

THE ATONEMENT IN THE
SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

A Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The work of Christ in His life and death fulfilled the preaching and teaching of the law and the prophets. In addition, Christ's work on the cross and in His resurrection was not only absolutely necessary in order to uphold the confidence and truth in God's revelation, but also was necessary in bearing the wrath of God concerning the original sin which all mankind inherited through Adam's lineage. Therefore, the law and the prophets testified as temporary messengers and mile-makers pointing towards the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of God. The promise which gave hope to the Israelites was the prophecy of the Messiah who would settle the debt of sin between God and His creation. Therefore, the nature of the old covenant was but a shadow representing the nature of the work of the Messiah in response to the requirements of the law for earning the forgiveness of sins (Heb 10:1).

Not only was there the necessity for such an all-satisfying atonement with God, but there was also a cause which allowed the need to be met. The love and justice of God were inseparable qualities signifying the reason why He did not immediately cause all of mankind to return to the dust after the fall (Job 34:14-15).¹ Without the love of God for His creation, He would not have desired to see the debt of sin in the nature of His people cancelled by an atoning sacrifice. Furthermore, the gospel of John bore witness to the fact

¹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 568-9.

that the result of God's love for the world was displayed in sending His only Son to make a way for eternal life (Jn 3:16). Likewise, in God's justice He provided a way which the penalty that was against His people due to their sin might be eternally paid. Therefore, the love and the justice of God equally contributed to the outworkings of the atonement which the work of Christ on the cross completed in perfection.²

The New Testament writers at this point, aside from the gospels, sought to interpret and apply the teachings and works of Jesus Christ. Whereas the gospels are often neglected as a source or foundation for the theological truths manifested in the rest of the New Testament canon. The purpose of this paper is to discuss and analyze the significance of the teachings of Jesus concerning the atonement as revealed in the Synoptic Gospels as well as the direct quotations of Jesus in Matthew and Mark stating the nature of the atonement in order to compare and argue for their agreement with teaching of the meaning of Jesus' death in the gospel of John.

The Atonement Revealed In The Synoptic Gospels

Due to the fact that narrative was the primary genre of the gospels, the authors left a limited amount of room for theological commentary. In addition, the content of the overwhelming amount of story-telling in all of the gospels undoubtedly reached their climaxes beginning with the passion sequences. In fact, in response to the obvious authorial emphasis on the suffering and death of Jesus, scholars have labeled the gospels

²Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 568-9.

as passion narratives with prolonged introductions.³ Despite the generality of the statement that the authorial intent was as mentioned above, the gospel writers still projected the theme of the cross over the entire ministry of Jesus. Therefore, the gospels attributed to the fact that Christ's work on the cross was not only a theological deed, but also a historical event that deserved to be treated as a part of human history. Moreover, all of the quotations and prophecies of Jesus concerning His passion experience involving the atonement, including their fulfillment, would be cherished and understood as actual physical and spiritual events.⁴ Therefore, the Gospel writers linked together the statements about the sufferings and death of the Messiah to the atoning theological implications resulting from the completion of His work. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contributed to Jesus' development of the theology of the atonement in their own stylistic ways.

First, Matthew and Mark shared similar approaches to depicting the Christ's life with the backdrop of the cross during His earthly ministry.⁵ Matthew and Mark shaped their gospel accounts in order to more acutely communicate the seriousness of sin and the atoning work of the Messiah. Matthew opened his gospel immediately placing signs of his authorial intent. In Matthew's genealogy he portrayed Christ's lineage as being a direct descendent of Abraham and also coming from the royal house of King David.

³Alister E. McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 35.

⁴Ibid., 36.

⁵Leon Morris, *The Cross in New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 15.

Without a doubt, Matthew began his gospel introducing Jesus as the promised Messiah. Furthermore, in Mt 1:21 he described the role of the Messiah in terms of Jesus being the one who would save His people from their sins.⁶ Moreover, Mark stood in agreement with Matthew's theme as he started his account showing how Christ preached the gospel of God and beseeched men to believe in the gospel (Mk 1:14-15). For Mark, the gospel implied all of the words, deeds, and facts concerning the work of Christ in his suffering, death, and resurrection that provided a way of salvation and atonement for the sins of mankind.⁷

Both Matthew and Mark depicted how Christ foretold the truth that the Messiah would suffer and die on behalf of the people. However, these prophetic truths were positive realizations of the saving nature of the atonement. In addition, Christ taught that despite the sorrowful expectation of the passion, the joyous hope of the resurrection awaited on the other side of His imminent death.⁸ For example, Mk 9:31 stated, “. . . for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.’ ”⁹ In addition, in Mt 20:18-19, Jesus predicted His death in the most descriptive manner than in any of the other gospels while upholding the truth that “. . . he will be

⁶Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 16.

