Options on Atonement in Christian Thought
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Abbreviations

AARA—American Academy of Religion Academy series
AB—Anchor Bible
Ac Bib—Academia Biblica
B.C.E.—Before the Common Era
CBQ—Catholic Biblical Quarterly
C.E.—Common Era (= A.D.)
ETL—Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses
ExpT—Expository Times
FBBS—Facet Books, Biblical Series
HNT—Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
ICC—International Critical Commentary
JBL—Journal of Biblical Literature
JSJSup—Journal for the Study of Judaism, Supplement Series
JSNTSup—Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series
JSOTSup—Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series
LXX—The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT
NPNF 2—Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series
NT—New Testament
OT—Old Testament
PTMS—Princeton Theological Monographs Series
SBLDS—Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSP—Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SJT—Scottish Journal of Theology
TDNT—Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
Introduction

What Is Atonement?

A wide range of ideas has received the label “atonement.” For some it means providing some kind of gift or apology in order to repair a damaged relationship. For others such repair (if it is to be called atonement) must mean making a costly payment or enduring a painful ordeal. In either view the goal of atonement is reconciliation between persons. Reconciliation is also revealed in the etymology of the English word “atonement,” a manufactured word derived from “at-one-ment.”

But when we speak of atonement in connection with biblical studies and Christian doctrine we are referring to concepts of the saving power of the death of Jesus developed in the early Greek-speaking churches and given further development over the centuries in works written in Latin and other languages. When I speak of “atonement” I am referring to this group of meanings and doctrines we inherit from the early church.

The apostle Paul is the principal spokesman (in our surviving records) for these atonement concepts. He communicates them through cultic\(^1\) and social metaphors he uses at key moments in his arguments. Six fundamental metaphors are drawn together (in varying combinations) to speak of atonement. Some picture the death of Jesus, some describe the beneficial effects on believers, and some can cover both. These six basic metaphors are sacrifice, scapegoat, redemption, justification, reconciliation, and adoption. I pause to define just one of these terms now. “Redemption” (Greek \textit{apolytrōsis} in Rom 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor 1:30; Col 1:14) refers to the purchasing of a slave, to the paying of a manumission price to free

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\(^1\) “Cult” refers to shared ritual, not to “extremist sect,” despite the usage in popular media. \textit{Every} religious community has a cultic practice that communicates the values and reinforces the social boundaries of the group. The centerpiece of the Jewish cult was animal sacrifice, which was used to cleanse impurity, some of which was believed to be caused by sin. The scapegoat rite was also an important part of the cult.
a slave, or to the ransoming of hostages. A redemption payment, then, could be lifesaving.

Paul would frequently combine two or three of these images in one sentence, allowing each metaphor to inform and help interpret the other. Underlying all the metaphors is the notion that Jesus died as a martyr. The Greeks called this kind of death a "noble death." This is not a metaphor, since noble death/martyrdom always refers to the violent death of a noble human being; its meaning is not changed when it is applied to the death of Jesus. On the other hand, the meanings of sacrifice, scapegoat, and redemption are changed when they are applied to Jesus' death; he was not literally a sacrificial animal, a banished goat, or a sum of money: these are metaphors.

Paul and his audience share the belief that Jesus died as a martyr. Paul then uses three metaphors (sacrifice, scapegoat, redemption) to interpret the martyrdom, and employs four to describe believers' changed status (redemption, justification, reconciliation, adoption). Obviously the redemption metaphor is doing double duty.

Paul combines these metaphors in a variety of ways. A number of composite concepts have developed, and they continue to evolve and re-form to this day. Christians today hold many different ideas of atonement, though they often fail to notice these differences, not to mention the different components that came together to form the ideas. Some of the more common composite concepts are these:

1. Humanity had a huge debt of sin, and was going to be condemned; Jesus agreed to suffer the penalty that humanity deserved and, because of his incomparable goodness, his death paid off all of humanity's sin-debt;

2. Jesus volunteered to take on human sin, allowing himself to become a lightning rod for the condemnation and wrath of God, and by so doing he actually carried away the sin and its associated penalty;

3. The sacrifices and other cleansing rituals of the OT cult all prefigured and pointed at the Messiah's self-sacrificial death, but his was the only death that really brought about the cleansing of conscience that the cult was thought to accomplish.

