

Cambridge Elements 

The Atonement

William Lane Craig

Abstract: *The Atonement offers in a concise compass an inter-disciplinary approach to the complex doctrine of the atonement, drawing upon biblical studies, church history, and analytic philosophy. Divided into three parts, the book first treats the biblical basis of the doctrine of the atonement, an aspect of the doctrine not often taken with sufficient seriousness by contemporary Christian philosophers writing on the subject. The second part highlights some of the principal alternative theories of the atonement offered in the pre-modern era, with a view to accurately expounding these often misunderstood theories. Finally part three, drawing upon insights from the philosophy of law, defends a multi-faceted atonement theory which features penal substitution as a central element. By employing distinctions found in legal thought often overlooked in philosophical treatments of atonement, the author seeks to offer a philosophically coherent account of Christ's atonement that connects closely with the biblical doctrine of forensic justification.*

Keywords: *atonement, Christ, expiation, propitiation, penal substitution, substitutionary atonement, imputation, vicarious liability, justification, sacrifice, ransom, satisfaction*

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Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood,
Sealed my pardon with His blood,
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was He;
"Full atonement!" Can it be?
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Philip Bliss

Preface

Having pursued for several decades a long-term research program on the coherence of theism, I decided to interrupt my project by tackling the Christian doctrine of the atonement. I was aware that the Protestant Reformers' doctrine of Christ's substitutionary atonement faced formidable philosophical objections that few contemporary theologians seemed equipped (or willing!) to answer. I had hoped that Christian philosophers might take up the challenge, as they have done with other Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and incarnation. But I found myself disappointed and dissatisfied with the unbiblical and anemic theories of the atonement defended by many contemporary Christian philosophers. I wished that someone would step forward with a philosophically competent defense of the Protestant Reformers' doctrine of substitutionary atonement. The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation made such a defense especially timely. Finally, I decided to tackle the subject myself.

The result has been unexpectedly rich. I thought I understood the doctrine of the atonement; indeed, I have taught on the subject. But I had no idea of the depths of fresh insight that this study would bring. As I delved into the doctrine of Christ's atonement – biblically, historically, philosophically – new understanding has been the reward.

Perhaps the most important insight biblically has been the gradual realization on my part that the term “atonement” is not univocal in its meaning. This fact, known to biblical theologians but not, generally, to Christian philosophers, subverts many philosophers' work on the atonement. For their theories are typically about atonement in the broad sense of *reconciliation*, whereas the biblical meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words translated by “atonement” and its cognates is *purgation* or *cleansing*. It turns out that many Christian philosophers' theories of the atonement are not theories of the atonement at all in the biblical sense.

Historically, I have been more than mildly surprised at how traditional atonement theories have been misrepresented in the secondary literature. I am not talking about those cheap caricatures

of traditional theories as implying cosmic child abuse or hateful divine vengeance, but about responsible secondary literature. I first became aware of this distortion with regard to Anselm, who was accused of representing God as a feudal Lord too vain to overlook an insult. But then I realized that Abelard had also been misrepresented, and then Hugo Grotius, as well! One has only to read the primary sources themselves to realize how distorted an account of these thinkers' theories is often given in the secondary literature. Probably most surprising for me was the discovery that the Church Fathers were not uniformly committed to the ransom theory of the atonement but articulated views involving a wide variety of motifs.

But it is philosophically that this study has proved most rewarding. I had never delved into the philosophy of law prior to commencing this study. But I soon realized that it is in the philosophy of law that theories of punishment are most discussed, as well as theories of justice. Any adequate discussion of the doctrine of penal substitution and the challenges to it must take account of the legal literature on justice, punishment, and pardon. Not that theology should mirror our system of justice – far from it! – but rather that, given the forensic or judicial motifs that characterize the New Testament, interesting and fruitful analogies and parallels to theological doctrines may be found in our justice system. These may provide support for the coherence or justice of various Christian doctrines. Those who claim, for example, that we know nothing of the imputation of someone's responsibility or guilt for wrongdoing to another innocent party are just ignorant of the law. Again and again, I have been amazed at the theological insight that emerges from a study of legal philosophy and the law.

