



Rethinking Sacrifice and Atonement

Introduction

For centuries, Christians have been taught that the idea that Jesus made atonement for the sins of humanity in his passion and death is firmly rooted in the New Testament. According to most biblical scholars, the basis for this interpretation of Jesus' death is found in the Old Testament and other writings of antiquity that ascribe atoning efficacy to the sufferings and death of a righteous person and to the offering of sacrifices for sin.

When we examine the ancient sources, however, we find very little evidence for this claim. In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, there is only one passage that speaks explicitly of one person suffering and dying for others and for their sins: Isaiah 53. There it is said that the sins of others were laid upon the servant figure described in the passage, that the servant bore those sins in his sufferings and death, and that he brought about the healing of others by being wounded for their transgressions and bruised for their iniquities (Isa 53:4-6, 8, 11-12). Sacrificial imagery is also used to refer to the servant's death as a sin-offering (Isa 53:10). Nowhere in the passage, however, is any explanation given as to how these affirmations are to be understood.

Outside of the Hebrew Bible, there are two passages from the Fourth Book of Maccabees that use sacrificial language and imagery when describing the manner in which several Jewish figures were put to death for their faithfulness to the Mosaic law during the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes in the mid-second century BCE. These figures are said to have purified others and attained their redemption by means of their blood and to have put away God's wrath at the people's sins through their sufferings and death (4 Macc 6:27-29; 17:20-22). In this case as well, however, the text offers no explanation regarding what is meant by these phrases. While similar language is used in the New Testament to speak of the significance of Jesus' death, it is likely that 4 Maccabees was written around the same time that the New Testament writings were being composed. Many doubts exist, therefore, as to whether 4 Maccabees

could have exerted any influence on the thought of Jesus' earliest followers.

Outside of these passages, there are no other Hebrew or Jewish writings of the Second Temple period that speak explicitly of one person suffering and dying in order to bear the sins of others, effect their purification or redemption, endure their punishment, or deliver them from God's wrath at their sins. Undoubtedly, there are a number of texts that use language that is in some ways similar. For example, when God becomes angry at the sin of the Israelites and threatens to destroy them, Moses tells God that he would prefer to die together with his fellow Israelites rather than see them destroyed without him (Exodus 32:30-34). Yet while Moses convinces God not to carry out that threat, in reality it is his intercession that puts away God's wrath. Furthermore, Moses does not offer to die in the *place* of the sinful people but only asks that he might die *with* them, and God responds to Moses' petition by insisting that he will not punish the innocent along with the guilty. Nothing in this passage, therefore, suggests the idea that a righteous person might atone for the sins of others by suffering or dying in their place or on their behalf.

Many biblical scholars have pointed to passages from Jewish and Greco-Roman writings of the Second Temple period that allude to the idea of vicarious suffering and death in order to argue that this idea would have been known to Jesus' earliest followers and would have influenced them to interpret Jesus' sufferings and death as vicarious. While this may indeed have been the case, it is important to stress that, when used in this context, the adjective "vicarious" simply refers to suffering and death that benefit others in some way. This term does not necessarily imply the idea of substitution, since one person may give up his or her life on behalf of others without taking their place or dying in their stead. In addition, vicarious suffering and death is generally not regarded as atoning for sins. The death of a soldier who is killed while defending his country from an enemy, for example, is said to be vicarious in that he gave up his life for others or for his country. Nevertheless, such a death

does not make atonement for the sins of anyone, nor does it involve suffering the penalty or punishment that others deserved in their stead. It is vicarious only in the sense that the soldier died as a result of his dedication to the task of saving and protecting his people from their enemy and perhaps in the sense that it inspired others to be willing to give up their lives for the same objective as well.

Some scholars have argued that the idea that a righteous person could atone for the sins of others by suffering or dying for them is found in a number of rabbinic texts composed several centuries after the books of the New Testament had been written. Most of those texts, however, speak of people atoning for their own sins through their own suffering and death. Of course, because those texts are from a later period, they cannot have exerted any influence on Jesus' earliest followers, though it is possible that they reflect ideas that already existed in the first century CE.

Because sacrificial language and imagery are used repeatedly in the New Testament to refer to the salvific significance of Jesus' death, there can be no doubt that ancient Hebrew and Jewish beliefs regarding sacrifice influenced the earliest interpretations of Jesus' death among his followers. In order to make sense of this language and imagery, biblical scholars have examined in detail the passages in the Old Testament and in Second Temple Jewish and Greco-Roman writings that speak of sacrificial beliefs and practices. Strictly speaking, of course, Jesus' death had not been a sacrifice, since he had obviously not been offered up as a sacrificial victim in a temple or upon an altar by a priest. The Hebrew Bible also rejects the idea of human sacrifice and prohibits putting one person to death in the place of another. Nevertheless, in order to understand the sacrificial language and imagery used to speak of Jesus' death in the New Testament, some type of reconstruction of ancient beliefs regarding the meaning and purpose of sacrifice is necessary.

