

The Atonement

Images and understandings of the death of Jesus

THE IDEA

The crucial doctrine

“Atonement” is one of the few theological words of Anglo-Saxon origin. It has the sense of “at-one-ment” - the bringing of enemies into peace and friendship. The word is used in theology to denote the work of Christ in bringing people into a right relationship with God.

The word “atonement” is used to translate the Hebrew root *kpr*, which has the basic sense of “cover” or “cover over”. The verb, *kipper* (to cover, to make atonement), occurs 102 times in the Hebrew scriptures (primarily in Leviticus and Numbers), 3 times in Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus / Sirach) and 50 times in the Qumran texts. The noun, *kippur* (atonement), occurs 8 times in the Hebrew scriptures and 20 times in Qumran. The related noun, *kōpher* (ransom, redemption payment), occurs 13 times in the Hebrew scriptures and 6 times in Qumran.¹

In the LXX most occurrences of *kipper* are translated by *exilaskomai*, *kippur* by *exilasmos* and *kōpher* by *lytron*. However, neither *exilaskomai* nor *exilasmos* occur in the New Testament and *lytron* only occurs in the parallel passages Mark 10:45 = Matt 20:28. Instead, the New Testament prefers *hilaskomai* (twice), *hilasmos* (twice) and *apolytrōsis* (10 times). The Hebrew word group is thus not well represented in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the concept of atonement remains central and the death of Jesus is at the heart of the New Testament understanding of atonement. From the earliest tradition “followers of Jesus have never been content with the “brute” fact that Jesus died but have always been concerned with the interpretation of this fact.”²

“For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures ...” (1 Cor 15:3).

“[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice (*hilasmos*) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

“[Sinners] are now justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption (*apolytrōsis*) that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement (*hilastērion*) by his blood ...” (Rom 3:24-25).

The complex doctrine

▪ Reconciliation word groups

The idea of reconciliation itself involves three different word groups in the New Testament. The *hilaskomai* word group belongs to the cultic realm and concerns relationships

¹ See D. J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 4: Yodh to Lamedh* (ed. D. J. A. Clines; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 455–8.

² J. T. Carroll and J. B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995) 257.



between humans and the gods. The *katalassō* word group comes from the world of ordinary relationships and indicates the improvement of a negative relationship. The *apokathistēmi* word group comes from the political sphere and is concerned with restoration. In the New Testament this word group sometimes has an eschatological sense; it is never used of the death of Jesus:

- “... so that [Jesus] might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement (*hilaskomai*) for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17).
- “God was in Christ reconciling (*katalassō*) the world to himself ...” (2 Cor 5:19).
- “[Jesus] must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration (*apokathistēmi*) that God announced long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21).

▪ **Metaphors**

As well as the two word groups for reconciliation, the New Testament uses predominantly four other clusters of images to draw out the full significance of Jesus’ death. These involve the language of:

- *The Law Court:*
 - justice
 - justification
- *The Battlefield:*
 - victory
 - deliverance
 - freedom
- *The Cult:*
 - sacrifice
 - expiation / propitiation
- *Commerce:*
 - ransom
 - redemption

These clusters of images come together in passages such as Rom 3:21-26 (justification, sacrifice and redemption), 2Cor 5:11-21 (reconciliation and sacrifice), Gal 3:10-14 (justification and redemption), Colossians 1-2 (redemption, reconciliation and victory) and Heb 2:14-18 (victory and sacrifice). It is very important to note that the New Testament writers recognised that no one metaphor could adequately encapsulate the meaning of the atonement. Nevertheless, throughout church history, attempts have been made to encapsulate the data into an overall theory of atonement.



THE DEBATE

Three main theories of atonement are prevalent today.³

The Classic Idea or Christus Victor

This view goes back at least to the time of Irenaeus (c. 120 – c. 200) but fell out of favour in the 11th century when the competing views of Anselm and Abelard became predominant. Anselm and Abelard both reacted to what they perceived as the crude, mythological language in which the early church depicted Christ's victory over Satan. The Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén resurrected Christus Victor in the 20th century. This perspective emphasises the cross as the point of decisive victory over Satan and the Powers. The cross is the culmination of a cosmic drama in which Satan's dramatic defeat brings about reconciliation between God and humanity.

