

## Introduction

“JESUS DIED AS A substitutionary (atoning) sacrifice for our sins.” This assertion seems to be taken for granted as an accurate summary of a key Christian claim. However, while it may accurately describe the beliefs of certain sectors of the Christian tradition, it is an inaccurate summary of *the New Testament’s* claims about the meaning of Jesus’s death. There is something mistaken about each one of the key terms here.

Now, to be clear up front, the NT univocally claims that Jesus’s death has *saving significance*, but the mistake is collapsing this into notions of “substitution,” “sacrifice,” and “atonement.” And an even bigger mistake is thinking biblical sacrifice has anything to do with “substitution” at all, let alone that all sacrifices are about “atonement.” This book is an attempt to untangle the various knotted and interrelated misunderstandings about sacrifice in the OT and Second Temple Judaism so that we can more clearly see how various NT authors reflect on the meaning of Jesus’s death when they make use of sacrificial imagery. Often, the NT authors do not even bring up sacrificial imagery at all, but this fact goes unnoticed even by many NT scholars because it has become commonplace to conflate anything “saving” about Jesus’s death with the concept of “sacrifice.” To untangle this interpretive mess, we need to patiently examine the biblical texts and to observe what is and what is not happening in the descriptions of various sacrifices found in the Bible and other pertinent contemporaneous texts.

The research presented here, especially the first half, serves dual purposes. First, it functions as a (relatively) concise reference resource for the Levitical sacrificial and purity system for its own sake, breaking down its key nuances and distinctions. Second, it grounds and substantiates the theses about Jesus in the second half of the book, demonstrating how careful attention to the nuances within the Levitical system, coupled with the prophetic appropriation of its themes, sheds light on how early followers of

Jesus actually employed sacrificial imagery to articulate the significance and purpose of Jesus's death (and resurrection).

While this book is written from a Christian perspective,<sup>1</sup> and I hope it will be read by Christians, I hope non-Christians interested in ancient and contemporary religions will engage this project too since it is a descriptive study of ancient texts, along with, ultimately, how their interpretation impacts current realities. Thus, this book is primarily written for students of the Bible, whether hopeful, former, or enrolled students, as well as teachers who have the privilege of being lifelong students. For all such readers, I wish to demonstrate how a lot of Christian theology in many Western (mainly Protestant) traditions, as it mobilizes the notions of "sacrifice" and "atonement," has little to no anchorage in the biblical texts themselves.

However, before diving into the various intricacies and nuances of sacrifice in the Bible, I want to frame this project in broader terms. The title *Lamb of the Free* is an intentional, if unclever, pun on the self-conception and identity the United States projects into the world in its national anthem as the "land of the free" ("and the home of the brave"). Although this study will remain focused on understanding sacrifice as it is presented in the Old Testament, in order to rediscover afresh how various New Testament authors make use of these conceptual frameworks for understanding the saving significance of Jesus's death, I want to be up front about a deeper reason underneath this inquiry. My aim is ultimately to showcase the liberating message of the gospel as an act of resistance to other notions of "freedom" on offer in the world as represented in the US national anthem. I will return to this concern in my conclusion and discuss how this study matters beyond just clearing up common misunderstandings of ancient texts for their own sake. However, the bulk of this project will be demonstrating how many assumptions about biblical sacrifice are just that—(false) *assumptions*—since they lack justification in the actual texts available to us. And this matters.

It turns out many theologies about God's salvation in Jesus Christ and justice are based on these mistaken understandings about sacrifice and justice. For instance, John G. Stackhouse Jr. claims that "God cannot 'just forgive' our sins without anyone suffering" on the supposed basis that "the elaborate sacrificial system of the Torah was ordained by God to symbolize this fundamental reality" and he calls this "[t]he logic of justice."<sup>2</sup> Each of these three claims, not to mention the ostensible relationships assumed between them, is mistaken. And I hope clearing up misunderstandings like these will play a small part in rediscovering a view of justice that is informed

1. I am a Christian in the Anglican tradition.

2. Stackhouse, "Terminal Punishment," 77.

by a more accurate understanding of the way sacrifice functions in Christian scripture. Hence, although my immediate purpose is to help us better understand NT author's sacrificial claims about Jesus, this all plays into a larger vision about how Christians ought to go about enacting distinctively Christian notions of justice and renewal.

