

Introduction

Atonement has its origins in ritual sacrifice, so most biblical scholars who write about Christian atonement begin with a survey of sacrifice. But biblical scholars usually resist the application of psychology to biblical texts, possibly with good reason. No one wants to see the Bible explained away as a disguised fear of Daddy or yearning for Mommy. And yet, almost every biblical scholar and theologian brings *some* psychology to bear on the subject, without identifying it as such. John Goldingay writes of atoning sacrifices as a reconciling type of gift, “parallel to the gift of flowers in human relationships.”¹ This asserts something about the psychology of sacrifice: that its motivation is similar to that of a pleasant and familiar custom. It suggests that sacrifice is about love and reconciliation, that it is thoroughly sensible and charming, with no thought of plying God with gifts in order to get something in return.

Even the most rigorous of biblical scholars resort to some psychological explanations. It is time to acknowledge that we are already using psychological categories to interpret ancient texts. We might then become more responsible for, and self-critical about, our psychological interpretations.

How could we *not* use psychology, when we are talking about religious traditions and practices that involved deep feelings, and may involve such feelings for the scholar, as well? What a writer asserts

1. John Goldingay, “Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ,” in *Atonement Today*, ed. John Goldingay (London: SPCK, 1995), 4.

about psychology needs to be tested for coherence, as do all assertions. The reader must judge whether the psychological theories utilized in this study coordinate well with biblical studies, and seem to help us in understanding atonement in Jewish and Christian thinking.

But first we must study the Bible. Christian atonement is, generally, the idea that “Christ died for our sins” or died as a “sacrifice.” In the New Testament, this idea mostly occurs in the Epistles and in Revelation. The subject is best introduced by providing some New Testament atonement passages, holding off on extensive commentary at this point. I give four texts from the apostle Paul and four from the successors to Paul.

Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. (1 Cor. 5:7 NRSV, the default translation used in this book)

I handed on to you . . . what I . . . received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3–4)

While we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Rom. 5:8–10)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. (Gal. 3:13)

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all. (1 Tim. 2:5–6)

When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Heb. 1:3)

If the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works. (Heb. 9:13–14)

He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Heb. 9:26)

Of course, Christ dying as a sacrifice is metaphorical, but the metaphors turn out to contain a number of basic Jewish sacrificial concepts, such as the notion that sacrificial blood purifies (see chapter 1) and the idea that sacrifice provides a “ransom” or “redemption” (see chapter 2).

Much more informally than in the biblical studies chapters, I would like now to introduce some of my views on the psychology of atonement.

Why Atonement Is Compelling

We need to ask why atonement has been so compelling in religious thought (whether monotheistic or not). I think it is partly because it corresponds to common beliefs about “the way life is”: that there is “no pain, no gain,” and “no free lunch.” People have experienced that, on the material level, nothing is free, and they assume that the same principle operates on the divine level as well: a “ransom” had to be paid (1 Tim. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:18). In ancient cultures, people tended to deal with their gods in the same ways they dealt with each other, practicing inducement, ingratiation, appeasement, and manipulation in their religion, as they did in their social lives. Gift-giving and praise were techniques for eliciting divine attention.

I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy. . . .
Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud! . . .
Do not hide your face from me. (Ps. 27:6–7, 9)

Self-interest is quite apparent in Psalm 20.

May he remember all your offerings,
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices.
May he grant you your heart’s desire,
and fulfill all your plans. (Ps. 20:3–4)

The goal of sacrifice here is to get God to grant one’s desires, which

SACRIFICE AND ATONEMENT

happens if God is pleased with the offering (regards it “with favor”). It is a kind of prosperity gospel!

But there were those who rejected this way of seeking God’s favor, asking,

Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obedience to the voice of the Lord?
Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice. (1 Sam. 15:22)

From a very early time, there were theological arguments about sacrifice.

Some of the prophets were upset with public displays of piety and sacrifice meant to impress God, to win God’s favor. Micah asked,

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? (Mic. 6:7)

Grandiose piety is manipulative. Jesus offers a radically different view by teaching that people should *trust* God, who need not be persuaded to give every good thing to God’s children (Matt. 6:30–33; 7:7–11). God *cannot* be manipulated. (That was Micah’s point as well; see Mic. 6:8; 3:11.)