The Satisfaction Theory

This has been the predominant view of the church since Anselm (1033-1109). This is sometimes known as the "objective" view as God is seen as the *object* of Christ's atoning work. God is reconciled to humanity through Christ's death. Anselm argued that the fundamental problem of redemption does not concern any "rights" that Satan has over humanity, as the Christus Victor view holds, but rather concerns the wrong done to God. Instead of faithfulness and service, humanity chose sin. The justice of God demands satisfaction, which must be paid by humanity as humanity has sinned. However, sin is so far-reaching in its consequences that only God is able to make amends. So humanity *should* make reparations but only God *can*. The solution is that Christ, the God-Human, pays the penalty on behalf of⁴ humanity.

The Moral Influence Theory

Abelard (1079-1142) reacted against both the idea of a ransom paid to Satan and the satisfaction view of Anselm:

How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!⁵

Instead he depicted Jesus as primarily our teacher and example and argued that the atonement is the ultimate manifestation of God's love. Inspired by Christ's example of self-giving love on the cross, humanity turns to God, forsakes sin and follows Christ. Isaac

³ For a detailed analysis of these three views see G. Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (trans. A. Herbert; London: S.P.C.K., 1931).

⁴ A substitutionary view of atonement (the prevailing Evangelical position) argues that Christ's death was not just "on behalf of" but also "in place of" humanity.

⁵ Abelard's Commentary on Rom 3:19-26, quoted in J. R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1986) 217.



Watts' hymn, "When I survey the wondrous cross", is a classic expression of this view of atonement.⁶

Summary

	Christus Victor (Aulén)	Satisfaction (Anselm)	Moral Influence (Abelard)
Overview	God intervenes on behalf of his people and defeats the enemy that enslaves humanity	Christ's death satisfies the just requirements of the Father	People are moved by the love of God displayed in Christ's self-giving death
What are we saved from? (the need)	Bondage to sin/Satan/the Powers	Guilt/penalty/judgment	Distance from God
How are we saved? (the mechanism)	The ransom paid results in Christ's victory over the Powers	Jesus, the "God-Human" enables reconciliation between God & humanity	Humanity is touched & changed by God's immense love
Effect on:	The Powers	God	Humanity

THE ANALYSIS

Moral Influence

Moral influence theory rightly emphasises the cross as the supreme manifestation of God's love (e.g. John 3:16; 15:13; Eph 5:2; 1 John 4:10, 19). Proponents stress that God's love both shines from the cross and provokes a response of love in us. This perspective seeks to answer the question as to how our salvation in the present can depend on a past event. Human response in the present is seen as a vital part of the act of atonement and not merely as an appropriation of a past event.

▪ Strengths

- Emphasises the relational cost of forgiveness as demanding much both from the forgiver and the person(s) being forgiven. Proponents rightly criticise the popular image of the atonement concerning a pardoned criminal on death row. The pardoned criminal is not relationally involved in the process; this is pardon rather than forgiveness.
- The unity of creation and redemption is stressed. The Hebrew scriptures regularly merge the images of creation and redemption (e.g. Job 26:12-13; Ps 68:7-14; 89:5-18;

⁶ This is not to say that this was Watts' predominant view – other hymns of his presuppose a substitutionary view of atonement and others Christus Victor!



Isa 51:9-11). Thus God is continually redeeming as part of his ongoing work of creation.

- Jesus' death is seen in the context of his life. Thus the controlling aspect of the atonement must concern forgiveness and acceptance, as this was what Jesus engaged in throughout his ministry. Furthermore, Jesus' refusal to give the law any ultimate importance makes it extremely unlikely that he died in order to satisfy some divine law.
- Draws on insights from psychology "to explore the profound change which the story of the cross can effect in the diseased ego".⁷ The only solution to the self's tendency to adjust the truth to suit itself lies in a disclosure of truth breaking in from outside the self. "[T]he cross has such power since it reveals a love which does not resort to any of the strategies for survival at which the self is so adept."⁸ The revelation of God's love on the cross is at the same time a generation of love in us from this psychological perspective.

