

Sin, Atonement, and the Basic Divine-Human Relationship in Judaism and Christianity

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15 Dec 2004

INTRODUCTION

As a Christian and a student of the Old Testament,¹ I am interested in the way the Christian faith (as represented by both the New Testament and later tradition) works with the Old Testament text, themes and vision. Since I believe in both tradition and the continual reformation of our theology, I find it important to listen to many different voices about the canonical texts. Voices from within the tradition provide guidance from the wisdom of years and the collective voice of the worshipping community. Voices from outside the tradition provide necessary challenges to traditional thinking, the importance of which has been increasingly noted by those who find traditional thinking consciously or unconsciously gathering and preserving power for the traditions of the tradition rather than seeking after truth that may challenge and possibly disadvantage them. I am aware enough of my own self-interested readings to acknowledge the need to read outside of my tradition. Truth can be found in unexpected places.

In this essay, I attend to an Orthodox Jewish voice on the topic of sin and atonement in the Old Testament. On this topic I am somewhat suspicious of my tradition (which is based on Reformed Christianity, though less dogmatic than many in that camp). When I first became a Christian I was disturbed by an apparent harshness of YHWH I saw in the Old Testament, but years of subsequent reflection have opened my eyes to the overwhelming grace that is also there. As that stumbling block has been (largely) removed, a new one has appeared in trying to square the Old Testament with subsequent Christian understandings of sin and atonement.² I find a number of curious tensions that call for attention. For example, Christian teaching often asserts the necessity of blood sacrifice to atone for sin and restore peace between the sinner and God. Prooftexts are available for such an idea, and the doctrine is useful for understanding the necessity of Christ's death. However, the Old Testament narratives seem curiously uninterested in connecting blood sacrifice with reconciliation of sinners to YHWH.³ As another example, Christian teaching on original sin and total depravity point to all of humanity being not only corrupted by sin (which should be obvious to anyone reading a newspaper or taking a moment to ponder one's own heart), but under the wrath of God, and condemned to eternal damnation. Though I personally have some understanding of, sympathy with, and humility before this teaching, it seems odd to me in two ways. First, this understanding of God's justice requires

¹ I consistently use the term "Old Testament" to refer to the first part of the Christian canon, while acknowledging all of the well known problems with the term. These problems are especially pointed in Jewish-Christian dialogue. In an earlier draft of this essay, I attempted to use different terms for these scriptural texts depending on whether I was speaking in the context of the Jewish or the Christian canon. However, there are too many multi-faceted usages for such an effort to succeed. Since I write as a Christian and my particular interest here is a better understanding of the Christian canon through attending to Jewish readings of the same texts, I thought it most appropriate to use the Christian term for the collection.

² I use the phrase "subsequent Christian understandings" as a sloppy shorthand for the New Testament and later Christian theology that accounts both the Old and New Testaments as authoritative and seeks to systematize and summarize them in various ways (e.g., creeds, confessions, sermons, popular theology).

³ Rob Barrett, "A Partial Survey of the Structure of Offense Narratives in post-Sinai Israel," n.p. cited Nov. 18, 2004. Online: <http://www.coffeewithbarretts.com/writings/Offense.pdf>.

extraordinary argument and considerable abstract thinking in order to make a persuasive case to a non-believer. Since prior acceptance of this idea is the opening assumption for many presentations of the gospel of redemption from the death of sin, it is somewhat surprising that it requires so much energy to get to the starting gate.⁴ But a second reason for wondering about these doctrines is that the Old Testament does not obviously approach the issue that way. Israel is certainly concerned with sin and atonement, but YHWH does not obviously and fundamentally approach his chosen nation with an attitude of wrath, nor with a demand for prior atoning sacrifices before interacting with them in a positive way.⁵ Rather, much of the Old Testament presents YHWH delighting in Israel and Israel delighting in YHWH. Though it must quickly be acknowledged that sin, wrath, danger, and tragic consequences are never hidden far away. But still, Abraham, Moses and David seem to enjoy YHWH's pleasure and even intimacy during their lives, despite being far from perfect, and without any obvious appeals to a future atonement by Christ.

So I have questions about how one should understand the Christian view of the basic divine-human relationship, particularly within the categories of sin that damages the relationship and of atonement that heals it again. How far does his revelation explain God's heart toward people so that Christians may rightly think and feel about our standing before him? Furthermore, what is revealed to us about God's heart toward others, whether Christian, Jew or non-believer? What do the categories of sin and atonement have to say about these?

In order to broaden my thinking, I decided to read some contemporary Jewish theology on sin and atonement, offered for the sake of Jewish-Christian dialogue. I am so settled in my mind through years of traditional Christian teaching that I have trouble thinking outside of those channels. Therefore, I turn to Jewish theologians, who have reflected on the same Hebrew text but from a separated tradition. Obviously their understanding of sin and atonement has no cross, and yet with claims of vital relationship with YHWH. So with all of the humility I can muster, I ask for help from Jewish theology, help in reading their Hebrew Scriptures and our Old Testament, help in hearing the voice of YHWH in the text.

I must apologize for attempting in this paper to characterize Orthodox Jewish theology. Not being my own tradition, the breadth of my reading on the subject has been miniscule and my reflection minimal, yet I write boldly as if I understand what I am writing about. So I put my thoughts onto paper with the hope that my errors will thereby be more readily corrected, my oversimplifications filled out, and my rough distinctions nuanced. Unfortunately, my characterization of Reformed Christianity likely suffers from similar faults, despite years of reading and reflection!

⁴ The difficulty may not be surprising if one takes the viewpoint that our depravity is so deep that we cannot even begin to grasp our own depravity. This is the way I currently approach the argument.

⁵ Certain cultic texts of the Old Testament could be cited to support this point-of-view, however many narrative and prophetic texts do not seem to find the cult indispensable for maintenance of a positive relationship between YHWH and Israel.

