

Interpreting 2 Corinthians 5:21 in Light of the Double Meaning of the Hebrew Words *ḥaṭṭā'āt* and *'āšām*

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Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. **For our sake he made him to be sin [or: to be a sin offering] who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** (2 Cor. 5:17-21)

The Hebrew word *ḥaṭṭā'āt* occurs approximately 200 times in the OT. Although its ordinary meaning is “sin,” the fact is that in the majority of occurrences in the OT (approx. 113 times) it carries the special meaning of “sin offering.”¹ In other words, if you see a passage in Leviticus where you have the expression “sin offering,” and you look at the Hebrew translated by that expression, *you will not find* the word *ḥaṭṭā'āt*, “sin,” plus another word for “offering.” The single word *ḥaṭṭā'āt*, depending on context, transparently means *either* sin *or* a sin offering.

If this seems a bit mind-bending, that the same Hebrew word can carry two meanings that are nearly opposite to one another, consider this sample of English words, which, in the same way, can carry nearly opposite meanings, depending on context:

cleave = to separate, to join
clip = cut apart, fasten
custom = usual, special
dust = to remove, add fine particles
fast = rapid, unmoving
oversight = care, error
peer = noble, person of equal rank
sanction = to approve of, to punish
temper = calmness, passion
trim = cut things off, put things on

¹ For *ḥaṭṭā'āt* (Strong's #H2403) as “sin offering,” see Exod. 29:14, 36; 30:10; Lev. 4:3, 8, 20, 21, 24, 25, 29, [x2], 33, [x2], 34; 5:6, 7, 8, 9, [x2], 10, 11, 12, 6:17; 25, [x2], 30; 7:7, 37; 8:2, 14, [x2]; 9:2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 15, 22; 10:17, 19, [x2]; 12:6, 8; 14:13, 19, 22, 31; 15:15, 30; 16:3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 15, 25, 27; 23:19; Num. 6:11, 14, 16; 7:16, 22, 28, 34, 40, 46, 52, 58, 64, 70, 76, 82, 87; 8:8, 12; 15:24, 25, 27; 18:9; 28:15, 22; 29:5, 11, [x2], 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 38; 2 Chron. 29:21, 23, 24; Ezra 6:17; 8:35; Ps. 40:6; Isa. 53:10; Ezek. 40:39; 42:13; 43:19, 22, 25; 44:27, 29; 45:17, 19, 22, 23, 25; 46:20.

In most occurrences in the OT, as I said, *ḥaṭṭā'āt* means “sin offering,” even though its first dictionary definition is “sin.” This is also true for the LXX, the Greek translation of the OT that Paul knew. In most cases the LXX uses the expression *peri hamartias* (literally, “for sin,” implying “offering for sin”) in place of *ḥaṭṭā'āt*, which construction is followed by Paul in Rom. 8:3 and by the author to the Hebrews in Heb. 10:6, 8. However, LXX uses the word *hamartia* by itself more than a dozen times to mean “a sin offering,” literally following the Hebrew.²

With all this understood, it becomes clear that if I were a Hebrew speaker, I could easily say, speaking poetically,

God made him who knew no *sin* (*ḥaṭṭā'āt*) to be a *sin offering* (*ḥaṭṭā'āt*) for us.

Equally, if I were a Greek-speaking Jew who knew the LXX Greek translation of the OT, as Paul is, I could also say, just as he did,

God made him who knew no *sin* (*hamartia*) to be a *sin offering* (*hamartia*) for us.

In fact, when Paul says this, he is may be thinking of Isaiah 53:10, in which it is prophesied,

Though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

In this verse the English words “offering for sin” translate the single Hebrew word *'āšām*, which, just like *ḥaṭṭā'āt*, can mean both “sin” and “offering for sin.”³ This meaning for Paul’s words in 2 Cor. 5:21 not only makes perfect sense in and of itself, but it also coheres 100% with Paul’s perspective on the death of Christ elsewhere. Christ became a sin offering in order that we might be found innocent in the court of judgment and made righteous by the Holy Spirit’s work of cleansing. As he says in Romans 8:1-3,

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of Life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the Law was powerless to do, God did. Sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin (Gr. *peri hamartias*), he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

² For the most common biblical Greek word for sin, *hamartia* (Strong’s #G266), being used in the LXX on its own to refer to a sin offering, see Lev. 4:21, 24, 32; 5:12; Num. 6:14 (in the nominative and accusative cases), and Exod. 29:14, 36; Lev. 4:8, 20, 25, 29, 33, 34; 6:10, 18 (in the genitive case, by itself without the preposition *peri*). For the much less frequent biblical Greek word for sin, *hamartēma* (Strong’s #G265), being used on its own to refer to a sin offering, see Lev. 4:29.