▪ Weakness

However, moral influence theory does not adequately explain *how* the cross demonstrates God's love and *why* it should lead to our repentance. John Stott expresses this well:

True love is purposive in its self-giving; it does not make random or reckless gestures. If you were to jump off the end of a pier and drown, or dash into a burning building and be burnt to death, and if your self-sacrifice had no saving purpose, you would convince me of your folly, not your love. But if I were myself drowning in the sea, or trapped in the burning building, and it was in attempting to rescue me that you lost your life, then I would indeed see love not folly in your action. Just so the death of Jesus on the cross cannot be seen as a demonstration of love in itself, but only if he gave his life in order to rescue ours. His death must be seen to have an objective, before it can have an appeal.⁹

Nevertheless, Abelard's criticism of the satisfaction theory has received renewed emphasis recently in the light of feminist theology in particular.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction theory, in the form of penal substitution,¹⁰ has been articulately defended by David Peterson and others at the Fourth Oak Hill College Annual School of Theology held in May 2000.¹¹ In a series of papers the authors argue that atonement has to be understood in the context of the wrath of God against sin. For example, in Exod 32:30-32 Moses offers himself in place of the people in an attempt to avert God's wrath (Exod

⁷ P. S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989).

⁸ Fiddes, *Past Event*.

⁹ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 220.

¹⁰ The doctrine of penal substitution holds that Christ, in bearing our sins, suffered death in our place thus securing our acquittal. Christ's death is viewed as "the undergoing of vicarious punishment (*poena*) to meet the claims on us of God's holy law and wrath (i.e. his punitive justice)", D. Peterson, *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001) ix-x.

¹¹ Now published as Peterson, *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today*.



32:10) and the verb *kipper* is used. The key texts in the Hebrew scriptures for proponents of the satisfaction theory are Leviticus 16 and Isaiah 53.

▪ **Leviticus 16**

- Appropriate measures have to be taken by the high priest lest he incur the wrath of God (1-2; cf. 10:1-3)
- Atonement for the high priest and his house is made by sacrificing a bull and sprinkling some of its blood on the front of and before the mercy seat (11-14)
- Prior to the sprinkling of blood incense is put on the fire before the Lord so that a cloud of incense covers the mercy seat (13). This may be just to prevent the high priest gazing upon Yahweh (cf. Exod 33:20), or it may also involve averting the wrath of God (cf. Num 16:45-50)
- Lots are cast over two goats (7-10); one is sacrificed as a sin offering for the people and some of its blood is sprinkled in the same way as that of the bull (15), making atonement for the sanctuary (16-17)
- Some of the blood of both the sacrificed bull and goat is sprinkled on the altar to make atonement for it (18-19)
- The high priest lays hands on the remaining goat, confesses all the sins of the people and thereby places them upon the goat which is then sent out into the wilderness bearing “on itself all their iniquities to a barren region” (20-22). The scapegoat is seen as a symbol of vicarious punishment by proponents of the satisfaction theory¹²

▪ **Isaiah 53**

This text is seen as referring to an individual who bears the “sin of many” as their substitute. Peterson argues that the Servant cannot be identified with Israel or with any of the prophets and insists:

As Israel’s substitute, the Servant is punished in a manner that exceeds the just punishment of the Babylonian exile. The salvation or ‘healing’ that is achieved in this way is profound and comprehensive. A decisive reconciliation with God is implied, together with a restoration of God’s people that involves more than a return from exile (e.g. the Servant shall ‘make many righteous’, 53:11). Those who deny the theme of penal substitution in this chapter appear to be guilty of special pleading.¹³

Peterson bases this view on the use of sacrificial language in verses 7 and 10, together with the language of “carrying” and “bearing” in verses 4, 11 and 12, which he sees as substitutionary language.