The Old Testament has been doubly interpreted through rabbinic Judaism's Talmud and Christianity's New Testament. Does this text have its own voice apart from these canonical additions? I will return to this question later, but for the moment I suggest we listen for it by exploring the similarities and differences between the Jewish and Christian metanarratives that provide a grid for reading the text. These metanarratives were developed out of the two different compound canons and represent particular interpretations of those canons. Therefore they must both cohere (to a greater or lesser degree) with the Old Testament, which is the earlier portion of both canons. It is my aim to shed light on the Old Testament's theology of sin and atonement by exploring both the Jewish and Christian metanarratives that depend to some degree upon the Old Testament.

Some forays into Jewish-Christian dialogue take first steps at enabling adherents of the two traditions to hear each other's views by finding connections between the traditions and their language of expression. For example, Steven Kepnes draws parallels between the Jewish and Christian ideas of sin, atonement and redemption by connecting the Christian doctrine of "original sin" with the Jewish idea of "exile" (further discussed below), the Christian idea of pervasive "sin" with Jewish ideas of "impurity," Christ's atoning sacrifice in terms of *Yom Kippur* and the *Akedah*.⁶ This essay takes a different approach by seeking to engage the overarching metanarratives of Christianity and Judaism in which the concepts of sin and atonement occur. By examining the metanarratives, I am agreeing with R. Kendall Soulen who points out the importance of what he terms the "canonical narrative." He helpfully identifies this canonical narrative not as the narrative contained within the canonical text, but rather the framework that is used for interpreting the canon. He functionally defines it: "A canonical narrative provides an interpretive construal of the [canon] that is logically distinct from the [canonical] text itself. In effect, a canonical narrative is a story that permits [the canon community] to read the multiplicity of [canonical] stories (and legal codes, genealogies, letters, etc.) in reasonably coherent and consistent terms."⁷ The canonical narrative is external to the canon itself, but is a product of the canon and its interpreters, and provides the hermeneutical lens through which the canon is read. Although Soulen works with a single Christian canonical narrative in his book, it is probably helpful to speak of a collection of such narratives that can be tapped to interpret various canonical texts and various situations in life.

In this essay, I seek to articulate schematic canonical narratives (sacrificing a good deal of importance nuance in the process) for understanding the basic divine-human relationship in the Jewish and Christian faiths. In particular, I am interested in their understanding of the tension between

⁶ Steven Kepnes, "'Turn Us to You and We Shall Return': Original Sin, Atonement, and Redemption in Jewish Terms," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel and Michael A. Signer; Boulder: Westview, 2000).

⁷ R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 15. I have used bracketed terms in the cited quotation to generalize from Christianity and the Bible to general canonical texts and their communities. Soulen acknowledges his debt to Woods for his work on "canonical construal" (Charles Monroe Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981], esp. chapter 4). There is clearly a connection between the idea of a canonical narrative and more traditional summaries of a belief system such as creeds and rules of faith.

YHWH and humans that results from sin, and the ways that tension is resolved. In the following section, I summarize two sketches of the dynamic of sin, one from Orthodox Judaism and one from Reformed Christianity. I try to present them in their own terms, though helpfully the Jewish source from which I draw was written in the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue. I then draw out the canonical narrative that seems to underlie their viewpoints, highlighting some of the similarities and differences. Finally, I present a number of questions that result.

TWO POSITIONS ON SIN

Orthodox Judaism: Michael Wyschogrod

Michael Wyschogrod is an Orthodox Jewish philosopher and theologian who is involved in discussions both within Judaism and with Christianity. As R. Kendall Soulen puts it, “Wyschogrod offers the Christian reader a statement of Jewish theology that is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition yet conversant with Christian theology and its questions.”⁸ In Wyschogrod’s essay “Sin and Atonement in Judaism”⁹ he presents the Jewish understanding¹⁰ of these two themes, structuring his presentation around the often unconscious conversation partners of secularism and Christianity.

Sin vs. Wrongdoing: The Influences of Secularism and Christianity

Wyschogrod first contrasts the ideas of sin and wrongdoing. He distinguishes them by marking the former as a religious offense against YHWH and the latter as an offense against an objective moral standard without reference to YHWH. Sin is a violation of divine command, regardless of whether the command can be rationally understood—indeed, “in its pristine form, sin presupposes a command which has no persuasive ingredient other than the authority of him who issues the command.”¹¹ Wrongdoing, on the other hand, presupposes a set of rules that are apart from YHWH (or even over YHWH) from which the wrongdoer deviates. To do a wrong is as impersonal as to arrive at the wrong answer in an arithmetic sum. And, with reference to Plato, since all people desire the good, anyone doing not-good must do so because of imperfect knowledge. Therefore the solution for wrongdoing is to correct the deficient knowledge, but sin is another matter.

Wyschogrod then divides the modes of sin into two categories: (1) outright disobedience of YHWH’s commands, and (2) acting in accord with YHWH’s commands but for reasons other than that they are such. The first is obvious, but the second is a subtle move of replacing YHWH as the law-giver with autonomous moral reasoning that identifies right behavior with a standard that exists

⁸ Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 5.

⁹ Michael Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” in *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (ed. R. Kendall Soulen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁰ To speak of “the Jewish understanding” of any topic is clearly an oversimplification (as would be for Christianity as well), but Wyschogrod focuses on classical rabbinic Judaism and its contemporary shape in (some strand of?) Orthodox Judaism.