Put another way, I don't think either the OT's or the NT's views of sacrifice have much to do with "justice" *per se*, but too many Christians, like Stackhouse, derive their view of what justice is from a mistaken understanding of sacrifice in the Christian canon. For some, justice is retributive and has to do with punishment. And a sacrifice, so it is thought, is bringing justice by punishing some other blood-filled mammal as a substitutionary death, construed as the just punishment for the sinner.

For instance, Hannah Bowman has recently demonstrated how "American penal culture" and "American mass incarceration has been driven by many ideological factors, including the pernicious influence of theological conceptions of 'penal substitutionary atonement,'" in opposition to which she offers an alternative model of atonement via solidarity.<sup>3</sup> I hope to ultimately dismantle these misunderstandings of justice and "the mutually-reinforcing ways in which atonement theology has acted in the service of racialized narratives of punishment and control"<sup>4</sup> by being clear about what is and what is not actually happening in OT sacrifice and then how NT authors (along with other Second Temple texts) make use of these sacrificial concepts.

I believe taking the time to sow these seeds to help those of us who are Christians hear more accurately what is in our Bible will reap a bountiful spiritual and theological harvest that can sustain ongoing Christian formation and our common mission of renewal and reconciliation in the name of Jesus Christ. As Isaiah says, God's word does not return empty (Isa 55:11).

## WHAT DOES "ATONEMENT" EVEN MEAN?

In English, the word "atonement" means too many things at once. And this is a result, in part, of how this word came into the English vocabulary. I have no inherent problems with this word, but because it can be used in *both* a sacrificial register (e.g., to translate the Hebrew word *kipper*) and in a non-sacrificial register (to convey anything that falls within the broad realm of "the saving significance of Jesus's death"), these conceptually separate domains are often conflated. And this conflation results in some major

3. Bowman, "From Substitution to Solidarity," 1–19, here 1.

4. Bowman, "From Substitution," 1.

misinterpretations of NT texts, which in turn have resulted in problematic theologies about the nature of salvation.

Following John Wycliffe's Middle English translation of the Bible in the fourteenth century, which used phrases like "to one" and "one-ment," William Tyndale in the sixteenth century first standardized "atone" and "atonement" (at-one-ment). It was first used as a translation of the Greek word *katallassō*, which means "reconciliation," in texts like 2 Cor 5:18–20 and Rom 5:10. *Katallassō*, "at-one-ment," "reconciliation." This all makes good sense. So far, so good.

But Tyndale then used the noun "atonement," and the verb form "to atone," to translate the Hebrew root word *k-p-r* in the Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy). But this already makes theological assumptions about the function of Israel's sacrificial system that Hebrew Bible scholars almost unanimously have demonstrated to be misunderstandings, as will be developed in the next chapter. For a quick teaser: In the *piel* form, *kipper* means "remove" most broadly, but when used in the sacrificial system it more specifically conveys the idea of "decontaminate" or "purify" or "purge" (i.e., removing a contamination clinging to something). Hence, *kipper* does not mean "reconcile," nor "save," nor "forgive." Equally importantly, only holy objects within the sacred dwelling place,<sup>5</sup> or later the temple, receive the ritual action of *kipper*. In other words, when *kipper* happens, what is decontaminated or purified is a holy object in the sanctuary, *not people*.

More on all of this in due course. For now I only want to signal that because many modern English translations follow Tyndale and use "atonement" and "atone" to translate *kipper* in books like Leviticus, "atonement" has come to mean, for NT scholars and Christian theologians alike, both "the totality of Jesus's saving work" and "*kipper*." This has led to an unfortunate set of misunderstandings, which in turn have resulted in problematic theologies.