▪ **Gospels**

Isaiah 53 is seen as providing the basis for Jesus’ own self-understanding and particularly his approach to his death. There is one formal quotation in the gospels in Luke 22:37 (Isa 53:12), two clear allusions in Mark 10:45 (Isa 53:10, 12) and Mark 14:24 (Isa 53:12), and other possible allusions in the numerous predictions of Jesus’ death. It is thus argued that

¹² See D. Peterson, “Atonement in the Old Testament,” *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (ed. D. Peterson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001) 14–5.

¹³ Peterson, “Atonement in the Old Testament,” p21.



the gospels, informed by Isaiah 53, present the death of Jesus as a substitutionary payment for the benefit of others.

▪ Paul

The primary texts for this view though are found in Paul's letters. Paul regularly states, "Christ died for us" (Rom 5:6, 8; 1 Cor 8:11; 2 Cor 5:14-15; 1 Thess 5:10) or "gave himself up" (Rom 4:25; 8:32; Gal 1:4; 2:20). The climax of Paul's comments on reconciliation with God in 2 Cor 5:11-21 is verse 21 concerning Christ's sin-bearing. 2 Cor 5:21 alludes to Isa 53:9-11 and the phrase "made him to be sin" is taken as referring to punishment for sin rather than as a sacrifice for sin. The similar passage about reconciliation in Rom 5:1-11 specifically mentions that the consequence of this reconciliation is that we will "be saved through him from the wrath of God" (Rom 5:9).

Rom 3:21-26 is another key text. Here justification is a gift from God made possible by redemption. Proponents of the satisfaction theory argue that redemption involves the concept of payment of a price. The language is the language of the slave market and the word for redemption (*apolytrōsis*) is used in classical Greek to denote the price paid to release a slave. The price paid here is Jesus' death, which secures our release from the penalty of sin. It is also argued that in Rom 3:25 the Greek word *hilastērion*, which is translated as "sacrifice of atonement" by the NRSV, should be translated as "a propitiatory sacrifice" which removes the wrath of God.

The clearest statements that Christ bore the penalty of sin for us are found in Rom 8:3 (where the Greek should be translated "as a sin offering" and not "to deal with sin" as in the NRSV¹⁴) and Gal 3:13.

▪ Hebrews

Hebrews draws much of its imagery from the cult in the Hebrew scriptures. The pervasive theme of atonement through the death of Jesus has to be understood, it is argued, against the background of atonement as the removal of God's wrath in the Hebrew scriptures. For example, Heb 2:17c could be translated as "to make propitiation [to God] with regard to the sins of the people". Christ's work is portrayed as the fulfilment of the Day of Atonement (Heb 9:11-15) and so "the blood of Christ functions in some sense to avert the wrath of God for those who are cleansed, sanctified and perfected by him".¹⁵

▪ 1 Peter

1 Pet 1:18-19 speaks of redemption through the death of Jesus and the reference to the lamb alludes to Passover but may also allude to the silent lamb of Isa 53:7, especially as 2:21-25 specifically draws on Isaiah 53. Jesus is portrayed as the fulfilment of the Suffering Servant who, in bearing our sins on the cross, sets us free from sin. Williams, in an extensive examination of the phrase "bearing sins" in the Hebrew scriptures, concludes

¹⁴ J. D. G. Dunn, *WBC 38A: Romans 1–8* (Dallas: Word, 1988) 422.

¹⁵ D. Peterson, "Atonement in the New Testament," *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (ed. D. Peterson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001) 49.



that whenever the phrase is used of a person or animal “the normal sense is that the subject bears guilt and punishment”.¹⁶ He argues that the clear meaning of 1 Pet 2:24 is that Jesus “bore the punishment for the sins of his people in their place, and that in so doing he wrought atonement for them as the punishment was poured out upon him by the hand of God himself”.¹⁷

▪ 1 John

1 John 2:2; 4:10 are the only places in the New Testament where the Greek word *hilasmos* is used. Proponents of penal substitution argue that this word should be translated as “propitiatory sacrifice” as its usage in ordinary Greek denotes the action by which a deity is to be propitiated.