¹¹ Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” 55.

apart from YHWH's commands. As an example,¹² if a man chooses not to commit adultery out of faithfulness to his wife rather than because YHWH has commanded it, then he sins because he has deemed YHWH irrelevant and placed his own moral reasoning above YHWH's command.¹³

Wyschogrod grounds this position in Gen. 3, where he interprets the forbidden fruit as an inscrutable divine test of Adam and Eve: will they choose to obey without other reason, or will they follow the serpent's lead by refusing to do what they do not understand? Reaching for the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil is exactly a grab at godhood, for they then step into the domain YHWH has reserved for himself: "The implication clearly is that eating of the forbidden tree will result in man obtaining knowledge of good and evil. Instead of simply obeying the divine lawgiver, he will then be in a position to know why the good is good and the evil, evil. It seems that God does not wish man to have this knowledge. He is to obey God in order to obey God and for no other reason."¹⁴ After violating this first command, Adam and Eve indeed begin to make autonomous moral judgments, with the first being their recognition of their own nudity (Gen. 3:7). Wyschogrod sees this mode of sinning through independent moral judgments to be particularly dangerous because such a sinner feels morally fulfilled, free of guilt, and happily self-righteous, while becoming steadily more distant from YHWH. Thus secularism subtly subverts the Jewish idea of sin by seeking to replace YHWH's commands with moral autonomy.

Wyschogrod then turns to the other influence on the Jewish understanding of sin: Christianity. Instead of the subtle, assimilating influence of secularism, Christianity provides a foil that Jewish theology seeks to oppose. He notes that popular Jewish belief caricatures Christian theology and then seeks to believe the opposite. Thus Christianity is seen as focusing on humanity's freewill-negating depravity, with no hope for salvation apart from extraordinary divine intervention, which necessitates predestining who will be saved and who will be damned. Christianity is seen to give no credit for goodness while faulting all evil. Jewish theology therefore takes the opposite stance and emphasizes human freewill and the relative ease with which YHWH's commandments may be obeyed (cf. Deut. 30:11-14). "If Christianity minimizes free will, Judaism will maximize it. If Christianity is pessimistic, Judaism will be optimistic. If Christianity is otherworldly, Judaism will be this-worldly. If Christianity emphasizes sin, Judaism will de-emphasize it. The list could be extended quite a bit."¹⁵

¹² I have composed this example to illustrate Wyschogrod's point, so I bear responsibility for it and hope it properly highlights Wyschogrod's intention.

¹³ Obviously, such a polarization makes it difficult to accept any role for the conscience in moral decision making. Wyschogrod addresses this issue in another essay in the same volume (Michael Wyschogrod, "Judaism and Conscience," in *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* [ed. R. Kendall Soulen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004]). He clearly does not speak for all Judaism in this regard. Hazony's review points out that Reform Judaism approves of an individual's autonomous search for right and wrong (David Hazony, "Interfaith Dialogue: Abraham's Promise--Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations," *Commentary* 119:1 [Jan. 2005]: 77).

¹⁴ Wyschogrod, "Sin and Atonement in Judaism," 55.

¹⁵ Wyschogrod, "Sin and Atonement in Judaism," 62.

Sin and Atonement in the Jewish Tradition

In response to the distorting pressures of Christianity and secularism on the Jewish understanding of sin, Wyschogrod seeks to “think about sin and atonement out of the integrity of Judaism and without attempting either to polemicize against or please any other faith. . . . Our task is to listen...to all the voices of the tradition, to all the texts, and to fashion from them an interpretation that reflects the thrust of the tradition presented in the most insightful way possible.”¹⁶ He lays his cornerstone here: “It appears to me quite clear that the Hebrew Bible assigns considerable choice to man.”¹⁷ Pharaoh’s hardening (Exod. 7:3) and prophetic predictions notwithstanding, he sees the Pentateuch through-and-through as clearly implying that people have the power to either accept or reject YHWH’s commandments.¹⁸ However, he quickly adds that this is not the whole truth. Rather, it is likewise “implicit in the Bible that God remains in control of history, and that in spite of the reality of human freedom, man’s ability to frustrate God’s plan for his creation is not without limits.”¹⁹ He finds the balance between human freedom and divine sovereignty in his observation that people can seriously interfere with YHWH’s plan but cannot completely wreck it. “While man has the power to do the former, I do not think he can quite achieve the latter.”²⁰ So although it may seem that human repentance controls the choice between a paradisiacal future and a destructive one, YHWH’s predilection for compassion over anger means that paradise will win in the end, implying that the messianic promises are not conditional. Israel’s election is irrevocable. YHWH’s punishment will not destroy Israel, but his love will return, and reconciliation with his people will take place. The rabbis allow for repentance being necessary for reconciliation by noting that YHWH will make Israel’s repentance happen through hardship, if repentance is indeed necessary. Wyschogrod recognizes that this position is not so different from (reformed) Christian notions of predestination, though he prefers to see it at the level of the nation of Israel rather than for individuals. His point is that even though the human imagination can conceive of Jewish history ending, the Old Testament does not allow for that possibility.

Having found his balance between human freedom and divine sovereignty, Wyschogrod then turns to the question of the seriousness of sin. He sees popular Judaism as taking sin too lightly, for it has catastrophic consequences. But no matter how sinful Israel is, he takes issue with the idea of unrelieved depravity since Israel also shows signs of loyalty, which proves that obedience is indeed possible. Most importantly, Israel’s sin is always within the context of their election by YHWH and

¹⁶ Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” 63.

¹⁷ Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” 63.

¹⁸ “Given the narrative economy that is characteristic of the biblical style and given the fact that the Bible likes to tell stories far better than to ask second-order, theoretical questions about those stories, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Bible understands that, by and large, people do what they do because they want to do it and that they could have done other than what they in fact ended up doing” (Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” 63).

¹⁹ Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” 64.

²⁰ Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” 65.

his special love that trumps any anger and guarantees an ultimately happy reconciliation between Israel and YHWH. “The terror of total damnation, of total rejection by God is thus absent, and it is perhaps this, more than anything else, which enables Jewish optimism to coexist with profound understanding of the sinfulness of man and the reality of punishment.”²¹

Turning to the redressing of the problem of sin, Wyschogrod names atonement as the correction of sin. Again in contrast to wrongdoing, which cannot be corrected because it lies in the past, the relational rupture with YHWH that is sin can be erased and undone through atonement. In the Pentateuch, atonement has both cultic and penitential aspects, but after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. the rabbis accommodated the impossibility of sacrifice by focusing on repentance and preserving the cult by means of structured memorial prayers.²² Wyschogrod expresses a longing for the restoration of a sacramental cult within Israel and notes that the Christian Eucharist maintains an element of holiness and physical, personal interaction with YHWH that present Judaism lacks.