Each one of these is a composite concept, combining two or three ideas into a unique notion of atonement. Some idea of substitution is present.

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in each of these concepts. The elements that explain how that substitution works in each of these cases are, respectively,

1. *A combined judicial-commercial-moral idea:* Sin incurs judicial guilt, and such guilt is comparable to a debt. The underlying metaphor within a metaphor is that guilt equals debt, while innocence has value, like a commercial value. The innocence of Jesus and the punishment he endured were sufficient to serve our penalty, pay our debt, and restore the moral balance sheet. In this metaphor innocent suffering is legal tender. Innocent suffering has excess power, transferable power.

2. *A combined judicial-scapegoat idea:* Sin arouses God’s wrath; Jesus agrees to become the scapegoat who will receive the outpouring of that wrath, and in his death he bears away the sin and its penalty as the goat bore away the sins of the community. Actually, the judicial element is somewhat subdued because it is the personal wrath of God that is emphasized.

3. *A combined cultic sacrificial-moral idea:* Here the death fits into a ritual pattern. The physical purity of a spotless animal is equated with the spiritual purity of the righteous Messiah. Because of his purity status the Messiah’s death has ritual effectiveness: the power to cleanse sins. The death of God’s chosen one has a vicarious cleansing power that the animal sacrifices did not have, since they were only physically pure. This is the ruling concept in the Letter to the Hebrews; it is only dimly present, if at all, in Paul.

The closer we look at what Christians understand atonement to be, the greater the diversity and complexity we observe. Even an apparently simple idea like “Jesus died for my sins,” turns out to have many possible interpretations: he died heroically; more than that, he died as a penal substitute; beyond that, he won something for me through that death; he took on something and carried it away. This combines the imagery of the battlefield, the courtroom, and the place of judicial execution.

In the oldest Christian texts (the letters of Paul) we see a number of images that speak of salvation achieved by a kind of transaction taking place at the cross, a penalty-bearing, a debt-canceling, or a redemption-purchasing. Similar ideas are common in several other NT epistles and in Revelation, yet they are almost completely absent from the gospels. The idea of “Christ dying for our sins” was not the emphasis of the Jerusalem
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church, but before long it became the dominant teaching in the Gentile churches. At several key points in Christian history certain theologians formulated concepts of atonement that took the metaphors quite literally and ignored other aspects of Paul’s theology, such as the spiritual transformation of believers.

Atonement was separated from and given precedence over other biblical images of salvation. Further, these concepts of atonement were detached from the vitality of personal religious experience and turned into dogmas, taking on a life of their own. For most Christians the notion of substitutionary atonement is encountered not in biblical sayings but in popular formulas that heighten the harsher elements. Many grew up believing that salvation meant a violent rescue from the threatened violence of an angry God. Such fear-based thinking is quite distant from the Gospel teaching “fear not” (Luke 5:10; 12:32).

Harsh and Violent Formulations of Atonement

Many Christians are eager to know what their options are for reacting to and assessing the various atonement teachings they hear. Many are having difficulty understanding a supposed divine law of justice that demanded a verdict but was so unjust as to allow the substitution of an innocent victim in place of the guilty. Even more difficult to accept is the notion of God (or “justice”) being paid off. Perhaps these metaphors were not meant to be taken as literally as theologians have taken them. More recently, different responses to atonement are being heard. These say that God was not persuaded in any way; rather, God, in Jesus, was participating in human suffering, proving that violence was ultimately powerless, or showing us how deeply involved we are in collective violence directed against chosen victims. Perhaps the metaphor was never meant to speak of a change in God’s attitude, but only to change the human tendency to commit, and to lie about, violence.