⁷David E. Garland, *Mark*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 19.

⁸Vincent Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (London: The Epworth Press, 1950), 14.

⁹All Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV translation of the Holy Bible.

raised on the third day.” In these verses, He also referenced the involvement of the Jewish chief priests and scribes.¹⁰

In Matthew and Mark the Messiah was also connected to the sufferings. In Mt 16:21 and 17:12, He communicated to the disciples that the passion was inevitable for the vocation of the Messiah. Likewise, in Mk 8:31 Jesus continued to teach them that His role as the Messiah essentially was to suffer and die at the very hands of those who were awaiting His coming. Undoubtedly, Jesus’ coming was to experience the sufferings and death of the passion.¹¹

The Lukan accounts, though proclaiming the same gospel message, functioned more so under the style of an all-encompassing story of how God sent His Son to redeem His people. Therefore, the re-telling required a larger amount of detail as well as a broader scope of theme rather than the luminous hovering of the cross.¹² However, the passion predictions foreshadowing the role of the Messiah were present. For instance, Luke gave similar references in Lk 9:22; 18:32-33 in comparison to Mt 20:18-19 and Mk 8:31 where Jesus bore witness to Himself that, “. . . he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” Also, Luke portrayed Jesus’ perspective on His passion as the purpose of the divine plan of redemption. Atonement was the plan and the means to that end was the giving of His life. In Lk 12:50, Jesus

¹⁰Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 282.

¹¹Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 26-29.

¹²Ibid., 64-65.

testified that He also had a baptism that He was to partake in which caused Him great distress until its completion.¹³

Therefore, the Synoptics stood upon the premise that the Messiah must come in order to save God's people from their sins. The under-lying theological awareness of the work of the Messiah was that in order to accomplish His goal He must endure through the suffering and penalty of death that sin brought under its curse. Furthermore, Luke ensured the confidence that Christ accomplished His goal in the atonement as he recorded Jesus' own statements testifying that all of the prophecies concerning the passion were fulfilled (Lk 24:25, 27, 44, 45, 46).¹⁴

The Nature of the Atonement as Taught by Jesus in Matthew and Mark

The theme of this section deals with two of the Synoptic Gospels in order to perceive the nature of the atonement rather than affirm the evidence of the atonement as taught by Jesus Christ. The two specific instances where Jesus directly addressed the nature of the atonement in relation to His passion are in Mk 10:45 and the Mt 26:28.

First, in Mk 10:45 Jesus revealed the nature of the atonement stating, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." However, this statement was not only limited to the gospel of Mark, but also was referenced in Mt 20:28. The two versions were parallel accounts. Therefore, a careful

¹³Robert H. Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement* (Wake Forest, NC: Stevens Book Press, 1988), 64.

¹⁴Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 76.

assessment of Mark's record will suffice. The major concept here in Jesus' teaching which must be dealt with is the idea of His life as a "ransom". The word "ransom" interpreted within the context of the disciples Hellenistic society represented the price which was paid in order to free a slave from servitude, to release prisoners of war, or to purchase freedom from the bonds of jail.¹⁵

The word in Mk 10:45 translated "ransom" in the Greek is λύτρον which carried the same connotation of the guilt offering in the Old Testament. Furthermore, λύτρον was attached to the preposition ἀντί which literally meant "in the place of".¹⁶ The preposition in most translations was translated "for", but can also mean "on behalf of" or "in the place of". Therefore, Jesus alluded in just these two, simple Greek words to the idea of a substitutionary payment for sin.¹⁷ The idea of a ransom conveyed the tone of a forfeited life whereas the preposition communicated the idea that perhaps the ransom did not just settle the debt owed, but rather the offerer switched places with the guilty party. Not only did Mark signify in his record of Jesus' words the beginnings of the doctrine of penal-substitutionary atonement, but he also pointed to the fact that Jesus voluntarily gave Himself as a sacrifice in His role as a servant. Through this type of ransom, Christ paid the debt of sin to the Father and took upon Himself the wrath of God over sin in order to

¹⁵George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 187.

¹⁶Glenn W. Barker, David A. Hubbard, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 34B, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, by Craig A. Evans (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 121.