Wyschogrod closes his essay with some comments about the *yetzer hara* (“evil inclination,” cf. Gen. 6:5; 8:21), which is a rabbinic innovation over the written Torah. In the rabbinic understanding, YHWH created an evil inclination that tempts people to sin. All are susceptible to it and its very existence as part of YHWH’s “very good” creation (Gen. 1:31) both reduces Israel’s culpability and partially indicts YHWH for human sin.²³

Reformed Christianity: Cornelius Plantinga and John Calvin

Cornelius Plantinga was a professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary and is now president of that institution. He has a passion for classical education and shaping the hearts as well as the minds of Christians. In his book, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*,²⁴ he reintroduces his readers to the orthodox Christian understanding of “the nature and dynamics of sin.”²⁵ He sees the doctrine of sin as having been wrongly downplayed in the contemporary church: “For the Christian church...to ignore, euphemize, or otherwise mute the lethal reality of sin is to cut the nerve of the gospel. For the sober truth is that without full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting.”²⁶ His book seeks to re-enliven the Christian understanding of sin, winning it the “1996 Book of the Year” award from *Christianity Today*. Because he focuses on sin without any discussion of atonement, I augment the summary of his book with elements from John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.²⁷ Calvin’s systematic presentation of

²¹ Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” 68.

²² This rabbinic move was justified by appeals to prophetic passages that criticize sacrifices that lack repentance and other texts that imply the efficacy of repentance without sacrifices (Wyschogrod, “Sin and Atonement in Judaism,” 70-1).

²³ The relative power of the *yetzer* and its place in Jewish ethical teaching may be quite relevant to the topic under consideration, but is beyond the scope of this essay.

²⁴ Cornelius (Jr.) Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

²⁵ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 5.

²⁶ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 199.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

Christianity, while not by any means endorsed by all Christian theologians, is an anchor point for Reformed Christian theology.

Sin is Culpable Shalom-Breaking

Plantinga begins with a definition of sin, which he derives from his concept of “shalom,” taken to mean “the way things ought to be,”²⁸ in which he includes such things as strong marriages; secure children; nations and races treasuring differences in other nations and races as attractive, important, and complementary; highway overpasses free of graffiti; and above all God “presid[ing] in the unspeakable beauty for which human beings long and in the mystery of holiness that draws human worship like a magnet.”²⁹ Given this idea of shalom, sin is defined as “culpable shalom-breaking,”³⁰ which is not just the breaking of a law but a “personal affront to a personal God.”³¹ These two ideas of breaking shalom and offending God are linked because Plantinga asserts that “God is...not arbitrarily offended. God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. ... God is for shalom and *therefore* against sin.”³² For Plantinga, sin is culpable shalom-breaking in the sense that the offender has consciously acted against the divine idea of shalom, not that a logically subsequent command has been broken. We immediately observe a fundamental difference between Wyschogrod and Plantinga: the latter presupposes in his definition of sin a rational understanding of the positive goal that God has in mind, while the former eschews such an understanding because it risks replacing YHWH with an objective standard, thus making him redundant. Plantinga does not endorse Wyschogrod’s distinction between sin and wrongdoing. As Plantinga explores the finer points of his definition, it can also be observed that he focuses much more on the individual and their circumstances than Wyschogrod. For example, he presents a fictional case study of Jim Bob who has been uniformly educated to be a racist. Is his racism (in Plantinga’s assessment, a breaking of shalom) culpable if he has never seen otherwise? In Wyschogrod’s understanding, if racism is prohibited by YHWH, then Jim Bob’s racism is clearly inadvertent sin (since he knew no better), but even if inadvertent then still a violation of YHWH’s command. Plantinga works his way through “great philosophical and theological swamps”³³ in order to evaluate Jim Bob’s culpability, relative to his parents’ and that of social and structural evil.³⁴

For Plantinga, the Primordial History of Genesis teaches the corrupting power of sin. Though Christians vary on the details of how the original sin of Adam propagates, all subsequent people are

²⁸ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 10.

²⁹ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 11-2.

³⁰ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 14.

³¹ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 13.

³² Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 14 (emphasis original).

³³ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 24.

³⁴ Cf. the Roman Catholic idea of “invincible ignorance,” which absolves one of responsibility for ignorance if moral diligence is inadequate for ridding one of the ignorance. Such ignorance is involuntary and therefore not imputable (Joseph F. Delany, “Ignorance,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 7:).

seen to have had their special human excellences perverted³⁵ so that they are not sound, but “we now sin with the ease and readiness of people born to the task.”³⁶ Left to itself, the corrupting power of sin takes human beings who were created out of nothing and corrupts them back into nothing by rebellion and defection.³⁷ Plantinga uses an outrageous case of remorseless child abuse as an example of utter corruption. In example after example, Plantinga seeks to convince the reader of the horrible reality of sin, its pervasive corruption, and its destructive force.³⁸

God’s Perspective on Sin and Guilt

To continue the Christian story of the dynamics of sin, we now turn to John Calvin. Central to Calvin’s understanding is that sin pervades every dimension of every person subsequent to Adam (even apart from any particular offenses that person may commit against God), and furthermore that this state of sin renders every person condemned before God:

...being thus perverted and corrupted in all the parts of our nature, we are, merely on account of such corruption, deservedly condemned by God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity. ... Even infants bringing their condemnation with them from their mother’s womb, suffer not for another’s,³⁹ but for their own defect. For although they have not yet produced the fruits of their own unrighteousness, they have the seed implanted in them. Nay, their whole nature is, as it were, a seed-bed of sin, and therefore cannot but be odious and abominable to God.”⁴⁰

In agreement with Plantinga, the sin within us all works itself out through the corruption of all human deeds, which is further condemned by God: “All of us, therefore, have that within which deserves the hatred of God. Hence, in respect, first, of our corrupt nature; and secondly, of the depraved conduct following upon it, we are all offensive to God, guilty in his sight, and by nature the children of hell.”⁴¹

Redemption from Sin in Christ

It is from this terrible starting situation that Calvin then turns to the gracious redemption found in Christ. He first observes that despite our sin, God find something in us to love:⁴² “Though it is by our own fault that we are sinners, we are still his creatures; though we have brought death upon ourselves, he had created us for life. Thus, mere gratuitous love prompts him to receive us into favour.”⁴³ Thus there is a tension in God between love for us and hatred, but his love wins out: “In order that all

³⁵ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 3.

