CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEPTUAGINT VERSION OF ISAIAH 53 AND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN FORMULA “HE WAS DELIVERED FOR OUR TRESPASSES”

1. Introduction

The discussion of the early Christian prepositional formulae ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν or ἡμῶν has an impressive Scandinavian tradition. One of the most influential publications to the topic is surely Harald Riesenfeld’s article on ὑπὲρ in Kittel’s theological dictionary. In a note Riesenfeld stressed the importance of distinguishing between those cases where ὑπὲρ stands with a personal object and those cases where it is followed by τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν. In his interpretation of the ὑπὲρ phrases though, Riesenfeld did not distinguish between the verbs governing the prepositions. The verbs ἀποθνῄσκειν or (παραδιδομέναι were all to refer to an action of atonement (Sühne), as long as they were followed by the preposition ὑπὲρ or in some cases by διά and the accusative. Interpreting the ὑπὲρ formulae in this way, Riesenfeld followed Joachim Jeremias, who in his article on παῖς θεοῦ in Kittel’s dictionary advocated the view that the ὑπὲρ formulae are all said to be understood against the backdrop of the tradition of the Suffering Servant of Isa 53, which is said to express the notion of an atoning sacrifice which takes away the consequences of sin.

Although Riesenfeld was aware of the important differences between the Masoretic text and the LXX text of Isa 53 and that the παραδιδομέναι terminology in Isa 53:6 and 12 does not occur in the Hebrew text, he meant to overcome this problem by claiming that the LXX followed a text tradition closer to that of the Isaiah Targum. Keeping the date of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan in mind, which is an 8th century document, it is much

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* First published in NovT 51 (2009): 339–351. References to articles included in this volume are indicated as follows: (→ ch. in this volume).
more likely that the LXX translation influenced the Targum.³ It is also not possible to detach the prepositional phrase from the ruling verbs. Rather it is the ruling verb which signifies the broader frame which forms the backdrop of the prepositional phrase.

The phrase “dying for someone” has been scrutinized by scholars of the New Testament. It can be claimed that since the groundbreaking research of Klaus Wengst, Sam Williams and Martin Hengel and more recently Henk Versnel, it has been illustrated that the early Christian notion “dying for someone” has its roots in Greek tradition.⁴ The notion of dying for someone else to avert evil from him/her ranges back to the tragedies of Euripides. This notion kept its influence until Roman times, as Henk Versnel illustrated.⁵ In a new landmark investigation of the motif, Christina Eschner came up with additional evidence that Euripidean heroines like Alcestis and Macaria served as role models for women in Paul’s times, expressing the highest level of dedication towards their spouses.⁶ It was known that the motif found its way into Plato, Stoicism and Second and Fourth Maccabees, into sepulchral inscriptions and decorations.⁷ Eschner showed us that the motif became popular not only through tragedy itself, but it also resounded in popular philosophy, in wall paintings in villas and in common proverbial speech in the Greek and Latin traditions during the early Roman Empire.⁸ One can readily say that it became part of common culture.⁹

Paul and the early Christian tradition surely draw on this tradition when they formulate the saving effect of the death of the Messiah in the


⁸ This also applies to the tradition about the deaths of Menoceus and Codrus.