Substitutionary Atonement in Shīʿi Islam

BY TAYMAZ TABRIZI, PHD

BERKELEY INSTITUTE
FOR ISLAMIC STUDIES

BERKELEY INSTITUTE
FOR ISLAMIC STUDIES

The Berkeley Institute for Islamic Studies (BLIIS) is a non-profit organization that was established in 2017 and is based in Berkeley, California. It was founded with the goal of promoting scholarship on Islam and Islamic cultures both historical and contemporary. The institute's academic research on Islam includes a broad range of academic disciplines from theology to law, and from anthropology to political science.

The institute encourages an interdisciplinary approach to the academic study of Islam. Within the Islamic tradition, the institute promotes research on those areas which have had relatively little attention devoted to them in Western academia to date. These include the intellectual and literary expressions of Islam in general, and Shīʿism in particular.

As a new kind of online academic institution, the Berkeley Institute for Islamic Studies is aimed at a high-visibility context and its digital platform makes the institute cost-effective for high-value content compared to traditional academic departments.

The views and conclusions of any BLIIS publication are solely those of its author (s), and do not reflect the views and conclusions of the Institute, its board of directors, management, or its other researchers and scholars.

AUTHOR (S)

Taymaz Tabrizi is currently Director of Research at the Berkeley Institute for Islamic Studies. He holds a PhD from McMaster University, Canada from the Department of Religious Studies where he specialized in the anthropology of religion and Imāmī Islamic law. He also holds a doctoral diploma in Gender Studies and Feminist Research from McMaster University from the Department of English and Cultural Studies. Dr. Tabrizi completed his M.A in comparative religion (History and Philosophy of Religion) from the Department of Religion at Concordia University, Canada where he specialized in comparative Imāmī, Sunnī and Jewish law in coordination with the Centre for Iranian Studies. He also completed a B.A from McGill University where he majored in Political Science (Middle Eastern Studies) and minored in the History and Philosophy of Western Traditions.

Substitutionary Atonement in Shīʿi Islam

Taymaz Tabrizi, PhD
Berkeley Institute for Islamic Studies

Abstract

This article studies substitutionary atonement in Shīʿi Islam. It looks at a particular Shīʿi tradition that is attributed to a possible 8th century soteriological attitude in Islam. Although there are clear differences between the proposed Shīʿi version of this form of atonement and its various mainstream versions in Christian thought, the study nevertheless opens up a brief look into an alternative understanding of atonement in Islam that may resonate with Pauline Christian understandings of salvation.

INTRODUCTION

Substitutionary atonement is a technical Christian term for a wide range of atonement models that see Jesus as having died as a substitute for others. More specifically, the term usually denotes Jesus' having died for the sins of others, namely humankind. The view is based on and expressed in two major New Testament verses:

> He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

> For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. (1 Peter 3:18-20)[1]

There are innumerable Christians models for substitutionary atonement, from classical Christology to modern representations as found in C.S Lewis and Karl Barth.[2] Yet it has become conventional knowledge that Islam has no concept of substitutionary atonement in light of Q6:164:

---

[1] New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation.
[2] See for example Jeannine Michele Graham, *Representation and Substitution in the Atonement Theologies of Dorothee Sölle, John Macquarrie, and Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

> Say, "Shall I seek a sustainer other than God, while He is sustainer of all things? No soul does evil, save against itself, and none shall bear the burden of another. Then unto your Sustainer is your return and He will inform you of that which you differed."[3]

The term atonement is a theological term that refers to an action that expiates sins which usually involves some informal or ritual penance, or ritual sacrifice (in the case of Islam, the latter may be an animal sacrifice). Substitutionary atonement in a wider sense would refer to some act of personal sacrifice that would atone for the sins of another so as to save a person from divine punishment.

The concept of substitutionary atonement has not been alien to Shīʿi Islam. Several traditions have been understood to allude to it. By far the most explicit one is attributed to Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 183/799):

> Mūsā al-Kāẓim said: God (Glorified is He!) became wrathful with the Shīʿah and made me to choose [to sacrifice] either myself or them (*fa-khayyaranī nafsī aw hum*). So by God, I redeemed them (*waqaytuhum*) with my own soul (life).[4]

Imāmī jurists have largely been muted on the tradition. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī suggests that it refers to a time where the Shīʿah had abandoned the practice of *taqiyyah* (dissimulation) during the reign of Hārun al-Rashīd (d. 763/766 or 809 AD) and as a result, al-Kāẓim had to put himself forward as a sacrifice in order to save them.[5] Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Māzandarānī (d. 1081/~1670) explains that the Imām was willing to sacrifice himself as he sought union with God (*liqāʾ Allāh*) as well as his apprehension that if this sacrifice was not made, the Shīʿah and their future righteous generations (*ṣāliḥūn*) would be eliminated.[6] In other words, by giving himself up to the authorities al-Kāẓim is said to have spared the Shīʿah from punishment at the hands of the Caliph.