³⁶ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 33.

³⁷ Following Athanasius (Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 48).

³⁸ In his epilogue he offers a few glimpses of the other side of human existence—“exultant worship, fifty-year wedding anniversaries” (Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 198)—and concludes, “Evil rolls across the ages, but so does good. Good has its own momentum. Corruption never wholly succeeds. (Even blasphemers acknowledge God.) Creation is stronger than sin and grace stronger still” (Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 199).

³⁹ Calvin here argues against the idea that we unjustly stand condemned before God for Adam’s sin; he maintains that we are justly condemned because of our own sin.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:I.8.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:XVI.3.

⁴² “But as the Lord wills not to destroy in us that which is his own, he still finds something in us which in kindness he can love” (Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:XVI.3).

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:XVI.3.

ground of offence may be removed, and he may completely reconcile us to himself, he, by means of the expiation set forth in the death of Christ, abolishes all the evil that is in us, so that we, formerly impure and unclean, now appear in his sight just and holy.”⁴⁴

This love, however, does not win out in all cases and for all people. Calvin sees this grace as being obtained by individuals through the secret operation of the Spirit, through whom Christ comes to dwell in the elect.⁴⁵ The result of this work of the Spirit is faith: “Faith consists not in ignorance, but in knowledge—knowledge not of God merely, but of the divine will.”⁴⁶ This high wisdom into God’s will is greatly limited during this life,⁴⁷ but at least one insight is needful for faith to be genuine: Calvin defines faith as “a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁸

The immediate result of this Spirit-given faith is repentance.⁴⁹ Faith and repentance can be distinguished but they exist together.⁵⁰ It is important for Calvin that repentance is not just for a particular deed, but for the whole life: repentance is “a real conversion of our life unto God, proceeding from sincere and serious fear of God; and consisting in the mortification of our flesh and the old man, and the quickening of the Spirit.”⁵¹ This quickening of the Spirit instills into our mind and heart “sentiments of justice, judgment, and mercy, . . . instilling his holiness into our souls.”⁵² Such quickening does not eliminate the proclivity to sin, for “in the regenerate man, there is still a spring of evil which is perpetually sending forth desires that allure and stimulate him to sin,”⁵³ which continues throughout this life. Yet, Christians have the love of righteousness instilled and implanted in them so they will no longer wallow in their former iniquities and pollutions.⁵⁴ Though regenerate lives are still far from perfectly conformed to the will of God, there is daily progress until “when relieved from the infirmity of flesh we are admitted to full fellowship with God.”⁵⁵ For Calvin, the life that flows from faith and repentance thus seeks to let God’s wisdom and will preside over all actions, not living by reason alone but through submission to the Holy Spirit whereby Christ lives and reigns over the Christian.⁵⁶

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:XVI.3.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:I.1.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:II.2.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:II.3.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:II.7.

⁴⁹ It is important to Calvin that the order not be reversed: repentance does not produce faith (Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:III.1).

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:III.5.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:III.5.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:III.8.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:III.10.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:VI.2.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:VI.5.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:VII.1.

TWO CANONICAL NARRATIVES ON SIN

Having summarized the treatments of sin in Wyschogrod's Orthodox Judaism, and Plantinga's and Calvin's Reformed Christianity, I now generate a schematic canonical narrative for each that highlights their key features. These 'narratives' only seek to deal with the problem of sin and its remedy as it has to do with the human-divine relationship.

Orthodox Judaism: Sin within the Context of Election

YHWH eternally elected Israel out of his great love for him, and has blessed him with the (somewhat inscrutable) Torah as guidance for life and for responding to YHWH's love. Full obedience to Torah is not extraordinarily difficult, and Israel has demonstrated substantial loyalty to Torah through the ages. Disobedience to Torah, whether intentional or not, is rebellion against YHWH. Such disobedience is sin and can have terrible consequences. Sin may be a result of the temptation of the *yetzer hara*. Sin disrupts Israel's relationship with YHWH, but he permits atonement through repentance (and sometimes cult) to repair the disruption and restore things to their situation before the sin occurred. Israel's ability to sin is limited by YHWH's sovereign power, for he is determined to maintain Israel's eternal election and the love relationship between YHWH and Israel.

Reformed Christianity: Sin Frustrates Creation

God created humanity with knowledge of him and his will for creation. The first human pair rebelled against God and his will, triggering a progressive and corrupting influence that has tragically disrupted the created world. All humanity has been corrupted by the power of sin, rendering every person detestable in God's sight and unable to please him. However, God's love for humanity caused him to send Jesus to live a perfect life and suffer an atoning death on the cross on behalf of all who live under the curse of sin. For those in whom the Holy Spirit works, Jesus' atoning sacrifice restores them to a position of favor in God's sight, brings to them afresh the knowledge of God and his will, and places within them a love for righteousness. Repentance from the former life of sin is a sign of this inward work. Though knowledge of and obedience to YHWH's will is presently imperfect, it will be made perfect in the age to come.

