

## Atonement, Then and Now

There has been a recent flurry of books on the atonement in the Old and New Testament recently. This suggests two things: first, that there has been some dissatisfaction with the old definitions and theological explorations; and second, it has sent scholars and pastors searching for new connections and new ways to articulate this important doctrine of the church. For the next three weeks I will try and access the recent fallout and then begin the process to articulate my own views on the subject.

There is no doubt that both Paul and Jesus, believed God's desire was to save the world, through a redemptive act, providing justification for the people of Israel and the world. Our revelatory information, the scripture, addresses the subject in the New Testament and Old Testament, with contextual and fluidity, demanding a keen reading of all the relevant texts. Although, it does not clearly define the transactional, or revelatory dimensions of these facts, that clearly find atonement the center of spiritual practice, it does provide a thread to the meaning of the cross. If there had been a clear direction we would not be filtering through book after book, to listen to the men and women of knowledge with such interest. The Old and New Testament has suggestive features that provide understanding; through its stories and rituals, we can see there are layers of perspectives that need deconstructing. Interpreting these rituals and stories, have provided each generation new suspicions of what the cross means, and what it means for the spiritual life and the psychological healing of guilt and shame. But at the same time, we are convinced through these stories and our experience that salvation means the forgiveness of sins, which is the clearest expression of salvation.

In this recent plethora of publications on atonement we are beginning to see more clearly that behind the atonement is a story. Depending on how it is told, and where it begins, informs the scholar on the meaning of the cross, and the doctrine of atonement. For instance, Anselm, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, saw the story like this: When Adam and Eve sinned, they damaged God's honor and initiated his wrath against humanity. Jesus died on the cross to appease God's wrath and restore God's honor to the world. Seen this way atonement is mainly the propitiation of God's wrath against the sinner.

Another way to tell the story of Jesus' saving act on the cross is to suggest that when humanity sinned, it meant that there needed to be a sacrifice on the part of humanity to show God proper contrition. Therefore, we can be forgiven. But in the case of original sin, the act of sacrifice was too much for humanity, therefore God himself paid the price for our sin, by sacrificing his son.

Finally, another story grew up early in Christianity's rise suggesting that the goal of salvation was to turn humanity around by a moral or courageous example of what it means to live the righteous life. Jesus provides this moral and spiritual example, which ultimately led him to the cross, showing the world what it takes to live a righteous life. Salvation begins with repentance, leading then to a live of spiritual righteousness.

These are just some of the stories that theologians have constructed in order to explain what Jesus did on the cross for the world. The two main sources for these stories have been Leviticus, in the Old Testament, and Paul, in the New Testament. Through the work of Milgrom, in Leviticus, there has been a harvest of new information and perspectives regarding the purity laws, sacrifice and Yom Kippur. His work has given rise to what was brought to the New Testament writers in their experience of the rituals and theology of the “mercy seat” and what atonement actually meant for them. There have been many scholars working on Paul’s understanding of atonement in Romans and Corinthians. The most important piece of information about Paul’s writings is that he uses many different story lines to try and tell the story of our salvation. For most scholars they feel that this is because Paul is a pastor, speaking to different groups with different backgrounds. His gift was to take that background and weave it into a story for them. This makes it difficult to know whether Paul had one definitive story, or that the experience of salvation could be different, for different groups. Most scholars feel Paul’s basic understanding of our atonement was caught up in the words “Justification” and “Forgiveness.” Mechanisms like “expiation”, “propitiation”, and “redemption”, were carry overs from his prior life in the temple. But for this new life in Christ he highlights the story of being free from sin, forgiven for our sin and justified by God for a live of freedom.

For more information on Paul reading Romans 3 and 5 are essential. Also, you must read Galatians 3:13ff and 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. These scriptures are foundational for Paul’s view of the gift of salvation and the definition of atonement. You will be able to see Paul’s diversity of thought and also how the transaction on the cross, the forgiveness of sins, leads to a life of freedom and joy. In Paul’s letters you cannot separate the two events-----the cross, from how we live.

To familiarize yourself with the Old Testament rituals of sacrifice and preparations for atonement I would suggest reading Leviticus 16. It is the instructions for the mercy seat, and the sprinkling of blood which includes sacrifices. Milgrom has especially been helpful in understanding the meaning of this furniture in the tabernacle, and what its function was to atone for the sins of the people. His connections to the New Testament are invaluable, when we consider what was in the mind of the Jewish worshippers and the Greek worshippers of idols.

Next week we will push on to the central story of the atonement, while we seek to narrow it down using the language of Paul, and the suggestions from Leviticus and 4 Maccabees in the Apocrypha. This was a Jewish book written during the first century B.C., which highlights the meaning of sacrifice in the Jewish nation of relationships and worship. I believe we will find the history and theology contained in this book will have overlaps with Paul and the Christians of the first century.