The main obstacle to such a reconstruction is the fact that neither the biblical texts nor Second Temple Jewish writings ever discuss explicitly the manner in which the sacrificial rites they describe were

understood to benefit those who participated in those rites. For that reason, biblical scholars have never been able to reach any kind of consensus regarding the meaning ascribed to those practices in antiquity or the purpose for which they were believed to have been prescribed. A wide variety of explanations or “theories” as to how sacrifices were thought to “work” and to attain the forgiveness of sins have been put forward, yet all of these have been shown to be problematic in one way or another.

In reality, many different types of sacrifice are prescribed in the Hebrew Bible, and most of the sacrificial rites did not have the purpose of obtaining forgiveness or making atonement for sins. In fact, neither the noun “atonement” nor the verb “atone” appear anywhere in the Old or New Testaments or in Jewish writings of the Second Temple period. The reason for this is that the terminology of atonement did not appear in English until the sixteenth century, when the word “atone” was formed by combining the words “at” and “one.” In Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, the biblical passages that refer to the purpose for which sacrifices for sin were offered use words that have to do primarily with the ideas of cleansing and prayer. The two English verbs most commonly used to translate those words are “expiate” and “propitiate.” In general terms, expiation refers to cleansing or purification, whereas propitiation has to do with appeasing the anger of someone, generally by means of intercession.

The section of articles titled *Rethinking Sacrifice and Atonement* on this website examines all of the writings and subjects just mentioned. The most extensive discussion of ancient Hebrew and Jewish beliefs regarding sacrifice is found in “Sacrifice and Atonement in Second Temple Jewish Thought,” which is taken from Chapter 3 of my book *Jesus’ Death in New Testament Thought*. The same subject is addressed more briefly in “Salvation and Sacrifice in the Torah” and the first part of “Sacrifice, Death, and Atonement in Second Temple Judaism,” both of which contain passages from my book *The Parting of the Gods: Paul and the Redefinition of Judaism*.

The most complete analysis of Isaiah 53 in this section of my website appears in “‘Wounded for Our Transgressions’: Rethinking Isaiah 53.” However, Isaiah 53 is also discussed at length in several of the selections found in the section of this website titled *Rethinking Jesus’ Death*. In “Paul’s Understanding of Jesus’ Death,” a selection from *The Parting of the Gods* that focuses exclusively on Isaiah 53 is found on pp. 112-120 of the text cited. That selection also touches briefly on the question of how Isaiah 53 may have influenced the interpretations of Jesus’ death that arose among his first followers. This question is discussed in greater detail on pp. 601-607 of the selection from Chapter 10 of *Jesus’ Death in New Testament Thought* that is reproduced here under the title “Jesus’ Death for Others: The Story and the Formulas.” Because Isaiah 53 is cited explicitly in 1 Peter 2:22-25, several pages from the selection titled “Jesus’ Death in 1 Peter” also touch on that question (see pp. 887-892 from the selection cited there).

The passages mentioned above from 4 Maccabees that use sacrificial language to refer to vicarious death are discussed in detail in “Vicarious Death and Atonement” and in “Sacrifice, Death, and Atonement in Second Temple Judaism” in this section of the website, *Rethinking Sacrifice and Atonement*. A brief passage from “Jesus’ Death for Others: The Story and the Formulas” discusses those passages as well (see pp. 608-613). These same selections also examine the texts from other Jewish writings and Greco-Roman sources that speak of vicarious suffering and death.

What all of these selections make clear is that there is nothing in the Hebrew Scriptures, Second Temple Jewish writings, or ancient Greco-Roman sources that would have led Jesus’ earliest followers to conclude that Jesus’ sufferings and death had made atonement for the sins of others. The main reason for this is that in ancient Hebrew and Jewish thought, there was only one thing that could atone for sins and obtain divine forgiveness, namely, repentance, understood as a renewed commitment to living in accordance with God’s will. Nevertheless, a number of passages from the writings considered in

this section do provide support for the idea that those presenting sacrificial offerings or enduring suffering and death out of faithfulness to God's will could seek and obtain God's forgiveness for others by means of the *intercession* that they made when offering those sacrifices or suffering and dying on their behalf.