Comparison and Contrast

These two canonical narratives of sin and the divine-human relationship hold much in common, however their differences are striking in light of their common heritage in the Old Testament. In this section I first present some similarities and then discuss some differences. For the remainder of this essay, I refer to "Judaism" and "Christianity" as shorthand for "Orthodox Judaism as presented by Wyschogrod" and "Reformed Christianity as presented by Plantinga and Calvin," respectively.

Similarities

The first common element is that both traditions hold the same core understanding of what sin is: rebellion by creatures against their Creator by acting in a manner contrary to his will. Second, both understand sin to be a serious problem that can have serious consequences. Wyschogrod sees popular Judaism as erroneously downplaying the seriousness of sin in response to Christianity's focus on it, but Plantinga also feels the necessity of calling Christians back to their traditional understanding of the calamitous results of sin. Third, both traditions maintain that the extent of sin (or to put it differently, the degree of human freedom for sinning) is limited by YHWH. Sin can frustrate but not destroy his plan; he will use his power against the human freedom to sin in order to ensure that his goals are achieved.

Third, YHWH's anger at sin and punishment of it is constrained by his great love for his people; his love for his people trumps his hatred of their rebellion. Fourth, in recognition of the need for restoring the divine-human relationship in light of their rebellion, YHWH has provided atonement as a means for reconciliation. Fifth, human repentance is a fundamental element of efficacious atonement. Sixth, the people of YHWH (whether Israel or the church) currently live in a tension between loyalty and rebellion. In response to YHWH's love, they love him and his righteous ways, however there is a continuing inclination toward rebellious sin.

These common elements in the two traditions might seem to provide enough of a framework for developing a common canonical narrative for understanding the divine-human relationship in light of sin. However, differences in details between the two traditions are significant enough that the resulting narratives almost seem unrecognizable to each other. I now turn to a discussion of some of those differences.

Differences

The first important difference between the two traditions is the Jewish focus on "sins" and the Christian focus on "Sin," or in other words, the portrayal of rebellion against YHWH as particular acts of disobedience against his will or as a deep corruption of humanity that then results in particular acts of disobedience. This difference is fundamental and accounts for much that separates the two traditions. For example, Jewish repentance is a turning from acts of inadvertent or intentional disobedience. Christian repentance is from an entire life, or even from an entire former person. Further, Jewish sin is a disruption in the divine-human relationship that can be restored straightforwardly, while Christian sin is progressive and corrupting power that starts from a single act at Eden and perverts all of creation. Another aspect of this difference is that sin, atonement, and restoration are ordinary parts of the created order for Israel in the Jewish view, while they take on universal proportions in the Christian view with its once-for-all atoning sacrifice of Christ. Thus Gen. 3 is read very differently by the two different traditions. For Christians, Adam's sin is "The Fall" that

moved the divine-human relationship from harmony to estrangement, triggering a growing disaster that reached its nadir at the cross. For Jews, Gen. 3 seems not to be so drastically different from the ordinary course of human life: YHWH's people rebel, suffer the consequences, and move on. Sin and restorative atonement are part of the normal rhythm of life for YHWH's people, requiring no particularly heroic measures on either side.⁵⁷

A second important difference is not unrelated to the first: the relative difficulty of living a life in harmony with YHWH. In Judaism, being obedient to YHWH is possible and not particularly difficult, and indeed Israel has demonstrated a significant degree of loyalty to YHWH through the millennia. Though YHWH has occasionally had to punish Israel for disobedience (sometimes severely) in order to bring the nation back to him, such punishment has been effective. In Christianity, obedience to God is not only difficult but impossible. Sin has such corrupting power that our best attempts to live righteously are perverted, self-serving and abominable in God's sight, thus the doctrine of total depravity.⁵⁸ So although both Christianity and Judaism acknowledge an inclination to evil, for Judaism this inclination is of secondary importance while for Christianity it is primary. This difference between Judaism and Christianity is revealed in another way: by opposite concerns about God's sovereignty and human freewill. Reformed Christianity argues that against appearances, people are unable to do anything decisively good. None are free to rise above sin and gain God's favor. Orthodox Judaism looks at the opposite problem: against appearances, Israel is unable to sin so badly that YHWH will forswear their election. Israel is not free to do anything decisively bad.

A third difference is the role of YHWH's people understanding his character and will. For Judaism, the Torah (including its rabbinic interpretation) is a concrete expression of YHWH's will for his people. It is not necessarily 'rational' to our minds (and we should not be surprised to find this to be the case) but it contains the full extent of what is expected of us. Study of Torah is important for avoiding unintentional sin. But Jews do not seem to seek an understanding of the divine mind. For Christians there is a much deeper expectation for aligning the human and divine mind. Plantinga defines shalom as "the way things ought to be,"⁵⁹ with the implication that God holds us responsible not only for living in accordance with the way things ought to be, but also for having proper knowledge about how things ought to be. The Christian canonical narrative is thus shaped around this knowledge, with sin disrupting our understanding of God and his will, and regeneration (based on atonement) restoring it. In the Jewish understanding, the Torah is straightforward, available and comprehensible at all times, while in the Christian view what is required of people becomes shrouded by sin and is revealed again through atonement. Wyschogrod implicitly presents this contrast in his consideration of sin and secular wrongdoing. He argues that seeking after an understanding of right

⁵⁷ The Flood Narrative of Gen. 6-9 is of obvious interest here and deserves further consideration.

⁵⁸ Calvin writes, "If everything which our mind conceives, meditates, plans, and resolves, is always evil, how can it ever think of doing what is pleasing to God, to whom righteousness and holiness alone are acceptable?" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:II.25).

⁵⁹ Plantinga, *Not the Way*, 10.

and wrong apart from it simply being what YHWH has commanded is a sin because it replaces him with an objective standard.⁶⁰ Plantinga argues the opposite by positing a thing, shalom, that God is for, hence him being against sin that destroys shalom. It is required of Christians (and indeed all humanity in the Christian view) to understand what it is that God has in mind in order to live in accordance with it. This is not seen to dethrone God but, by seeking what he seeks, gives him the highest honor. Thus sin for Jews is the violation of YHWH's law while for Christians sin is violating what is right, which will always simultaneously be a violation against God's will.