Many Christians are reassessing what they were taught as children, that “Jesus was killed for you.” They are questioning what they were told as teenagers, that only the intercession of the tortured Messiah could rescue them from eternal torture at the hands of a “loving” God. Many are no longer convinced by what they currently hear from the pulpit, that God could not just forgive and forget, that someone had to take on

the penalty of sin. They no longer see any sense in the notion of forgiveness being gained through a misdirection of the punishing wrath of God onto his innocent son. What kind of “father” would make forgiveness conditional upon such an act? Have we failed to appreciate the profoundly ethical and intimate implications of calling God “father,” or is this an abusive and fear-driven father?

Many Christians find it hard to accept Saint Anselm’s idea that sin did damage to God’s honor, and that Christ’s death was a “recompense for the injury.” They are no longer convinced by Calvin’s notion that “He by his death purchased life for us,” as “a payment or compensation which acquires us from guilt.”

Such theology may indeed draw upon Paul’s, but there are other themes in his teaching that should prevent the harsh and transactional elements from dominating. Further, Paul initiates a spiritualizing pattern that will be followed by most of his successors, wherein the violent implications of atonement are somewhat downplayed while the generosity of God and the transformation of believers into the likeness of God are stressed.

But popular Christian beliefs often have nothing to do with spiritual progress and transformation, focusing instead upon crude ideas of Jesus’ death as a pay-off, a sacrifice, a punishment-bearing, for “Jesus took the hit for me”; “Jesus bled and died for me”; “that should have been me up on the cross.”

Many theologians, ancient and contemporary, have not been happy with expressions of a violent and judicial God, and have sought to constrain, spiritualize, or minimize these concepts, even denying that a payment-demanding God was ever envisioned. Some of them, however, retain the vocabulary and logic of sacrifice, though sentimentalizing it. A smaller group of thinkers has ceased to speak of the death of Jesus as any kind of purchase or transaction with God, focusing instead on the lessons to be learned from Jesus’ life and character, which includes his courageous stance in the face of death.

This is a good place to raise the subject of progressive development in religious conceptualization, progress both within and outside the Bible. One can witness the development of religious ideas within the Bible,

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with later parts of the Bible even critiquing or “correcting” the earlier parts: Chronicles corrects Kings; Micah and Jeremiah reject the sacrificial cult; Jesus asks for deeper devotion than the Torah demanded; Paul says the old covenant has a fading glory while the new covenant has a permanent glory.

How does our understanding of God grow, and can we gain new insight into the relevant biblical passages by revisiting them? How did atonement ideas come to play such an important role, and what do we make of them now? These are questions I will address in the course of this work. Further, there is much to be gained from a reexamination of what led to the crucifixion, and what we can learn from Jesus’ attitude.

How have theologians and preachers handled the old ideas of Jesus’ death as ritual purification or as redemption payment? I see the proposed solutions falling mostly into three categories: primitivizing, spiritualizing, and rejecting. One group affirms the primitive and violent ideas; another group tries to scrub them clean, downplaying the divine violence in them; the third rejects all notions of salvation through redemption payment or ritual death. Readers must decide which of these options fits best with Jesus’ own emphasis on straightforward trust in God and honesty in dealings with people. The most commonly occurring option is the second one. The creativity of the various strategies for rescuing, rationalizing, and redefining atonement is really quite remarkable. It enables theologians to avoid facing the fact that the problems with atonement are present in our Scriptures; it is easier to say that all difficulties lie in a misinterpretation or distortion of the Scriptures, which is, after all, largely true. But contradictory messages can be found even in the same biblical author, such as the notion of God being both violent and forgiving, and of salvation being both “free” and “purchased.”

It is necessary to look now at the lineage of atonement-related ideas and practices in Judaism, and then move on to the apostle Paul, who constructed his atonement metaphors from ritual and social practices in Jewish and Gentile societies. Later I will examine a number of particular options on atonement, finishing with a discussion of spiritual growth and religious philosophic progress.