All too often, as evidenced by Stackhouse above, when people are discussing the saving significance of Jesus's death, false equivalencies are made in rapid succession: "saving" is assumed to mean "atoning," and "atoning" is taken to mean "sacrifice," and "sacrifice," so it is thought, always has a *kipper* function and is then assumed to be equivalent to "forgiveness." So everything about the salvific meaning of Jesus's death gets reduced to and

5. Following Liane Feldman's suggestion, I am using "dwelling place" rather than the usual "tabernacle" to translate *miškān* to productively defamiliarize readers, since "tabernacle" fails to convey the function (and therefore meaning) of *miškān*. The verbal forms of the root *š-k-n* convey the act of "dwelling" or "settling" (*šākan*) and the *mem* (*m*) prefix signifies the *place* where the verbal action happens. Thus, the *miškān* functions as the physical and geographical place of YHWH's dwelling among Israel.

conflated with "an atoning, *kipper*, sacrifice." These inaccurate confluations are what I aim to correct.<sup>6</sup>

This matters because many of the go-to NT texts assumed to be supporting something like "penal substitutionary atonement" (e.g., Rom 3:25; 8:3; Gal 3:13, 2 Cor 5:21) are demonstrably not about sacrificial atonement (nor are they about substitution).<sup>7</sup> They are about the saving significance of Jesus's death, but they utilize a completely different conceptual framework than sacrifice in general or *kipper* in particular to explain that saving significance.

To be sure, and as I will develop more shortly, atonement—in the sense found in Leviticus (*kipper*)—is indeed present in the NT. But it is underappreciated how *rarely* it is actually mentioned. It is only explicitly mentioned in two texts written toward the end of the first century: Hebrews and 1 John. There is *other* sacrificial imagery used throughout the NT, but I will demonstrate why it is important to notice the difference between sacrificial atonement (*kipper*) and other types of sacrificial imagery—because not all Levitical sacrifices have an atoning function. Too many interpreters betray their lack of awareness of this and thereby replicate and pass on distorted notions of sacrifice in their exegesis of NT texts.

## CHARTING A PATH FORWARD

When I use "atonement," "atone," "atoning," and so on, I am restricting this word group's meaning to the Levitical concept of *kipper*. And this study aims to show how differentiating between atoning and non-atoning sacrifices is crucial to understanding the sacrificial imagery applied to Jesus by various NT authors. Moreover, this project is not about interpreting the meaning of Jesus's *death per se*, in all its metaphorical varieties present in all the NT texts that touch its meaning. Many NT texts use some metaphorical register other than the sacrificial to convey the significance of Jesus's death. But the point of this study is to focus particularly on the *sacrificial* understandings

6. Similarly, from Scott Shauf: "One of the main barriers to understanding sacrifice in general and Jesus's death as a sacrifice in particular is a too-easy equation between sacrifice and atonement. Christians are accustomed to thinking of Jesus's death as a sacrifice solely in the sense of an atoning sacrifice, as achieving forgiveness for sins, without even being aware that sacrifice was more commonly performed for purposes other than atonement, especially for the purposes of communion and gift" (*Jesus the Sacrifice*, 195).

7. I discuss each of these and more in chapter 7. But see also, e.g., McLean, "The Absence of an Atoning Sacrifice in Paul's Soteriology," 531–53; Streett, "Cursed by God? Galatians 3:13," 189–209; McMurray, *Sacrifice*, 57–94.

of Jesus's death in the NT. To do this well, however, I will also have to debunk the interpretations of some texts that scholars often mistakenly read as being about sacrifice but that, upon investigation, turn out to be set in another metaphorical register altogether.

Therefore, when we encounter a NT text, our main guiding questions in the background will be:

1. Is this text using *sacrificial* imagery, or is it employing language from another conceptual domain?
2. If it is employing sacrificial imagery, is it drawing upon the *atonement* or *non-atonement* sacrifices?

The result of all of this will be greater clarity concerning the diverse ways NT authors speak about the saving significance of Jesus's death in terms of both types of sacrificial imagery—both atoning and non-atonement—as well as imagery from other conceptual frameworks. It will also highlight the prominence the non-atonement sacrifices had for early Jesus-followers since these were the sacrifices associated with Jesus's death in the earliest strands of the NT literature. These sacrifices are the determinative framework for comprehending the Lord's Supper (and Paul's instructions and warnings in 1 Cor 11 in particular).