Within the context of high Imāmology,[7] the tradition does not seem to be out of the frame of Shīʿi normativity and may have more esoteric implications than what al-Majlisī may have suggested. It was quite common among early Shīʿis to believe that the Imām or *ḥujjah* (God's divine 'proof' on earth) stood between him and the creation. The Imām was the respite of God's chastisement of not only the Shīʿah, but also humankind. The Imām was the perfect manifestation of God and his primordial light (*nūr*), he was the cosmogenic *logos* (*ʿaql*) and was therefore the vehicle and channel for God's grace in the world. The *ḥujjah* was the reason why God continued to send his mercy down on earth. If life

---

[3] See also Q17:15; 35:18; 39:7; 53:38.

[4] Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb b. Isḥāq al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī,* 15 vols., ed. Dār al-Ḥadīth/Mūsā Shubayrī Zanjānī (Qum: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1429/2008), I, 646.

[5] Muḥammad Bāqir b. Muḥammad Taqī al-Majlisī, *Mirāt al-ʿUqūl fī Sharḥ Akhbār al-Rasūl*, 26 vols., ed. Hāshim Rasūlī Maḥlātī (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyah, 1404/1983), III, 126.

[6] Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad al-Māzandarānī, *Sharḥ al-Kāfī*, 12 vols., ed. Abū al-Ḥasan Shaʿrānī (Tehran: al-Maktabat al-Islāmiyah, 1382/1963), VI, 37.

[7] High Imāmology refers to a historical trend within Shīʿism that understood Imāmah as a cosmic, cosmogenic and on some levels, a theophanic reality. For a study on high Imāmology, see for example Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994); Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Christian Jambet, *What is Shiʾi Islam? An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

persisted and it continued to rain, it was due to the presence of the Imām. As Maria Massi Dakake argues:

> The Imāmī concept of the *ḥujjah* was directly linked to the argument for the necessity of an Imām on earth at all times. Imāmī tradition argued that there was always a *ḥujjah*, or Proof of God, on earth; the earth could not exist without a *ḥujjah*. The Imāms were the "pillars of the earth" (*arkān al-arḍ*) and thus its necessary support.[8]

Substitutionary atonement, in its widest sense, has historically not been alien to Shīʿi Islam. Mahmoud Ayoud has described Ḥusayn b. Alī, the third Shīʿi Imām, as having "generally been considered by the Islāmic tradition to be a sacred sacrifice offered on the altar of truth, the truth that continues to guide human history to it [sic] ultimate fulfillment in accordance with the will and plan of God."[9] A well-known folk tradition that is attributed to al-Ḥusayn's sister, Zaynab bt. ʿAlī, states, "O God, accept from us this sacrifice (*hādhā al-qurbān*)."[10]

A popular historical view is that al-Ḥusayn sacrificed his life so that the Muslim community would wake up from its heedlessness (*ghaflah*), be mindful of God's commands and be washed of its sins. In other words, the Imām's life was offered as a sacrifice (*qurbān*) so that Muslims would be free of sin. It may be argued that this form of substitutionary atonement may be in line with the Qur'anic narrative. The Qur'an, for example, presents the story of Lot who had offered his daughters in marriage so that the people of Sodom would desist from sexual sins[11] a sacrifice which did not involve his own life but may have been an even greater sacrifice as it involved the wellbeing of his own offspring.

With this in mind, it is possible that in early Shīʿi memory the tradition of al-Kāẓim's sacrifice could have referred to an attempt to atone for the sins of others through a sacrifice that would not only protect the Shīʿah from political oppression, but the Imām - as a theophanic and cosmogenic reality – would also suffer for the sins of his flock. Through al-Kāẓim's grand deed, the Shīʿah would become mindful of their sins and thereby move towards 'righteousness' thus ensuring their salvation.

---

[8] Maria Massi Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 167.
[9] Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ʿĀshūrāʾ in Twlever Shīʿism* (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 91.
[10] ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Mūsawī al-Muqarram, *Kitāb al-ʿAbbās* (Najaf: Maktabat al-Rawḍah al-ʿAbbāsiyyah, [1427/2006-7]), 115. I would like to thank my friend and colleague Bilal Muhammad for pointing out this folk tradition to me.
[11] See Q11:77-79; 15:67-71.