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6 Rom 5:15-7; 6:23; 2 Cor 3:17; Gal 5:1, 13.
The Roots of Atonement

1.1 Holiness

Atonement draws on a number of ancient religious concepts. One is “holiness,” which signifies separation, the necessary distance between the profanely human and the awesomely divine. “Holiness” did not originally have a moralized meaning, but spoke of a necessary separation of what is common from what is holy, qodesh, as when the Israelites are told not to set foot on the holy Mount Sinai (Exod 19:12), a notion retained even in the NT: “You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest” (Heb 12:18). This shows the threatening and frightening aspect of the holy. “Set limits” (Exod 19:12) is the watchword of religion at this level of development; the purity code sets strict limits everywhere.

The enforcement of boundaries (spiritual and social) is the essence of purity systems. Ritual both enforces and crosses these boundaries according to strictly controlled procedures interpreted by the sacred technicians, the priests. Ritual assumes a highly structured universe and supports a highly structured society. Everyone is expected to conform to certain purity codes and procedures, but the priests are subject to many more purity restrictions because they have access to the realm of the Holy.

Transgression, the crossing of boundaries, means danger, retaliation, and penalty. Actually a limited penalty is welcomed, since paying it mollifies the deity’s wrath. The alternative is death. Numinous awe and danger surround ritual objects: Nadab and Abihu offer up “unauthorized coals” \(^1\) and are blasted by the Lord (Lev 10:1-2). In the case of a man who

\(^1\) Jacob Milgrom’s translation; the NRSV and most modern translations have “ unholy fire” (cf. KJB: “strange fire”). They probably brought them from a profane source instead
innocently reached out to steady the ark of the covenant, “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there” (2 Sam 6:7). When King Uzziah “became angry with the priests a leprous disease broke out on his forehead” (2 Chr 26:19). Even complaining can provoke the Lord to lash out and burn up some parts of the camp (Num 11:1). God is “a devouring fire” (Exod 24:17; Deut 5:22) who sends flames down to consume his enemies (2 Kgs 1:10–2), even “consum[ing] . . . two hundred fifty men” on one occasion (Num 16:35). This last is a violent “reminder . . . that no [one] who is not of the descendants of Aaron, shall approach to offer incense” (Num 16:40). Priestly space is protected with unlimited violence.

Concerns about the evil or dangerous moods of gods come from a very primitive level of religious psychology. The strategies of aversion, placation, propitiation, and deception have frequently been associated with sacrificial rituals. As notions of uncleanness and sin develop over long periods of time, however, they give evidence of moral reflection and display a gradually expanding trust in the reliability of the spirit-forces. The deity’s wrath is increasingly seen to be motivated mainly against injustice and cruelty and less against ritual infractions. Different levels of religious conceptualization are evidenced by the debates within religious traditions, when those who aspire for higher ethical levels criticize the ritualism and political favoritism manifested by those on lower ethical levels.

1.2 The Metaphysics of Sacrifice

A Food Payment

Since atonement builds on sacrificial theology, one of the roots of atonement lies in the ancient idea of actually feeding the god with the smoke of the burning animal, strongly attested in the first four books of the Pentateuch. The priests’ job is to “offer the Lord’s offerings by fire, the food of their God . . . the food of your God” (Lev 21:6, 8). YHWH demands “the food for my offerings by fire, my pleasing odor” (Num 28:2).


Milgrom says feeding God is “not to be found in Israel”—and promptly goes on to admit that feeding God was “the original aim” of table, bread, altar, and candelabrum, and that evidence of it is found “in some sacrificial idioms of the Bible: ‘my table’ (Ezek 44:15), ‘the food of his God’ ([Lev] 21:22)” (Leviticus 1–16, 440).
This wording can even be seen in the NT in Ephesians 5:2, where Christ’s sacrifice is a “fragrant offering” in the nostrils of God. Of course, in Ephesians this is metaphoric, but such metaphor rests on and reinterprets primitive beliefs.