▪ Conclusion

The satisfaction theory provides a comprehensive analysis of the death of Jesus against the background of sacrifice in the Hebrew scriptures. It takes sin seriously and recognises that the problem of sin requires a drastic solution. Furthermore, it appears to make sense of a great deal of the New Testament texts concerning the death of Jesus and has been the predominant theory of atonement in the church since the eleventh century. Nevertheless, there are major problems with this view:

- So much emphasis is necessarily put on the death of Jesus that it often appears that Jesus came solely or primarily in order to die. Little connection is therefore made between the cross and Jesus’ life. For many proponents, emphasis is inevitably placed on Paul’s letters and the gospels thereby become somewhat marginalized.
- The theory operates from the perspective of retributive justice. “A properly formulated view of penal substitution will speak of retribution being experienced by Christ because that is our due.”¹⁸ It may well be that the classic New Testament texts can be interpreted along the lines of the elimination of sin rather than retribution for sin and seen in the context of God’s restorative justice.¹⁹
- The satisfaction theory appeals to justice but fails adequately to answer the question as to how it can be just to punish a righteous man for the sins of many unrighteous people. “[I]t is hard not to assent to the argumentation that guilt and punishment are not transferable, like money and fines, but intrinsically by their own nature and morally by every rule of justice are inseparably attached to the person whose sinful acts have incurred them.”²⁰
- At the end of the day, however careful the language used, this theory portrays Jesus the Son being punished by God the Father. Feminist and Anabaptist theologians in particular have profoundly criticised this view of atonement as intrinsically violent.²¹

¹⁶ G. Williams, “The Cross and the Punishment of Sin,” *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (ed. D. Peterson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001) 70.

¹⁷ Williams, “The Cross and the Punishment of Sin,” 81.

¹⁸ Peterson, “Atonement in the New Testament,” 38.

¹⁹ T. Smail, *Once and For All: A Confession of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998) 93–9.

²⁰ Smail, *Once and For All: A Confession of the Cross*, 98.

²¹ Brown and Parker, for example, claim that the traditional view of atonement teaches that suffering is redemptive. The perpetuation of this view in a patriarchal context results in women being expected to make



Christus Victor

This is also known as the “classic” or “dramatic” view of atonement. Aulén states: “there can be no dispute that it is the dominant idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period”.²² It sees atonement as a cosmic drama in which Christ overcomes the principalities and powers. Humanity is perceived as in bondage to the Powers and this enslavement has to be dealt with in order for reconciliation between God and humanity to take place.

This view fell into disrepute due to the extreme nature of the language sometimes employed in the Church Fathers. For example, the notion of a ransom was conceived as being paid by God to Satan in order to deprive him of his right to rule over humanity. Alternatively, God was thought to have duped Satan; the most famous example of this position is found in Gregory of Nyssa:

Since the hostile power was not going to enter its relations with a God present unveiled, or endure His appearance in heavenly glory, therefore God, in order to render himself accessible to him who demanded a ransom for us, concealed himself under the veil of our nature, in order that, as happens with greedy fishes, together with the bait of the flesh the hook of the Godhead might also be swallowed, and so, through Life passing over into death, and the Light arising in the darkness, that which is opposed to Life and Light might be brought to nought.²³

Nevertheless, other language used in the Church Fathers is much more nuanced. For example, Gregory of Nazianzus states:

Is it not evident that the Father accepts Him, but neither asked for Him nor demanded Him; but on account of the Incarnation, and because Humanity must be sanctified by the Humanity of God, that He might deliver us Himself, and overcome the tyrant, and draw us to Himself by the mediation of His Son, Who also arranged this to the honour of the Father, Whom it is manifest that He obeys in all things? So much we have said of Christ; the greater part of what we might say shall be revered with silence. But that brazen serpent was hung up as a remedy for the biting serpents, not as a type of Him that suffered for us, but as a contrast; and it saved those that looked upon it, not because they believed it to live, but because it was killed, and killed with it the powers that were subject to it, being destroyed as it

self-sacrifices as a demonstration of their worth. Furthermore, they argue, if the death of the Son is required to satisfy the wrath of the Father this provides theological legitimation for child abuse. “When parents have an image of a God righteously demanding the total obedience of ‘his’ son — even obedience to death — what will prevent the parent from engaging in divinely sanctioned child abuse? The image of God the father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son has sustained a culture of abuse and led to the abandonment of victims of abuse and oppression.” See J. C. Brown and R. Parker, “For God So Loved the World,” *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (eds. J. C. Brown and C. R. Bohn; New York: Pilgrim, 1989) 1–30.

²² Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, 22.

²³ *Great Catechism*, ch. 24.



deserved. And what is the fitting epitaph for it from us? O death, where is thy sting?
O grave, where is thy victory? Thou art overthrown by the Cross.²⁴

Here we have emphasis on the incarnation, Jesus' humanity and the cross as the victory of God over the powers.

In modern times, the aftermath of two World Wars meant that, in the second half of the twentieth century, the problem of evil and the language of the demonic were taken seriously by New Testament scholars. In this context the Christus Victor view of the atonement was ripe for reappropriation.

▪ Conclusion

Christus Victor takes seriously the notion of the Powers. Humanity is enslaved by them and needs deliverance from them. Jesus' death is seen in the context of his life and ministry that was one of continual victory over the Powers. Texts such as Col 2:15 and Heb 2:14-15 are significant for this view. Furthermore, Jesus' resurrection is also given prominence.

Jesus' death on the cross was like a black hole in space that sucked into its collapsing vortex the very meaning of the universe, until in the intensity of its compaction there was an explosive reversal, and the stuff of which galaxies are made was blown out into the universe. So Jesus as the cosmic Christ became universal, the truly Human One, and as such, the bearer of our own utmost possibilities for living.²⁵

However, the question remains as to whether Christus Victor provides a comprehensive theory of atonement. For proponents of the satisfaction theory would argue that the cross was a demonstration of God's love (moral influence) and his victory over the Powers (Christus Victor) but it is also (and primarily) the satisfaction of God's wrath against sin. How does Christus Victor deal with the texts that are central to the satisfaction theory, particularly the Pauline ones?

A key text is 4 Maccabees 17:20-22, which, with reference to the martyrdom of a woman and her seven sons by Antiochus Epiphanes described in 2 Maccabees 7, states:

These, then, who have been consecrated for the sake of God, are honoured, not only with this honour, but also by the fact that because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, *the tyrant was punished*, and the homeland purified - they having become, as it were, *a ransom for the sin of our nation*. And *through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice*, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated.

²⁴ Oration 45.22.68-71.

²⁵ W. Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 143.



The Greek word, translated as “atoning sacrifice” above, is *hilastērion*. In addition, the Greek word for “ransom” is *antipsychos*, this word only occurs elsewhere in 4 Maccabees 6:29 where Eleazar, just before his death from torture, prays, “be merciful to your people and let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange (*antipsychos*) for theirs”. 4 Maccabees, a text most probably written in the middle of the first century CE (i.e. contemporary with Paul), uses imagery drawn from Isaiah 53 to suggest that the martyrs’ “sufferings will have the effect of drawing on to themselves the sufferings of the nation as a whole, so that the nation may somehow escape.”²⁶ In this important text Isaiah 53 is not interpreted in terms of the satisfaction theory of atonement but rather in ways that resonate with Christus Victor. The martyrs’ refusal to capitulate to the ruling Powers resulted in the defeat of “the tyrant” and the preservation of Israel.