When Jesus' earliest followers began to use sacrificial imagery and the notion of vicarious death to ascribe salvific significance to Jesus' death, therefore, there is no reason to suppose that they did so because they believed that in itself his death had saved human beings, made atonement for their sins, or accomplished something on their behalf. Rather, what led them to understand Jesus' death in those terms was their belief that Jesus had gone to his death seeking for others the same thing that he had sought for them throughout his ministry, namely, that they be brought to live in ways that would allow them to experience the blessings of wholeness and well-being that God intended for all. This would happen as they lived under his lordship as members of his community of followers. In effect, as he went to his death, rather than attempting to save his life, Jesus had offered it up to God with the implicit petition that God bring to pass everything that he had been seeking for others throughout his ministry. This included especially the establishment and consolidation of his community of followers, who would live in accordance with God's will as defined through Jesus so as to find in that community the healing and salvation that Jesus sought for all.

In the minds of his followers, however, Jesus had also died hoping to be raised and exalted as Lord over this community so that he might continue to guide and accompany those who would come to form part of it. In addition, he had no doubt sought that God accept all who would live as his followers and forgive them their sins. When God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to heaven, therefore, in effect he granted Jesus all that he had sought as he offered up his life. By raising and exalting Jesus, God not only made it possible for Jesus to continue leading, guiding, and serving others as their Lord but in essence also declared his acceptance of all

those who would come to live as part of Jesus' community of followers. Because God had exalted Jesus as Lord so that he might bring to pass God's promises of salvation, all those who lived as his followers could also have assurance that through Jesus they would attain that salvation.

Because the priests who offered up sacrifices and prayers at the Jerusalem temple sought from God on behalf of others the same type of things that Jesus had sought for others in his death, Jesus' earliest followers would also have drawn comparisons between what those priests did and what Jesus had done. Like the priests who went before Israel's God with sacrifices and sacrificial blood imploring God to accept and forgive his people, so also Jesus would have been understood to have offered up his life to God asking that God graciously accept those who would live as members of his community and forgive them their sins. However, just as the basis upon which God responded favorably to the sacrifices and prayers presented by the priests on behalf of the people was the people's commitment to living in accordance with God's will, so also the basis upon which God had responded favorably to Jesus' self-offering on behalf of those who would live under his lordship was the fact that, as they followed Jesus in faith, they would be brought to live in the way God desired and commanded for the good of all.

In Jewish thought, those who endured suffering and death as a result of their prophetic activity—such as the servant figure of Isaiah 53—or as a result of their faithfulness to the law—such as the Jewish figures mentioned in 4 Maccabees—also went to their deaths seeking something for others. What they sought was that, through their own dedication and faithfulness to God, others might also be brought to live in greater conformity with God's will so that they might attain the wholeness and well-being that followed intrinsically from such a life. It is in this sense that their deaths were regarded as vicarious. Because Jesus had similarly suffered and died as a result of his commitment and dedication to bringing others to

live in accordance with God's will as members of his community of followers, his death also came to be understood as vicarious.

It was not sacrifice, suffering, or death, therefore, that was thought to obtain God's favor or forgiveness or to atone for sins. Rather, what obtained God's acceptance was a commitment to living in the way that God commanded out of love for all. Sacrificial offerings were merely means by which God's people manifested that commitment in a palpable and concrete manner. They also served to strengthen that commitment among those who presented them. If no such commitment was present in the offerers, however, their sacrifices were not acceptable to God and obtained nothing from God. For that reason, it was not sacrificial offerings that were thought to attain God's acceptance and forgiveness or to atone for sins, but the commitment to doing God's will that was manifested and strengthened by means of those sacrificial offerings.

Similarly, what was believed to please God and put away God's wrath at the sins of his people was not the sufferings or death of figures such as those in 4 Maccabees who remained steadfast in their obedience to God even in the face of death. How could the sufferings and death of the people God loved ever be pleasing to God? Rather, what pleased God and put away God's wrath was the faithfulness and commitment to God's will that those figures manifested by means of their willingness to give up their life rather than renounce their obedience to God's good commandments, since they made it possible for others to be strengthened in the same type of faithfulness, commitment, and obedience for their own good. If that did not happen, however, their sufferings and death benefited no one and accomplished nothing on behalf of others.

Because Jesus had gone to his death seeking that others be brought to live in greater conformity with God's will out of love for them, therefore, his death came to be considered as both sacrificial and vicarious by his earliest followers. However, Jesus' sufferings and death were considered sacrificial and vicarious only because they were the consequence of a life and ministry that had been

dedicated to laying the basis for a community in which all would be brought to live in the way that God desired. And while Jesus was thought to have obtained for all who would come to live as members of that community God's forgiveness and acceptance by means of his faithfulness unto death to the task given him, this was only because as they followed him they would dedicate themselves to living in accordance with God's good will and in the same love that characterized Jesus as their Lord. For that reason, even though they continued to fall into sinful behavior and were far from perfect, as long as they continued to follow Jesus, God would overlook their sinfulness and imperfection so as to accept them just as they were, confident that through their relationship with Jesus as their risen Lord they would be transformed into the new and obedient people that God wanted them to be for their own good and that of others.

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