Hebrew sacrifice had more than one purpose and was supported by more than one metaphysical belief. The most important sacrifice in the pre-exilic period was the burnt offering, which sends up to God a “soothing aroma” (NASB) or “pleasing odor” (NRSV). The “soothing” meaning is seen in the verb-root נחם (in the Qal, נוחה), which signifies “rest.” The pleasing odor (ריאח ניחוח) is mentioned thirty-nine times in the Pentateuch and three times in Ezekiel. It is a pacifying aroma, mollifying God: “when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind’” (Gen 8:21). Whole offerings, sometimes accompanied by peace offerings (as in 2 Sam 24:25) were “occasionally offered to propitiate the wrath of Jahweh, especially in times of crisis.” In the post-exilic period, when crude propitiatory concepts are partially replaced by ideas of cleansing, the sin offering and guilt offering become the most important sacrifices. (See the next subsection.)

“Propitiation” is a term often used by scholars to designate this business of appeasing someone who is angry. Propitiating the deity was probably the original role for sacrifice in all sacrificing cultures. Sacrifice as payment is clearly seen in much of the OT. The sacrifice must be costly to be effective; something received as a gift cannot function as a sacrifice (2 Sam 24:24).

Scholars are fairly straightforward in admitting the frankly selfish motive of ancient sacrifice; it is “a gift to the deity to induce his aid.” For some reason, however, they rarely focus on the fact that these gifts are the culture’s most valuable food commodities, with an emphasis on costly meat: offerings are “the food of your God” (Lev 21:8). Sacrifice is like a tribute payment to an emperor: God demands that “no one shall

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6 Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16, 441.
appear before me empty-handed” (Exod 23:15). In ancient times the food was thought to strengthen the deity, an anthropomorphic notion that is only partially suppressed by the biblical redactors.

*Cleansing*

Sacrifice-as-food-payment is not the end of the story, of course. Even within the Pentateuch we see what looks like an ongoing argument about the purpose of sacrifice. The naturalistic idea of God’s anger being soothed with a food-payment is the understanding in parts of Genesis (J, the Yahwist author), Samuel, and Kings. But the Pentateuchal author/redactor called “P” (for priestly) does not care for the idea of sacrifice as food payment. In its place P develops a complex metaphysics of ritual cleansing or purging impurity that is literal, not metaphorical, and poses a spiritual threat to the community. Sacrifice, for P, is not meant for appeasement but for obtaining a spiritually cleansing substance: blood. The blood obtained from the hatta’t (“sin offering,” KJV, NRSV; “purification offering,” Milgrom) is used to cleanse various installations in the Temple where impurity has lodged.

Sin committed anywhere in Israel pollutes the Temple, attaching to it like a “miasma.” More serious sin, or sin committed by priests, seeps in further, even to the curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Deliberate sin penetrates all the way into the Most Holy Place, to the lid of the ark of the covenant, which is the mercy seat (kapporet in Hebrew; hilastērion in Greek). Impurity from lesser sins, and sins committed by lesser persons, can be cleansed at any time; every Sabbath the priests conduct sacrifice and apply the sacrificial blood to the horns of the outer altar and the incense altar, expunging involuntary sin and lesser impurities.

Sins committed “with a high hand” and sins committed by the priests, however, are not removed by these routine sacrifices; the ark of the covenant retains the pollution from these acts and it must be removed annually or God will abandon the Temple. Cleansing this impurity requires the sprinkling of hatta’t blood on the kapporet in the Most Holy Place, a

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ritual performed only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement, then, in Milgrom’s understanding, is more correctly the Day of Purification.

Milgrom has shown that the principal Hebrew sacrifices are a matter of Temple purification, not of substitutionary death. It is a Christianizing distortion to say that the animal’s death is a substitutionary punishment or that the blood takes on the stain of sin. Rather, it is the Temple that has been corrupted, and blood is a cleanser. Sacrifice was propitiatory for J, but was protective and cleansing for P (the Priestly author), whose ideology dominates Second Temple practice. H (for “Holiness Code”) combines these views (see below). The D (Deuteronomist) author is mainly concerned with the question of covenant loyalty, caring little about cultic metaphysics as long as there is only one Temple (in Jerusalem).