Therefore those who gave over their bodies in suffering for the sake of religion were not only admired by mortals, but also were deemed worthy to share in a divine inheritance. Because of them *the nation gained peace*, and by reviving observance of the law in the homeland *they ravaged the enemy*.²⁷

This “martyr theology” may provide the key to interpreting Pauline atonement theology. It makes sense of Paul’s language of Christ dying for us or giving himself up for us; it makes sense of 2 Cor 5:21 which alludes to Isa 53:10-11; finally it provides a different perspective on the notion of the sin offering, drawing on Isaiah 53 rather than Leviticus 16, from that of satisfaction theory.

TWO FURTHER CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS

Jürgen Moltmann²⁸

Moltmann provides a thoroughly Trinitarian perspective on the death of Christ. He insists that in the cross “[t]he Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son. Unless this were so, the doctrine of the Trinity would still have a monotheistic background”.²⁹

▪ Key texts

- Mark 15:34 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
- 2 Cor 5:19 “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself”
- **The Cross as a Trinitarian Event of Divine Suffering**
- Jesus’ cry of abandonment is in solidarity with all who cry out to God in their abandonment
- Father suffers in grief the death of the Son

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) 583, his emphasis.

²⁷ 4 Maccabees 18:3-4.

²⁸ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974).

²⁹ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 243.



- Father and Son together are united in their love for the world and so at the point at which they are most deeply separated, they are also united in a deep community of will
- In the cross the love between Father and Son spans the gulf that separates the godless and godforsaken from God. The Trinitarian being of God includes this gulf within itself and overcomes it

René Girard

Girard has provided a sophisticated account of human conflict through his notions of mimetic rivalry and the use of the scapegoat mechanism. He has consistently argued that Christ's death should not be viewed in sacrificial terms.³⁰ His work on the cross is eminently compatible with Christus Victor.³¹

His position can be summarised as follows:

- The problem of violence is endemic to human society. This potentially results in endless spirals of ever-escalating retaliation.
- The problem of violence is overcome by the scapegoat mechanism. Problems are heaped on a scapegoat and the scapegoat's death brings reconciliation.
- Mimetic desire: essential to our humanity is the ability to learn by copying others; this includes imitating others by desiring what they desire.
- Mimetic rivalry: in a world of scarcity this leads to conflict as both parties competitively desire the same thing.
- Crisis of distinctions: when rivals desire the same thing social distinctions by which order is preserved are likely to collapse; e.g. masters and slaves. Societal collapse can be averted if a scapegoat is found.
- Rival groups' hostilities cease by focusing on a scapegoat whose death resolves the crisis. The fiction of the scapegoat's guilt must be maintained at all costs.
- The victim is rendered sacred by being regarded as simultaneously cursed and life-bringing. As compensation for sacrificial death the victim is given special honours and may even be divinised.
- Subsequent sacrifices repeat by controlled ritual the structure of the scapegoat mechanism. In this way internal aggressions are resolved ritually and the social fabric is preserved.
- Religion is thus organised violence in the service of social tranquillity.
- The Gospels expose this scapegoating mechanism by demonstrating the innocence of the victim, Jesus.
- "Violence is unable to bear the presence of a being that owes it nothing – that pays it no homage and threatens its kingship in the only way possible."³² Jesus is killed because humanity will not eschew violence.
- A sacrificial reading of Jesus' death continues to "buy into" the very scapegoating mechanism that the Gospels seek to expose and subvert.

³⁰ See especially, R. Girard, "The Nonsacrificial Death of Christ," *The Girard Reader* (ed. J. G. Williams; New York: Crossroad, 1996) 177–88.

³¹ R. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001); J. D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001) 46–9.

³² Girard, "Nonsacrificial," 183.



- The key text, which for Girard has not been taken seriously enough by Christians, is Matt 9:13 “I desire mercy *not sacrifice*”.