The perceived need to butter up God, or to placate God’s anger, has its psychological origin in childhood strategies for placating moody parents. The harsh God derives from harsh parenting, and the latter is reinforced by beliefs about God as violent and punishing. Our God-concept and our approach to parenting have a reciprocal effect on each other. We project our earthly experience onto God, and our understanding of God affects how we approach parenting. The good news is that, as parents become less frightening, God becomes less frightening. The message becomes “come, let us reason together” (Isa. 1:18) rather than “a fire is kindled by my anger” (Deut. 32:22). Our concepts of God would never make any progress if we had parents who would rather give their child a stone than a loaf of bread (Matt. 7:9), but Jesus chooses to use that illustration because he assumes that most parents are better than that. He is saying that most parents would

provide *good* things, not a stone. And—*of course*—God is kind: “How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11; cf. Luke 11:13). Jesus proclaims that the Father gives *freely*, and not because sacrifice has been made or obeisance given. The Father does not want the children to grovel.

Revelation to the Wounded

There are many themes, ideas, and values that undergo reflection, debate, and struggle in the development of religion in any culture. But the single most important struggle, the great ideological battle of the ages, is the conflict between love and fear in believers’ attitudes toward God. I understand God to be actively involved in the struggle in the heart of each believer, revealing love to us, and trying to help love to win out over fear. It is a long, slow process. I speak of “revelation” to refer to any revealing of divine reality or truth by God or by Spirit to humans. Unfortunately, the human mind is a very dense filter, and every revelation is adapted, assimilated, and distorted by the individual receiving it. As soon as revelation enters the human mind and heart, it is altered to one degree or another, domesticated to fit the beliefs the person already holds. Too often, we insist on pouring new wine into old wineskins that cannot “stretch.” Old ways of thinking cannot hold the new truth (the point in Mark 2:22). And yet it also helps us to change our thinking.

Religion operates on our wounds, our loves, our fears, hopes, and yearnings. But unless revelation succeeds in clarifying religious values, they will remain poorly conceived, still attached to primitive origins and expressing more of woundedness than of healing, more of fear than of love. Religion carries a long heritage of fear. Divine revelation communicates a message of trust (and “perfect love casts out fear,” 1 John 4:18), but it takes a long time for the new message to sink in. In Judaism and Christianity (and in other religions, to one degree or another, I would argue), the fear legacy of ancient religion has been *partly* replaced by the trust inspired by revelation. Fear and anxiety dominate ancient religion. One is always in danger of breaking some

taboo or angering some spirit. This can even be seen in biblical religion. The Lord can lash out in anger at even the unintended transgression of sacred boundaries, as he did at Uzzah, who reached out to steady the ark of the covenant, “for the oxen shook it. The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God” (2 Sam. 6:6–7). Fear is the operative emotion: “David was afraid of the Lord that day” (6:9). Perhaps the original readers of this text experienced some of the same horror that most of us experience when reading this. But, hopefully, we find it much harder to accept the idea that God is a holy terror.

It should be obvious that, if one’s relationship with God is characterized by fear, one’s theology and thinking will be distorted. But to this day, many people are taught a message of mingled love and fear, as we see in the Epistle to the Hebrews: God is “faithful” and we are “to love” and be “encouraging” (Heb. 10:23–25), but “if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire” (10:26–27). Would not fear overwhelm love here? Every promise in Hebrews seems to carry a threat: “How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (2:3). “Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks . . . for indeed our God is a consuming fire” (12:28–29). How confident can our love be then?

The idea of God as a punishing presence reflects dynamics learned in childhood. We tend to think about God in the ways we learned to think about our parents. A major thesis of this book is that atonement theology is largely based on childhood strategies for satisfying moody and explosive parents by “paying for” infractions (or having someone else pay for them). It would be a big mistake always to reduce religion to child psychology, but it would also be a mistake to deny the connection when there is good reason to notice it. We need to ask why brutal symbolism and mythology are common in our religions—not just in Christianity.

The mixture of love and fear, forgiveness and threat, is nothing new in the history of religious symbols. The really effective religious symbols have a mysterious socializing power, since they combine divergent levels of human thought and draw together people of different backgrounds. The fact that the blending is illogical may actually *increase* its religious potency. Religious ideas are embraced for their vividness, their unconsciously compelling power. That which arouses the passions corresponds to something in early childhood experience evoking those things that have most harmed us, as well as those that have most helped us. They speak of what has cut most deeply into us—fear and love.

Bossy and impatient parenting styles were common in ancient societies. Doctrines of hell, payment in blood, and sacrificial substitution ring true for those who have been taught to consider violent retribution and punishment to be normal parental behaviors. As the sixth-to-seventh-century pope Gregory the Great wrote, “The rust of vice can only be purged by the fire of torment.”² Tragically, people have sought repair by returning to the matrix of brutality that damaged them in the first place. It takes a long time to unlearn the idea of payment through suffering.