Payment and Aversion

The fundamental term for purging or cleansing, kipper, was not an exclusively sacrificial term, but it was inextricably linked to the idea of a payoff. Kipper (atonement) is cognate with kopher. A kopher is a payment, specifically a “payment for the redemption of forfeited life.” It is “a ransom for their lives . . . . atonement money” (Exod 30:12, 15, 16), an “atonement” in the form of “articles of gold, armlets and bracelets” (Num 31:50), a way of averting someone’s wrath, either humans’, as in Gen 32:20 (“I may appease him with the present”) and Proverbs 16:14 (“a king’s wrath . . . appease it’’); or Yhwh’s, as in Numbers 8:19 (averting punishment for encroachment on sacred territory) and Exodus 32:30 (trying to persuade God not to lash out after the golden calf incident).

This is not just a restoration of propriety; it is an aversion of human or divine violence. Violence is highlighted in some of the non-ritual usages of kipper, where a murderer is the kipperer. God is frankly appeased

10 Milgrom is sometimes rigid on this point, claiming that sacrifice does not secure forgiveness for sinners, but only cleanses the sanctuary (Leviticus 1–16, 254–55). John Dennis is one of a number of scholars who point out that both cleansing and forgiveness are taking place (“The Function of the ḥatt Sacrifice in the Priestly Literature” [ETL 78 (2002) 112, 115–18, 121]).
by the “righteous” violence (Ps 106:31) of the priest Phinehas, who drove his spear through a Hebrew man and a Midianite woman while they were in the act of lovemaking. Yhwh was prepared to destroy the whole nation until the priestly killer “made atonement for the Israelites” (Num 25:13)—or “interceded,” in the euphemism of the psalm (106:30)—with this act of violence, which successfully “turned back my wrath from the Israelites” (Num 25:11). Even more gruesome is the atrocious “making expiation” (kipper, 2 Sam 21:3) that David does to the Gibeonites by handing over seven relatives of Saul to be impaled or crucified on a city wall. Yhwh was even involved in the early part of this last event, having informed David that there was blood-guilt on Saul’s house (21:1). All of this shows us the undercurrent of violence in kipper, something the P editor tried to spiritualize out of the picture, describing instead a sure procedure for repeated cleansing of the constantly accumulating impurity of Israel, suppressing the fact that this act had been thought to avert the anger of Yhwh.

The next Pentateuchal author, H (for “Holiness Code”), is not content with an impersonal cleansing process; he re-personalizes the cult. H is taking more literally the idea that sacrificial odors are literally “pleasing,” are even a kind of payment. H is the author of the central “explanatory” verse:

> For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. (Lev 17:11)

However, the idea of blood, as life, being able to make atonement is hardly a clear explanation to modern people. The logic is either that the life-force in the blood can cleanse the anti-life force that is impurity, or that the animal’s life is a payment or substitute “for your lives” (17:11), a notion that is not present in P. Thus there can be a dual meaning in H. In either case the sacrifice has literal value; it is not just a symbol enacted to dramatize cleansing or gift-giving; it is literally cleansing (P and H) or gift-giving (J and H).

Doing kipper, then, means conciliating, placating, wiping clean, or paying off. The ritual assumes an environment of potential divine violence, and a remedy based on either placation or magic. Whichever

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metaphysics is dominant in the minds of particular practitioners, the ritual is manipulative. Whether one thinks to give the Lord goods that he desires, or whether one believes in the efficacy of manipulating a spiritual substance (blood), the thinking is manipulative. In neither case is atonement connected with moral decision or reform, though in the late Second Temple period repentance finally came to be considered essential to the efficacy of sacrifice. A ritual that started with naturalistic metaphysics took on ethical meaning. The priests had assimilated the ideas of the prophets.