A secondary, but no less important, result is that this study will end up dismantling the ostensible exegetical basis for "penal substitutionary atonement." This will mainly be indirect because the exegetical arguments to be presented are going to focus on expositing the biblical texts and the way the words run on the page.<sup>8</sup> But the results of these endeavors will prove how penal substitutionary atonement is left with no scriptural anchor. This study will demonstrate how, from a biblical-studies perspective, penal substitutionary atonement has problems with each one of its key terms—penal, substitutionary, and atonement. I shall argue that it is predicated on a complete misunderstanding of the sacrificial system in the scriptures. And I do mean *complete*. It misinterprets how atonement is accomplished and what it is for (and it also falls victim to the imprecision of the word "atonement" by conflating all sorts of meanings with it).

At this point it will be helpful to chart my path for arriving at these conclusions in a little more detail. In chapters 1–4, I clear up common misunderstandings about OT sacrifice and the two forms of (im)purity (ritual vs. moral) in the process of providing an account of the meaning, logic, and limits of the various functions of Levitical sacrifices.<sup>9</sup> In chapter 4 I also

8. Cf. Hauerwas, "Why 'The Way Words Run' Matters."

9. I am neither assuming the OT represents, nor am I attempting through a critical

discuss the so-called prophetic critique of sacrifice and the expectation of "restoration" when utilizing cultic imagery, as well as the fact that forgiveness can and did occur apart from the atoning apparatus of cultic sacrifice.

Chapter 5 explores Jesus's relation to the sacrificial and purity systems in the Gospels. I demonstrate how the understanding of the Lord's Supper in both the Gospels and 1 Corinthians derives exclusively from the *non-atonement* sacrifices. I also deconstruct arguments that try to find allusions to sacrificial atonement in the Lord's Supper and the crucifixion accounts in the Gospels.

Then I address, in chapter 6, how atonement is used in 1 John and Hebrews. I also show how Hebrews employs this framework to depict followers of Jesus as being made into both co-high priests and co-purgation sacrifices with Jesus. Hebrews has a thick atonement theology, but it is *not* a *substitutionary* atonement theology. It is a participatory atonement, or solidarity atonement theology.

In chapter 7 I examine several key NT texts that are commonly misunderstood to be about sacrifice and/or atonement. I show why they are best comprehended within another conceptual framework: 1 Pet 2:24; Mark 10:45//Matt 20:28; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Rom 8:3; and 3:25. There are more passages than these, but space does not permit me to tackle every single text misunderstood in this way. Nevertheless, I hope these case studies provide sufficient examples of how to analyze NT passages in relation to the preceding study of OT sacrifices.

By way of conclusion, I directly address the notion of "substitution." By this point, it will have become more than clear that the NT authors, whether they make use of sacrificial imagery, or whether they make use of the atonement sacrifices, all agree on one fundamental point: Jesus's death is a *participatory* phenomenon; it is something all are called to *share in experientially*. The logic is not: Jesus died so we don't have to. Rather it is: Jesus died so that we, together, can follow in his steps and die with him and like him, having full fellowship with his sufferings so that we might share in the likeness of his resurrection (e.g., Phil 3:10–11; Gal 2:20; 6:14; Rom 6:3–8; 1 Pet 2:21; Mark 8:34–35 with 10:38–29; 1 John 2:6; 3:16–18; etc.).

In short, while Jesus did die *for* us, this does not mean that Jesus died *instead of* us. It means that he died *ahead of* and *with* us.

use of the biblical texts to reconstruct, what ancient Israelites "really did" or "really taught/thought." Rather, since this book is primarily about understanding how the NT authors appropriate the OT's sacrificial and purity language and themes to comprehend the saving significance of Jesus, my aim in these chapters is detailed exegesis of the biblical texts themselves in conversation with their interpretive legacies/reception history, especially in the Second Temple period.