

# The Substitutionary Death of Jesus Christ in Second Century Christian Literature

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## Research Question

This study aims to explore what Christian authors of the second century thought about the death of Christ and – more specifically – whether they affirmed that the death of Christ could be interpreted as a substitutionary death. In doing so, this study hopes to grant scholars studying NT-texts relating to Christ’s substitutionary death new avenues of assigning probabilities to certain readings by contrasting their interpretation with that of second century Christians.

## State of Research

There has not yet been a full-scale study of substitutionary interpretations of the death of Christ in the second century. In fact, there has not been any dedicated study on the soteriological interpretation of the death of Christ specifically regarding texts and authors from the second century. In the past much effort within biblical scholarship has gone into reconstructing various proposed backgrounds for the interpretations of the death of Christ within the NT: the OT-background, early Jewish texts or Greco-Roman literature. However, the Christian Reception of the topos or the relevant NT-passages has been largely ignored. There is, therefore, a need for an exploration of this issue within this emerging field of NT-studies, to fill this lacuna within current scholarship.

## Methodology

This study is set up as a hybridization between two methods: First, five case studies will be presented. Then, three overarching studies of certain themes that were evident within the case studies will follow, making use of additional material that was not part of the case studies beforehand. In this way the attention to detail that case studies allow is utilized, while also providing a reasonably meaningful overview of at least some aspects of the theological problem at hand.

In this study texts from the second century that give an interpretation of the death of Christ as substitutionary are explored. This also means that a significant amount of texts that feature other interpretations of the death of Christ, even texts that define the death of Christ as vicarious/effective but not substitutionary, will not be studied. This, of course, presents the danger of becoming a recursive argument: if one only studies texts that one deems feature a substitutionary interpretation of the death of Christ, one is likely to find such an interpretation and therefore might view it as a central tenet of early Christian belief. To mitigate the risk of recursion a chapter giving an overview of the broader context of interpretations of the death of Christ will be added, situating the theological *topos* studied here within the broader theological framework it historically belongs to. It is not the aim of this study to claim that a substitutionary understanding of Christ’s death was the prominent expression of soteriological thought in the second century: it was not. Confining this study to substitutionary interpretations of the death of Christ is simply a matter of space and time constraints.

The texts used as case studies in this dissertation all stem from what one might call the “majority church” . This has not come about by way of choice but is rather the inevitable result of the theological framing of this study: Texts that do not come from the majority tradition do not tend to feature soteriological interpretations of the death of Christ prominently and there is only marginal reference to any substitutionary thought in them.

## Definitions

- Substitution
- Substitution is necessarily an etic term; there is no equivalent lexeme in our ancient sources that conforms to its modern semantic range. This does not rule out the usage of it as an analytic construct that we apply to our sources to find out whether there are concepts within these sources that cohere with our notion of substitution. It does however caution us against uncritically defining certain emic terms as necessarily entailing a substitutionary sense, which might more aptly be provided by context rather than the lexeme itself. Instead, it is often necessary to investigate the inherent system logic of a text and compare that to the predefined heuristic model of substitutionary death.
- For the purposes of this study, substitutionary death can be defined as a person dying instead of another person by taking the place that the beneficiary of the substitution would have ordinarily occupied. This definition delimits the concept of substitution clearly from any notion of participation in Christ’s death and is therefore at odds with at least one popular definition of “Stellvertretung” that was common in the so-called “Tübinger Schule” and still holds much sway within current scholarship. Insofar as substitution is an etic analytical category, one cannot restrict the argument of this study to a certain type of source or literary genre.
- Second Century
- The idea of second century texts cannot be seen as a static or absolute timeframe, but rather as a somewhat fluid setting where all of the texts used could plausibly be located (i. e., the “long second century”).

## Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter I: Methodological Considerations
Chapter II: Overview. The Death of Christ in the Second Century
Case-Studies
Chapter III: The Epistle of Barnabas
Chapter IV: Justin Martyr
Chapter V: Melito of Sardis – Περί Πάσχα
Chapter VI: The Epistle to Diognetus
Chapter VII: Irenaeus of Lyon
Thematic Studies
Chapter VIII: Formulae for the Death of Christ in the Second Century
Chapter IX: The Usage of Ransom Language in the Second Century
Chapter X: The Usage of the Fourth Servant Song in the Second Century
Chapter XI: Summary