Completely different from these other sacrifices, and having nothing to do with cleansing, forgiveness, or reparation, was the Passover sacrifice. The reiterated Passover was commemorative (of the Exodus from Egypt), but its original function (within the Exodus story) was apotropaic: warding away the Angel of Death who was out to kill all the first-born in the land. Yet for Paul even this was suggestive of Jesus’ saving death: “for our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (5:7).

1.3 The Scapegoat Ritual

Another violent cultic image is that of the expulsion ritual, of which the best-known is the scapegoat in the Hebrew cult. Scapegoat ritual is to be distinguished from sacrifice, even though the former took place at the same time as the most important sacrifices, the hatta’t offerings of the Day of Atonement. The scapegoat ritual is surrounded by the regime of sacrificial cleansings (Lev 16), yet retains its distinctive character: an expulsion ritual, not a sacrifice. It is not an offering, not a cleansing, not even something that has much to do with the Deity. It is a very ancient and naturalistic rite, literally carrying away sin, not impurity. Sin is literally “put . . . on the head of the goat,” and “the goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region” (Lev 16:21-2). Furthermore, this goat is ritually maltreated—its hair is pulled, it is cursed, pierced, spat upon, things that are never done to a sacrificial animal. Scapegoat is a very ancient rite of naturalistic (literal) sin-expulsion, one where the Deity’s attitude is not mentioned, nor need it be. If sin can be literally

14 Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16, 2445.
transported, what does the Deity’s attitude matter? Sacrifice is much more theologically advanced than expulsion ritual, because the Deity’s attitude is relevant in sacrificial ritual. The detailed instructions about handling sacrificial blood act out the community’s worshipful concepts of holiness, pollution, cleansing, and obeisance. The scapegoat ritual is not an act of worship, but a violent act of self-defense based on the most primitive metaphysics.

There was also a long tradition of expulsion rituals in popular Greek culture, particularly the practice of selecting and expelling a pharmakos, a “medicinal.” The pharmakos was a human victim, sometimes a prisoner, who was selected, ritually abused, and chased away from the city, carrying away a disease or impurity. This was a well-known practice and a vivid image during Paul’s time, even if its actual practice was disappearing.

1.4 Internalization or Spiritualization

In cultures from Asia to Europe to Africa there is a progressive and observable development away from violent sacrificial practices toward a concentration on ethics and an increased valuation of the individual’s spiritual motive, a process that can be called spiritualization. The sacrificer “sacrifices only in himself,” says an Indian text, while Jewish texts say God wants the sacrifice of “a contrite heart” or of “thanksgiving” more than “an ox or a bull” (Pss 51:16-17; 50:12-14; 69:30-31). This can be called “interiorized” or “internal” sacrifice. In this kind of spiritualization motive is everything: the true sacrifice is not the ritual act but the inward disposition.

Others, such as Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, and Plato have preferred to openly attack sacrifice and the manipulative motives with which it is practiced, mocking or condemning the institution rather than advocating reform, although some scholars try to turn these prophets into mere

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19 I refer to internalization as Level Three spiritualization, among the six levels of spiritualization I discern (Finlan, Background and Content, 49–50, 60–61; idem, Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005] 22–23).
20 Hos 4:8; 6:6; 8:11-12; 10:2; Mic 6:6-8; Jer 7:22-23; Plato, Laws 10.885C; 10.909B, 948C.
reformers or even Temple employees. Some certainly were reformers and thus defenders of the Temple institution (such as Ezekiel, Joel, and Malachi) and some undoubtedly were not (such as Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, and the authors of Isaiah 1 and Psalms 40, 50, and 51). In different ways, priests, scribes, and prophets engaged in various efforts to spiritualize, intellectualize, and interiorize the Hebrew cult.

By the time of Paul, intellectuals among both the Greeks and the Jews had for centuries been critiquing, rethinking, and reinterpreting animal sacrifice, both by highlighting the inner attitude of the giver rather than the outward rite and by using sacrificial terminology metaphorically. Spiritualization shaped much Christian interpretation of the OT; violence in the text was often taken as a metaphor for spiritual struggle.