In order to make this Element accessible to biblical scholars, theologians, and philosophers alike, I have tried to presuppose as little as is feasible about each discipline. This necessitates explaining, e.g., what the Septuagint is for the sake of Christian philosophers and what retributive justice is for the sake of biblical theologians. My hope is that specialists familiar with one discipline may still find much to learn in another.

With regard to the law, I am especially grateful to Dr. Descheemaeker of the University of Edinburgh School of Law for helping to direct me to legal literature on various subjects and to Shaun McNaughton at Brown & Streza LLP for help in obtaining court opinions. I'm also grateful to my research assistant Timothy Bayless for procuring for me research materials, as well as proof-reading. As always, I am thankful for my wife Jan's faithful support and interest in this subject.

Finally, I thank Professor Yujin Nagasawa for his inviting me to contribute this volume to the Cambridge Elements of Philosophy series. Due to the severe word limit, this Element is necessarily very succinct, though, I think, accurate. I hope to publish a fuller, more detailed discussion in the near future.

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Introduction

The word "atonement" is unique among theological terms, being a derivation, not from Greek or Latin, but from Middle English, namely, the phrase "at onement," designating a state of harmony. The closest New Testament (NT) word for atonement in this sense is *katallagē* or reconciliation, specifically reconciliation between God and man.¹ Reconciliation is the overarching theme of the NT, and other important NT motifs such as the Kingdom of God, salvation, justification, and redemption are subservient to it. Atonement in this sense thus lies at the heart of the Christian faith.

But there is a narrower sense of "atonement" that is expressed by the biblical words typically translated by this English word. In the Old Testament (OT), "atonement" and its cognates translate words having the Hebrew root "*kpr*." Best known of these expressions is doubtless *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. To atone in this sense takes as its object sin or impurity and has the sense "to purify, to cleanse."

¹ See II Cor 5.17–20; also Rom 5.10–11; Col 1.19–23; Eph 2. On the centrality of the theme of reconciliation to the NT message, see Marshall (2007, ch. 4).

The Greek equivalent in the Septuagint (LXX) and NT is *hilaskesthai*. While the result of atonement in this narrow sense may be said to be atonement in the broad sense, nevertheless the biblical words translated as “atonement” or “to atone” need to be understood in the narrower sense if we are to understand the meaning of the texts. Theologically, the doctrine of the atonement concerns atonement primarily in the narrower, biblical sense of cleansing of sin and has traditionally been treated under the priestly work of Christ.²

The message of the NT is that God, out of His great love, has provided the means of atonement for sin through Christ’s death: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3.16). By his death on the cross, Christ has made possible the reconciliation of alienated and condemned sinners to God. Thus, “the cross” came to be a metaphor epitomizing the Gospel message, such that Paul could call the Gospel “the word of the cross” (I Cor 1.18).

So the four Gospels devote disproportionate space to Jesus’s so-called passion, the final week of his suffering and crucifixion, thereby emphasizing his death. Of course, Jesus’s death is not the end of the passion story: the Gospels all conclude with the proclamation of Jesus’s victorious resurrection, vindicating him as God’s chosen one. The death and resurrection of Jesus are two sides of the same coin: he “was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4.25).

Paul quotes the earliest summary of the Gospel message, a four-line formula dating to within five years of Jesus’s crucifixion, reminding the Corinthian believers:

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
 and that he was buried,

² In contrast, Eleonore Stump (2018) treats atonement in a very broad sense, as signaled by her use of “*at onement*,” designating a state of union with God. Accordingly, her book is not about Christology, but about soteriology and, especially, pneumatology. The Holy Spirit displaces Christ as the central figure in her account of achieving union with God. The death of Christ plays a relatively minor role in her theory of *at onement*, and atonement in the narrow sense no role at all.

and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the
 Scriptures,
 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.

(I Cor 15.3-5)

This is the message, Paul says, that was proclaimed by all the apostles (I Cor 15.11), and it is the message that dominates the NT.

Notice that Christ is said to have died “for our sins” and to have been put to death (or delivered up) “for our trespasses.” How is it that Jesus’s death dealt with our sins? How did his death on the cross overcome the estrangement and condemnation of sinners before a holy God, so as to reconcile them to him?