³ For use of the Hebrew word *'āšām* (Strong’s #H817), another one of the words for sin, on its own, to mean “sin offering,” see Lev. 5:6, 7, 8, 16, 18, 19, 25; 6:10; 7:1, 2, 5, 7, 37; 14:12, 13, 14, 17, 21, 24, 25, 28; 19:21.

Let us now look over some alternative possibilities for interpreting Paul's phrase in 2 Cor. 5:21: "he made him. . .to be sin." Let us ask first, "What is sin?" Here are some possible definitions:

Sin is all attitude and action that is at enmity with God, neighbor, and creation.

Sin is disobedience towards God.

Sin is an inner inclination to do evil.

Sin, in other words, can be an attitude, an action, or an inclination. It is never a person, and you cannot say in Greek any more than in English, "I am sin, he is sin." People harbor sin, people serve sin, people do sin. They do not become sin. You cannot make a person—let alone make Jesus—become an evil attitude, an evil inclination, or an evil action. So there is no way to take the statement "He made him to be sin" literally. And once you give up trying to take it literally, you are left with possibilities such as

1. God made him sinful
2. God treated him as though he were sinful
3. God transferred all our filthiness to him as though he were the one who did our sins

Let us look at these three possibilities one by one.

1. First, neither Paul nor any other NT writer ever says "God made him sinful." And no wonder. It would be grotesque to suggest that God, in order to deal with the fact that his creation had become sinful, had to make himself sinful too. Moreover, one of the cardinal truths of the New Testament is that Jesus was and is without sin. If you say, "Well, perhaps he took our sinfulness off of us and put it on himself in order to destroy it," then you are forgetting that sinfulness is not a "thing" like a garment, but an inner attitude, action, and inclination. Did he "take on" our sinful attitudes, actions, and inclinations? Absolutely not. He suffered all these things being carried out against himself. He bore our sins quite literally:

He bore our pride when the Jewish leaders rejected him for showing up their shallowness;
He bore our dishonesty when they told lies about him and accused him falsely;
He bore our violence when the soldiers and the priests beat him and had him flogged;
He bore our hatred when they spit on him and mocked him;
He bore our greed when they divided his outer robes and even cast lots for his underwear;
He bore our murderousness when they crucified and killed him.

2. New Testament writers never say, "God treated Jesus as though he were sinful," but rather they repeatedly affirm that it was human beings that treated Christ as though he were sinful. While most of those watching the crucifixion thought that Jesus was dying under God's rejection and punishment, something else entirely was really happening. Jesus was praying prayers of intercession, he was making disciples, he was being "heard by God," he was giving himself as "a fragrant (pleasing) offering to God," and he was "entrusting himself to God" (see Lk. 23:34-46; Eph. 5:2, Heb. 5:7; 1 Pet. 2:23). True, there is a moment in his agony when he prays, "My God, my God, why have you left me?" (Mk 15:34 || Mt. 27:46, quoting Ps. 22:1). But

the whole of Psalm 22 is prophetic of the sufferings of the Messiah, and Jesus knew that. Psalm 22 prophesies not of God's abandonment of the one who prays, but of God's rescue and vindication of the one who prays. In the prayer's agony, we see his passionate commitment to hold by faith to the truth that God is still with him even when everything happening to him appears contradictory to that truth. As it is said by the author of Hebrews,

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. ... In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his reverence. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all those who obey him. (Heb. 4:14–5:9)

Jesus by no means learned obedience as a son on our behalf by being rejected. He learned obedience by obeying even when it cost him absolutely everything.

3. New Testament writers never say “God transferred all our filthiness to Jesus as though he were the one who did our sins,” but rather just the opposite. It was the pleasingness of Jesus that opened the way for us to become reconciled to God, not our unacceptability that supposedly made Jesus displeasing:

“Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2).

“He kept entrusting himself to him who judges justly, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb. 5:7).

In conclusion, we find that 2 Cor. 5:21 makes very elegant sense when we see the Hebrew word *ḥaṭṭā'āt* or *'āšām* behind the repeated word “sin.” God made the one who knew no sin to be a sin offering for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. Serious absurdities and contradictions to New Testament teaching arise when we try to interpret it in any other way.