Spiritualization also ties in to the martyrological tradition. The Greek tragedians developed the idea of self-sacrifice for one’s city or for a religious principle into a major literary/religious theme, using explicitly sacrificial terms. The Jews also wrote of the selfless suffering of a prophet or righteous one, particularly in Psalms 22:17, 25; 35:14; 69:9-14; Isaiah 53:3-10; Zechariah 12:10–13:9; Wisdom 2:10-24, using sacrificial imagery in some of these passages (Isa 53:10; Zech 13:1, for instance).

1.5 Cultic Labels for Noble Death

The idea of dying heroically for a cause, known as “noble death,” was the most prominent dramatic theme in the works of the greatest playwrights of the Greek world, Sophocles and Euripides. Sometimes the death is seen as saving the nation or securing victory in war; in the great play Antigone, Sophocles’ heroine dies for “the holiest laws of heaven”—showing proper respect for the dead body, which is also important for the soul. Repeatedly these noble deaths (or martyrdoms, as we call them) are pictured as cultic acts. The heroine Iphigenia beseeches Zeus to “receive this sacrifice . . . the undefiled blood of a fair maiden’s throat.”

She dies for Greece: “I freely give on behalf of my own country . . . . Lead me to the altar to sacrifice.”

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21 Young, Use of Sacrificial Ideas, 57–63, 71.
When the Romans adapt this idea it is generally in a military setting, taking the form of dedication to the gods of the underworld before going into a battle where they are doomed to die. A family of famous military martyrs, the Decii, is mentioned by Roman authors of varying philosophical affiliations.

Jewish authors drew upon the noble death theme. Second Maccabees 6:18–7:42 is a lengthy narration of the torture and killing of a Jewish family who refused to scorn the Torah. The martyrs are confident that “God has [not] forsaken our people,” but “will again be reconciled with his own servants” (7:16, 33). One hopes “through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty” (7:38).

The benefit secured by these deaths is made more explicit in Fourth Maccabees, which retells the story: “they vindicated their nation” (17:10); “by their endurance they conquered the tyrant” (1:11). Even a metaphor of purchase is used: their deaths acted as a “ransom” (17:21) or “exchange” (6:29) (antipsychon in both cases). Further, this book repeatedly attaches cultic terms to the deaths:

Make my blood their purification (katharsion). 4 Macc. 6:29

The homeland [was] purified (katharizō) . . . through the blood of these devout ones and their atoning death (hilastēriou tou thanatou).” 4 Macc. 17:21-2

These create inevitable comparisons with Romans 3:25 and 1 Timothy 2:6, where the same (haimati, hilastērion) or similar (antilytron) words occur. Underlying all this heroism and self-sacrifice is the anger and violence of God (“he disciplines us with calamities”; “we are suffering because of our own sins. . . . Our living Lord is angry for a little while, to . . . discipline us,” 2 Macc 6:16; 7:32-33). The deaths are vicariously beneficial to others (“let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification,” 4 Macc. 6:28-29). The wrath of divine retribution hangs over the whole scene; martyrdom is a way to escape the wrath, even to appease the wrathful one, but it in no way challenges the concept of divine retribution. In fact, martyrdom inscribes and perpetuates the concept of a wrathful God.

The political component of martyrrology is often highlighted. Muslim suicide bombers today understand their metaphorical sacrifices to be

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26 I change NRSV’s inaccurate “death as an atoning sacrifice” to “atoning death.”
“purchasing” them a place in Paradise. Christian Crusaders used the same rhetoric. Patriots of many nations speak of “sacred blood” and the “hallowed ground” where it was spilled. And where sacred blood has once been spilled, it is likely to be spilled again. Sites of worship, once Hindu and now Muslim, or vice versa, are the focus of many attacks in India. In sacrifice and sacrificial language, religious and political ideas come together, and violence is never far away. Spiritualization, then, is a limited blessing, partly uplifting, but partly covering over a failure to be uplifted.