In handling this question, we should distinguish between the *fact* of the atonement and a *theory* of the atonement. A great variety of theories of the atonement have been offered to make sense of the fact that Christ, by his death, has provided the means of reconciliation with God. Competing theories of the atonement need to be assessed by (i) their accord with biblical teaching and (ii) their philosophical coherence. Unfortunately, the work of contemporary Christian philosophers on the doctrine of the atonement has been largely uninformed by biblical exegesis. Theories of the atonement are laid out based on the way in which reconciliation is typically achieved in human relationships. If the biblical texts are discussed at all, it is only after a theory of the atonement has been laid out, which is then read back into the biblical texts.

Not only does such a methodology risk distortion because of the enormous disanalogies between merely human relationships and divine–human relationships, but more fundamentally it runs the risk of developing a theory of the atonement that, however congenial, just is not a Christian theory of the atonement because it does not accord with the biblical data. Such an approach to the biblical texts represents eisegesis, not exegesis. So flawed a hermeneutic will not deliver to us the meaning of the author of the text but only our own preconceived views. Because the biblical data concerning the atonement are so often neglected by Christian

philosophers, we need to begin with a survey of some of the key biblical atonement motifs.

1 Biblical Data concerning the Atonement

Theologians have often remarked on the multiplicity of metaphors and motifs characterizing the atonement found in the NT. Here we want to survey some of the essential elements that make up the biblical doctrine of the atonement. If any of these go missing from a theory of the atonement, then we know that we do not have a biblical theory of the atonement. We may then be spared the digression of pursuing such a theory further, since it is disqualified as a Christian atonement theory.

Our interest in examining the biblical material is not in historical-critical analysis of the biblical text, seeking, for example, to determine the date and provenance of the priestly traditions concerning the Jewish sacrifices or to ascertain the authentic words of Jesus concerning his death, but rather with the biblical text as we have it.

In approaching the biblical teaching on the atonement, we must decide whether to approach the subject thematically or by author. While the latter approach has the advantage of giving us a clearer picture of what a Paul or a John, for example, thought about the subject, it does not permit us to develop common emphases. We shall therefore take a thematic approach to the biblical materials.

1.1 *Sacrifice*

The predominant motif used in the NT to characterize the atonement is the presentation of Christ's death as a sacrificial offering to God on our behalf. NT scholar Joel Green provides a pithy summary:

In their development of the saving significance of Jesus' death, early Christians were heavily influenced by the world of the sacrificial cult in Israel's Scriptures and by the practices of animal sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple – The expression "*Christ died for all,*" widespread in this and variant forms throughout the NT (e.g., Mk 14:24; Rom 5:6,

8; 15:3; Gal 2:21; 1 Pet 3:18), is thematic in this regard, as are references to the salvific effects of *the blood of Christ* (e.g., Acts 20:28; Rom 5:9; Col 1:20). Jesus' death is presented as a *covenant sacrifice* (e.g., Mk 14:24; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 7:22; 8:6; 9:15), a *Passover sacrifice* (e.g., Jn 19:14; 1 Cor 5:7-8), the *sin offering* (Rom 8:3; 2 Cor 5:21), the *offering of first fruits* (1 Cor 15:20, 23), the sacrifice offered on *the Day of Atonement* (Heb 9-10), and an offering reminiscent of *Abraham's presentation of Isaac* (e.g., Rom 8:32). The writer of Ephesians summarizes well: "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Eph 5:2)³

1.1.1 Jesus's Attitude toward His Death

The interpretation of Jesus's death as a sacrificial offering was not an *ex post facto* rationalization on the part of Christians of Jesus's ignominious fate. Rather, Jesus himself had seen his impending death in this light. He predicted his death (Mk 10.33-34) and even provoked it by his Messianic actions in Jerusalem (Mk 11.1-10, 15-18). Jesus's selection of the Passover festival as the time of the climax of his ministry was no accident. For as he celebrated with his disciples his final Passover meal, "he took bread . . . and gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' And he took a cup and . . . gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many'" (Mk 14.22-24). Jesus saw his death symbolized in the elements of the Passover meal. It was the blood of the Passover lamb, smeared on the doorposts of Jewish homes, that had saved the Jewish people from God's judgment in Egypt. Moreover, the expression "this is my blood of the covenant" recalls Moses's words at the inauguration of the old covenant (Exod 24.8). Jesus the Messiah is inaugurating, by his death, the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer 31.31-34), which would bring restoration and forgiveness of sin. Moreover, the words "poured out for many" hark back to Isaiah's prophecy of the Servant of the LORD, who