So Jesus is the only man who achieves the goal God has set for all mankind, the only man who has nothing to do with violence and its works. The epithet ‘Son of Man’ also corresponds, quite clearly, to the fact that Jesus alone has fulfilled a calling that belongs to all mankind. If the fulfilment, on earth, passes inevitably through the death of Jesus, this is not because the Father demands this death, for strange sacrificial motives. Neither the son nor the Father should be questioned about the cause of this event, but all mankind and mankind alone ... That is indeed why people are constrained to invent an irrational requirement of sacrifice that absolves them of responsibility. According to this argument, the Father of Jesus is still a God of violence, despite what Jesus explicitly says. Indeed he comes to be the God of unequalled violence, since he not only requires the blood of the victim who is closest to him, most precious and dear to him, but he also envisages taking revenge upon the whole of mankind for a death that he both required and anticipated. In effect, mankind is responsible for all this. Men killed Jesus because they were not capable of being reconciled without killing.³³

- Jesus’ death is redemptive, however, because of its effect on humanity. It provides the means whereby violence is exposed for what it is and enables human beings to be extracted from their own prison of hatred and be reconciled to God through the mediation of Jesus. This appears to be the message of the earliest preaching as recorded in Acts (e.g. Acts 2:22-24).

Girard has been unable to account for the book of Hebrews within his theory of atonement but a Girardian perspective on Hebrews has subsequently been provided by Michael Hardin as follows.³⁴

- Hebrews regularly uses the language of sacrifice (5:1; 7:27; 8:3; 9:23, 26; 10:1, 5, 8, 11, 12, 26; 11:4; 13:15, 16).
- But using sacrificial language and accepting the mechanism of the sacrificed victim are not the same thing.
- Hebrews subverts sacrificial language under cover of sacrificial language!
 - Jesus, the sacrifice, is not portrayed as sacrificial lamb but as high priest – the one who offers sacrifice.
 - As high priest, Jesus is in control of his destiny and chooses to give up (sacrifice) his life rather than perpetuate the cycle of violence.
 - Hebrews emphasises that Jesus’ sacrifice brings to an end the sacrificial system.

CONCLUSION

It was stated above that the New Testament writers recognised that no one metaphor could do justice to the complex notion of atonement. Similarly, no one theory is able

³³ Girard, “Nonsacrificial,” 186.

³⁴ M. Hardin, “Sacrificial Language in Hebrews: Reappraising René Girard,” *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking* (ed. W. M. Swartley; Telford: Pandora, 2000) 103–12.



comprehensively to encompass the biblical data. Moral influence theory, though attractive, cannot adequately account for the key texts used by proponents of either Christus Victor or satisfaction theories of atonement. Satisfaction theory recognises the biblical strands drawn on by moral influence and Christus Victor theories but argues that they are insufficient to account for the texts that proponents believe point conclusively to a satisfaction perspective. However, the acute theological and ideological problems that satisfaction theory raises render it extremely problematic.

A viable alternative to the predominant satisfaction theory is a modified Christus Victor perspective that:

- Takes the revised Christus Victor of Aulén as its starting point
- Reads the key New Testament texts highlighted by satisfaction theory through the lens of martyr theology informed by 4 Maccabees. This is particularly significant as Mark 10:45 has recently been advocated as the starting point for a biblical exposition of satisfaction theory.³⁵ The notion of giving one's life as a ransom for many is well expressed in the 4 Maccabees texts discussed above
- Includes Moltmann's perspective on Trinitarian suffering
- Is enriched by Girard's emphasis on the scapegoat mechanism

Questions

1. Steve Chalke has suggested that satisfaction theory presents the cross as "a form of cosmic child abuse".³⁶ How do you react to this statement in the light of the discussion above?
2. Consider a range of well-known hymns, songs and choruses that focus on the cross. What theory of atonement underlies each of these?
3. The cross was a form of violent execution used by the Romans to punish wrongdoers and terrify local populations. In his teaching Jesus clearly calls people to a path of non-violent resistance to towards evil and love towards our enemies. How should Christian's understand each of these quite different elements coming together in their thinking about the atonement? Why do you think so much popular Christian understanding of the atonement expressed in violent terms? How important is a non-violent understanding of the atonement?

Reading & Resources

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³⁵ Simon Gathercole, speaking as a proponent of satisfaction, in a debate on atonement organised by the UK Evangelical Alliance at the Emmanuel Christian Centre, Westminster, London on 7 October 2004.

³⁶ Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182.



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