the preposition ὑπερ (*huper*) does not typically carry that meaning, but usually means “for the benefit of” (see Lk 22:20; Jn 15:13; Rom 5:8; Rom 8:32; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 2:9; 1 Pet 3:18). Therefore, verses containing that word do not support the theory of a substitutionary death.

On the other hand, there exist at least three passages of Scripture where ὑπερ (*huper*) must be translated “in the place of,” which gives us warrant to see in the term the sense of substitution:[[61]](#footnote-61)

- 1 Corinthians 15:3 – For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for (ὑπερ) our sins according to the Scriptures.

- Galatians 1:4 – …who gave Himself for (ὑπερ) our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.

Note that Jesus died “for” sins. Jesus would not have died “on behalf of sin.” He died in the place of sinners. Therefore, these verses confirm a substitutionary sense for the preposition ὑπερ (*huper*).

2 Corinthians 5:14 – For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for (ὑπερ) all, therefore all died.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14, we read that because Jesus died for all, all died. Here again, substitution is intended. Because Jesus dies “in the place” of others, all can be said to have died in Him.

Other feel that the idea that Jesus’ death satisfies God’s justice produces a conflict within the Trinity between a demanding Father-God, and a merciful Son. In other words, the Father demands retribution, while the Son suffers for humanity. However, as was stated earlier, the Father displayed His mercy when He sent His Son to save the world (Jn 3:16). The Father was the initiator of salvation’s plan. Moreover, the Son is not only humanity’s Savior, but also its Judge (Matt 25). Therefore, the substitution theory neither introduces distortion into God’s nature, nor forces a division between Father and Son.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Still others object that if God requires retribution for sin and that Christ’s death satisfied that need, then salvation and forgiveness are no longer acts of grace. Grace, it is thought, would extend forgiveness without cost. This objection, though, fails to recognize that God’s grace was manifest in that He initiated the plan of salvation. He was under no obligation to do so.

We also take into consideration that, in spite of the fact that retribution was required, God was not obliged to accept the sacrifice Jesus made on behalf of others. In His grace, God imputed the sins of humanity to His Son, and, in turn, imputed the righteousness of His Son to sin-tainted people. Finally, God acted in grace when He Himself became the sacrifice for sins. He fulfilled the requirements of justice Himself.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Some may wrongly conclude that since Jesus paid the full price for sin, that all people are automatically forgiven. However, the Bible indicates that God has established conditions for receiving salvation. Jesus death profits only those who fulfill the conditions of repentance and faith (Rom 5:17).[[64]](#footnote-64)

Nonetheless, some still insist that God could indeed forgive without a sacrifice.[[65]](#footnote-65) It appears that Jesus did so in His earthly ministry (Matt 10:8; Lk 15:11-32) and so taught His disciples (Matt 18:23-27). In these instances, however, no mention is made about the *basis* on which God forgave. All forgiveness at any time is based on the cross. It is important to consider that even sins forgiven in the Old Testament through the temple sacrificial system, were actually forgiven retroactively by the future sacrifice of the Savior:

…whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. {This was} to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, {I say,} of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:25-26).

The final objection we will address presupposes that Jesus would have had to suffer eternal punishment to cover the sins of all people. It is clear, though, that this was not the case since God raised Jesus from the dead. We explain this by pointing out the infinite value of Christ’s life. Peter calls His blood “precious” (1 Pet 1:19). The limited suffering (i.e. physical death) of a being of infinite worth was sufficient to atone for the eternal punishment of finite people. Thiessen comments here, “A finite being cannot exhaust an infinite curse, but an infinite being can exhaust it is a few hours.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

We can conclude that the substitution theory best fits the biblical data, which clearly shows that Christ’s death was a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world in order to satisfy God’s retributive justice. Nevertheless, the other theories we have discussed make positive contributions to our appreciation of Christ’s redemptive work. They remind us that Christ’s death: (1) was indeed an example of dedication to God for us to imitate, (2) is the ultimate expression of God’s love for us, (3) provides a warning about the serious nature of sin, and (4) liberates people from the power of the evil one.

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6. Franks, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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25. Franks, p. 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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52. Ibid., p. 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., p. 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., p. 338. Yet, Calvin incorrectly supposes that Jesus suffered not only in His body on the cross, but also after His death when His soul was in Hades (Franks, p. 342). This view is refuted in chapter 8 of this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
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57. Thiessen, p. 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Noted in Boyd, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., p. 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
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