A fourth difference is the relative interest in universal humanity and the particular human family of Israel. The Christian canonical narrative is deeply universal and largely ignores Israel. The Jewish canonical narrative is deeply focused on Israel and largely ignores the rest of humanity. Though both have something to say about these downplayed portions of humanity if one digs into the details, a surprising amount of digging is necessary. As Soulen discusses at length, the controlling Christian canonical narrative has four basic elements: Creation, Fall, Redemption in Christ, and Final Consummation.⁶¹ Israel lies somewhere between the second and third elements but does not merit mention in the overarching story. Even with the canonical status of the Old Testament, Israel plays only a prophetic and foreshadowing role that is largely irrelevant (or even problematic?) to the Christian story.⁶² Judaism is not so different. Yes, there are Gentiles who live apart from Israel, are part of YHWH's beloved creation, and have been blessed by YHWH with the eternal Noachide covenant. And indeed there is a future vision for the nations living in vital relationship with YHWH through Israel, however these people play only a marginal role in Judaism's core story.

OPEN QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

The similarities between the Jewish and Christian understandings of sin and atonement outlined above testify to their common foundation in the Old Testament. However their dramatic differences lead to a number of questions about those scriptures. Are both the Jewish and Christian readings of these scriptures valid? What does "valid" mean? Can it be said that one is more valid than the other? If we assume for the moment that both are valid, does this imply that the Old Testament is an "open ended" text in a fundamental way? How would one evaluate the "open endedness" of a text? Both Jews and Christians supplement these scriptures with additional canonical texts (the New Testament for Christians, the Talmud for Jews) that guide their interpretation. Are the New Testament and Talmud open ended in the same sense and to the same degree as the Old Testament, or do they only permit more constrained readings? Clearly the Old Testament is open ended in the sense that it presents an interpreted history of the past with only partial, figurative and artistic pictures of a future that is both continuous with and discontinuous from that past. But the New Testament and Talmud also have this

⁶⁰ Wyschogrod, "Sin and Atonement in Judaism," 55-60.

⁶¹ Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 12-17, 34-40.

⁶² Soulen points out that the Christian backgrounding of Israel is also apparent in the church's creeds (Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 32).

feature, so it is not obvious that they are inherently more constrained than their predecessor. If the Old Testament is indeed open to wide ranging interpretation, in what sense can a reader seek to hear its voice? Is that voice so polysemous that speaking of its meaning is meaningless? How closed or open is the Old Testament? Does it make any sense to listen for the voice of the Old Testament alone when both Jewish and Christian traditions complement it with a second set of canonical texts?

In this essay I have compared Jewish and Christian views of sin and atonement across the entire sweep of biblical time (although the Jewish view focused more narrowly on the period that began at Mt. Sinai). It seems that the two canonical narratives become somewhat less sharply opposed if one constrains the Christian narrative to the age of the church. In other words, if we compare Israel and the church rather than Israel and all of humanity the stories come closer together. For example, though Christian theology sees all humanity living under the curse of sin, the church dwells in the assuring covenantal love of God—like Israel in Jewish theology. As a further example, though Christian theology sees sin as rendering all of humanity totally depraved, the redeemed church lives in a milder state of being devoted to righteousness but unable to live it out completely in this life. This understanding is not dissimilar from Judaism's understanding of Israel living in the tension of temptation by the *yetzer hara* while devoted to YHWH's Torah. There are still significant differences between the Christian and Jewish canonical narratives (e.g., knowledge of YHWH's will, continuing role of the Jews) but once the scope is limited to YHWH's elected people, the contrast between the narratives is substantially reduced. It should be noted that those outside of the elect have a very different story in the two: Judaism sees Gentiles as having a place in the world to come if they live under the Noachide laws,⁶³ while Christians see those outside the church as condemned.

Kepnes suggests that Jews can better understand the Christian doctrine of original sin by comparing it with the Jewish idea of exile (Hebrew *galut*).⁶⁴ He observes that *galut* describes “a state or condition that limits the human ability to be in free contact with God,”⁶⁵ which is a key consequence of the Christian idea of corrupting original sin. Exile has many different layers, from Adam's alienation from the ground to the central role of the Babylonian exile in the canonical history and to the centrality of the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. in the development of rabbinic Judaism. He notes that exile in Jewish thought does not simply refer to return to the land of Israel, but to “the longing for final redemption and for return to the Edenic state of harmony between human and human, between humans and the world, and between humans and God.”⁶⁶ This contact point with the idea of Sin (with a capital ‘s’) in Christian theology seems promising, especially when Kepnes also points out that, like original sin, “*galut* cannot be overcome by human will alone; exile will end only

⁶³ The rabbinic discussions concerning who has a place in the world to come are complex and I obviously oversimplify things here. The topic of Christian and Jewish eschatology is related to sin and atonement, but beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶⁴ Kepnes, “Original Sin, Atonement, and Redemption,” 295-7.

⁶⁵ Kepnes, “Original Sin, Atonement, and Redemption,” 295.

⁶⁶ Kepnes, “Original Sin, Atonement, and Redemption,” 296.

when God intervenes to make it end.”⁶⁷ Kepnes’ suggestion of a category shift to link original sin with exile opens up the intriguing possibility of finding other less-than-obvious thematic linkages not only between Judaism and Christianity (i.e., more complex connections than the Jewish idea of sin and the Christian idea of sin), but also between Old and New Testaments within Christianity.