³ Green (2006, p. 172, my emphases).

poured out his soul to death,
 and was numbered with the transgressors;
 yet he bore the sin of many,
 and made intercession for the transgressors.
 (*Is 53.12*)

Jesus saw himself as the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, who “makes himself an offering for sin” (Is 53.10). Earlier, Jesus had said of himself, “the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10.45). The Son of Man is a divine-human figure from Daniel’s prophecy whom “all peoples, nations, and languages should serve” (Dan 7.14). In his paradoxical statement, Jesus stands things on their head, declaring that the Son of Man has come in the role of a servant and, like the Servant of Isaiah 53, gives his life as a ransom for many. Jesus evidently saw his death as a redemptive sacrifice, like the Passover sacrifice, and himself as a sin bearer, inaugurating, like the Mosaic sacrifice, a fresh covenant between God and the people.

1.1.2 OT Background

We can gain insight into Jesus’s death as a sacrificial offering by examining the function of the OT sacrifices that formed the interpretive framework for Jesus’s death. In doing so, we enter a world that is utterly foreign to modern Western readers. Most of us have never seen an animal slaughtered, much less done it ourselves, and, accustomed as we are to buying our meat and poultry in antiseptically wrapped packaging in refrigerated bins, we are apt to find the animal sacrifices described in the OT revolting. Moreover, most of us have no familiarity with a world in which ritual practices fraught with symbolic meaning play a major role in one’s interactions with the spiritual realm, and so the OT cult may strike us as bizarre and opaque. If we are to understand these practices, we need to shed our Western sensibilities and try to enter sympathetically into the world of a bucolic society that was not squeamish about blood and guts, and which had a highly developed ritual system in its approach to God.

The challenge of understanding these ancient texts is compounded by the fact that they often describe rituals without explaining their meaning, which was probably well known to their contemporary practitioners. Therefore, we must try as best we can to discern their proper interpretation based upon the clues that we have. Fortunately, we have sufficient evidence to form some reliable ideas about what the sacrifices were intended to accomplish.

The OT sacrifices come in a bewildering variety, the distinctive functions of which are not always clear.⁴ Fortunately, we can determine the general function of the sacrifices without going into a delineation of the various kinds that were prescribed. In general, the sacrifices filled the twin fundamental purposes of expiation of sin or impurity and propitiation of God. “To expiate” means *to remove, to annul, to cancel*; “to propitiate” means *to appease, to placate, to satisfy*. The object of expiation is sin/impurity; the object of propitiation is God.

1.1.2.1 *Propitiatory Sacrifices*

At least some of the OT sacrifices were clearly propitiatory. A premier example is the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. This sacrifice was not originally instituted for the purpose of expiation; rather, the blood of the lamb smeared on the doorframes of Israelite homes served to shelter them as God’s judgment swept over Egypt (Exod 12.13). Had they not offered the sacrifices, God’s deadly judgment would have fallen on the Israelites, as well.

Propitiation is also in view in the various priestly sacrifices offered in the Tabernacle (and later, in the Temple). The careful regulations concerning the sacrificial offerings are to be understood against the background of God’s striking down Aaron’s sons for their unlawful offering of sacrifices in the Tabernacle precincts

⁴ A popular account may be found in Morris (1983, ch. 2). For detailed, scholarly discussion, see Milgrom (1991, pp. 133–72). We have little knowledge of sacrifices outside the Levitical system. The so-called burnt offering seems to have existed prior to its incorporation into the Levitical sacrificial system and was offered both to propitiate God (Gen 8.21) and to expiate sin (Job 1.5; 42.8)