Atonement doctrines correspond closely with the strategies for handling emotional trauma and surviving in families where the parents put conditions on their love. Teachers of atonement claim that salvation was purchased by a sacrifice made “once for all” (Heb. 9:26; 10:10), but in fact atonement thinking reflects *chronic* stress, manifesting in repeated cycles of sinning, bingeing, getting caught, confessing, repenting, and being told to “make good” by paying a certain penance or penalty. Restoration is not free, but is purchased through suffering. The psychology of atonement is constantly dramatized in a cycle of guilt, confession, and forgiveness. The message that the innocent Son of God was nailed to the cross to pay for one’s sins does not reduce anxiety but deepens it.

2. Gregory the Great, *Moralia on Job* 3.14; quoted in L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester, UK: Longmans, Green, 1920), 98.

Real repair from the matrix of damage caused by brutal parenting requires recognizing the psychopathology of cruelty, and repudiating it. This will affect our religious beliefs and our social living; there is a link between what people believe about God and how they treat each other.

Christian atonement is a paradoxical mixture of noble hopes and religious fear. The surface of atonement theology involves the love of God, but the underlying (unconscious) pattern involves coping with parental rage. Therefore, atonement doctrine is fueled by anxiety, even while it also embodies love, although love that is frustrated and hedged about with conditions. Atonement thinking is complex, commingling personal need, fear, and ideal hope based on the assumption of a God both violent and loving. The sacrificial interpretation of the death of Jesus takes ancient ideas of ritual purification and ransoming, and spiritualizes them with ideas of transformation and grace. The result is a complicated mixture of anxiety, guilt, and love. To the extent that it focuses on ransom or substitutionary atonement, it reflects the dynamics of a dysfunctional home. To the extent that it emphasizes attunement with the will and the love of God, it reflects healthy psychology within a healthy family.

The Approach Used Here

Cultic metaphors are particularly important in Paul and Hebrews. When cultic language is used metaphorically, there is some *continuity* and some *discontinuity* with the preceding cult. Given the importance of both continuity and discontinuity between Old Testament ideas and New Testament images, and between New Testament images and subsequent Christian beliefs, there must be a chronological dimension to this study, examining the ancestry and development of atonement ideas. But a merely chronological study would not necessarily highlight psychological factors. To uncover the psychological dimension, one must study the *functions* of atonement, the needs that people believed atonement was meeting. If we look at the reasons and explanations that believers have given for sacrifice and atonement, psychological

factors will be illuminated. Even if the real motives are partially disguised or even unconscious, the rationalizations will give clues to the hidden motives. Thus this study must have both a chronological and a functional dimension, which complicates the matter of organization.

I will begin with two chapters on the two main functions of sacrifice in the Old Testament, purification and compensation. These chapters will include some sections on psychology where relevant. Chapter 3 is entirely devoted to psychological ideas, including attachment theory. Chapters 4 through 6 will be on Paul and Hebrews, the main sources of Christian atonement thinking. Chapter 7 looks at the development of atonement concepts in Christian history. Psychological theories will be brought in at appropriate points. The final section of each biblical or historical chapter will concern the teachings and approach of Jesus, and how they differ from the beliefs and practices just discussed.

Biblical scholars often object to the mixing of biblical studies with later popularizing interpretations because they find the latter to distort the Bible rather than illuminate it. But the study of the Bible must extend beyond the biblical text itself. The community that receives the text also shapes it and transmits it through time. The relevance of the Bible includes how it was received and interpreted, even distorted. The latter is certainly the case with atonement doctrines that exaggerate and distort a few statements of Paul while ignoring the rest of what he said. The doctrine of penal substitution exaggerates the element of substitution that *is* present in Paul, adds ideas that are not found in Paul at all (such as that Christ was *rightly* punished when he bore our sins, since, at that moment, he become “a transgressor . . . rebel, blasphemers”),³ and ignores much of what Paul taught (about the ability to do God’s will [Romans 12], to imitate Christ [Phil. 2:5; 1 Thess. 1:6], and to be transformed and divinized [Rom. 8:29–30]). Still, the seeds of later popular ideas are usually found to have been planted by the biblical authors.

3. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* 3.13; in John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 135.

SACRIFICE AND ATONEMENT

I will utilize some existing psychological theories about patterns of psychic injury and coping. My own addition is the assertion that some concepts of atonement are psychologically based on a pattern of assuaging or soothing angry parents through a strategy of payment through suffering.