An important distinction between the Jewish and Christian canonical narratives of sin and atonement is the importance of sacrifice. With the destruction of the Temple, Judaism did not seem to find it difficult to eliminate the cultic practice from the pattern of maintaining good relations with YHWH. However, Christians grappling with the terror of God dying on a cross and the power of the resurrection led to the doctrine that sacrifice was absolutely necessary for reconciliation between sinful humanity and God, with the Old Testament sacrifices paving the way for the one Ultimate Sacrifice.⁶⁸ What does the Old Testament actually say about sacrifice? How can it justify both the Christian position of absolute necessity⁶⁹ and the Jewish position of disposability? It seems that the Old Testament does not lean fundamentally upon sacrifice for divine-human reconciliation on a *prima facie* reading.

The Jewish and Christian positions on sin are often simplified by saying Jews are optimistic and Christians are pessimistic. I wonder if both approaches are too extreme in light of the Old Testament. Wyschogrod evidences supreme confidence in YHWH’s eternal election of the entire nation of Israel, regardless of their unfaithfulness. However, ten tribes of Israel were cut off by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E., never to be heard from again. Beyond this example of cataclysmic and irreversible loss of a significant portion of the covenant people, the history of Israel—especially as presented in the Old Testament—is one of cliff-hangers. The promise of Land is in jeopardy at the end of Genesis when Abraham’s descendents settle in Egypt. The Pentateuch ends with the redeemed nation on the edge of the Land, with blessings and curses laid before them, but with little confidence that the story will end better than for their parents who died in the wilderness. The Primary History ends with Judah in exile. The entire Old Testament ends with restoration from exile, but with the Jews being far from an obviously blessed nation, rather a minor province in a world dominated by mighty empires. While YHWH’s promises are strong, and Israel’s very existence testifies to his determination to succeed, the presumption that YHWH will continue to bless all (or even much) of ethnic Israel

⁶⁷ Kepnes, “Original Sin, Atonement, and Redemption,” 296.

⁶⁸ I find Johnson helpful here as he addresses the question of what happened to the early Christian thinkers and writers to cause them to rework their symbolic world and produce the New Testament. He writes: “The NT is incomprehensible if seen as a collection of theological writings in an abstract or theoretical mode. . . . It was because men and women of the first-century Mediterranean world, both Jews and Greeks, found their lives suddenly and inexplicably transformed by a new and unsuspected power from a new and confusing source that they were forced to reflect on their lives in a new way and infuse the symbols of their world with new content” (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1999], 104).

⁶⁹ While Christian doctrine maintains the necessity of Christ’s sacrifice, in the Protestant tradition there is no sense of continuing sacrifice.

seems out of keeping with the Old Testament. In light of YHWH's surprises of the past, confidence in a proper understanding of his unconditional promises about the future must be tempered.

Likewise, Christian pessimism about the depravity and fallenness of humanity sometimes seems extreme, especially when considering the faithful of the Old Testament. Abraham, Moses, David, and Jeremiah all had close relationships with YHWH, even with the relational bumps that came along the way. It is difficult to re-read their canonical lives as being under YHWH's wrath, totally depraved and unable to please him. In the present day, Christian evangelism often has an element of convincing people of how dark their hearts and minds are. While it is true that our most righteous moments are filthy in light of Christ's goodness, and while it is also true that the eschatological perfections are far from our present reality, there seems to be significant evidence in the Old Testament for YHWH taking pleasure in some who sincerely seek relationship with him. How should non-believers be introduced to YHWH? The doctrine of total depravity requires careful consideration.

Wyschogrod interestingly notes that the role of sin in the Old Testament is not uniform throughout the canonical history: "While sin does not play a critical role with the patriarchs, it attaches itself to the generation of the exodus through the golden calf, the sin of the spies sent by Moses, and many other incidents too numerous to mention"⁷⁰ This observation raises a number of questions. What is the role of sin in the patriarchal stories? It is certainly there (e.g., Sodom and Gomorrah [Gen. 18:16-19:28], Abimelech sinning against Abraham [Gen. 20:9], Joseph's brothers [Gen. 42:22]) but its presentation is quite different than in the Mosaic stories. Why do the sin stories cluster around Moses? Is there a difference in how sin is presented under Moses and then subsequently under Joshua, the judges, and the kings? How about in the post-exilic stories? What canonical role do such stories play and why is sin treated differently in different periods? Does any difference accord more with the canonical history or the history of the tradition behind the text?⁷¹

In Soulen's examination of the role of Israel in Christian theology he is particularly struggling against supersessionism; however he also makes a case for Christian theology focusing overmuch on redemption from sin and losing its focus on God's creation. He observes that the Christian Bible is "thought to relate a story whose fundamental presupposition is the catastrophe of sin and whose goal is therefore deliverance from the negative conditions of existence. This perspective obscures the possibility that the Hebrew Scriptures are not solely or even primarily concerned with the antithesis of sin and redemption but much rather with the God of Israel's passionate engagement with the mundane affairs of Israel and the nations."⁷² He brings in Bonhoeffer to support his case: "Unlike the other oriental religions, the faith of the Old Testament isn't a religion of redemption. It's true that Christianity has always been regarded as a religion of redemption. But isn't this a cardinal error, which separates Christ from the Old Testament and interprets him on the lines of the myths about

⁷⁰ Wyschogrod, "Sin and Atonement in Judaism," 67-8.

⁷¹ This question can only be addressed if sufficient confidence can be gained concerning the history behind the texts.

⁷² Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 53.

redemption?”⁷³ These suspicions from Soulen and Bonhoeffer are echoed by Judaism’s interpretation of the Old Testament as only secondarily a story of redemption.

This essay has reflected on the canonical narratives that Orthodox Judaism and Reformed Christianity use for understanding the ideas of sin and atonement that are contained within their rich scriptural texts. The differences between these two understandings, despite being anchored in the same Old Testament, are striking and raise numerous questions about both how to read the Old Testament well and how to understand sin and atonement and their implications for the basic divine-human relationship. My hope is that these thoughts will help to direct more in-depth studies into these questions.

⁷³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Enlarged ed.; New York: Collier Books, 1972), 336.

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