¹⁷David S. Dockery, ed., *The New American Commentary*, vol. 23, *Mark*, by James A. Brooks (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 171.

pour out salvation to God's people.¹⁸

In this context, Christ's role of a servant was loaded with the truth that He was going to sacrifice His life in the place of all sinners. Moreover, the term "ransom" denoted the nature of the atonement rather than signifying the entire work of redemption. The ransom was merely the price or type of sacrifice that Christ was to make. In addition, throughout the Jewish culture whenever there was the instance of the need of a ransom to be given, the result always incurred an absolute remission for the wrong done. Therefore, the former condition of the captive or debtor, after the service of the ransom, was erased and absolved totally from their record. Case in point, the debt was paid once and for all (Heb 9:12; 10:10).¹⁹

Second, at the Last Supper in Mt 26:28 Jesus spoke concerning His involvement in establishing the new covenant through the work of the atonement. Whereas in Mk 10:45 Jesus described the nature of His specific role as Messiah in the atonement, here in Mt 26:28 Jesus described His role as Messiah as part of the over-arching divine plan to bring fulfillment to the promise of God in Jer 31:31-34. God promised His people that He would establish a new covenant with them. Therefore, Christ's work as Messiah as a whole was instituted in order to establish the terms of God's new promise to His people. Clearly, Jesus interpreted His death as the means to bring the new covenant into a reality when He said in Mt 26:28, ". . . for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out

¹⁸William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 415-6.

¹⁹George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by Christ Himself*, 2nd Ed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 194.

for many for the forgiveness of sins.”²⁰ Matthew was the only gospel writer to include the phrase describing the work of the new covenant in terms of the forgiveness of sins whereas Mark and Luke mentioned this quotation, but omitted the fragment concerning the remission of the people’s sins.

This verse offered a significant parallel to Mt 20:28 and Mk 10:45. Both verses communicated the specific nature and work of Christ as the Messiah. However, Matthew’s account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper with the inclusion of this verse in its entirety, conveyed the further significance of Christ’s shed blood as it ushered in the new covenant and removed the old covenant. Furthermore, Christ’s words in Mt 26:28 seemed to fulfill the specific promise in Jer 31:34 where God declared, “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”²¹ Jesus’ blood and sacrifice paralleled the blood and sacrifice of the animal during the original Passover. Therefore, for Jesus’ blood to establish a new covenant, there needed to be a significant difference in the dynamic effect of His sacrifice in comparison to the original sacrifice which sufficed the requirements of the old covenant.²² Moreover, since the promise of God in Jer 31:34 recognized the full remission of sins, Christ’s work of Messiah in His role as part of the divine plan of redemption accomplished a greater priestly and sacrificial work than Moses or any other previous servant before Him because Christ’s blood and sacrifice sealed the

²⁰Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement*, 66.

²¹David S. Dockery, ed., *The New American Commentary*, vol. 22, *Matthew*, by Craig L. Blomberg (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 391.

²²Ronald Wallace, *The Atoning Death of Christ* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1981), 27.

new covenant in one final offering.²³

In Mk 10:45 and Mt 26:28, Jesus revealed the atonement in two main ways. First, He taught the internal nature of the work of the atonement through the analogy of the “ransom” terminology. Second, He depicted His work of atonement for the forgiveness of sins of mankind as the fulfillment and beginning of the new covenant promised in Jer 31:31-34.

The Work of the Cross in the Gospel of John

John wrote his gospel carrying certain themes throughout the entire book with the salvific work of Christ illuminating them and giving them their precise meanings. John used the meaning of the cross and the atonement to establish context and substance to all of his themes such as life, love, and obedience.²⁴ The purpose of this section is to show the similarities and agreements in the meaning of the cross as taught in John’s gospel in comparison to the Synoptic Gospels.

First, in agreement with the Synoptics, John affirmed that Jesus viewed His Messiah vocation in terms of His suffering and death. In Jn 12:32-33 Jesus prophesied His focal point of His mission stating, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.” Although in the Synoptics Jesus testified to the specifics of His passion explaining the people and methods by which He would suffer, John communicated the same type of

²³Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement*, 219-20.

²⁴Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 145.

death through a phrase which served as a theological insight. For instance, Jesus being “lifted up” not only signified His crucifixion, but also His exaltation. The verb was not to be limited to a literal elevation interpretation of Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus was to be glorified and exalted as God and Savior as He accomplished the atonement, resurrected, and ascended to the Father and to the glory He had with Him since the foundation of the world (Jn 17:5, 24).²⁵ Therefore, as in Mt 20:18-19, Mk 8:31, and Lk 9:22, John also bore witness to Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection as His role as Messiah in the divine plan of redemption.

Second, John’s gospel taught the nature of the atonement alongside the evidence revealing that Christ’s work of the cross included the passion. In Jn 1:29, he recorded John the Baptist testifying of Jesus saying, “The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ ” John the Baptist associated Christ with two aspects of the atonement: the Lamb of God and the victor. Moreover, John portrayed Jesus not only as the sacrifice lamb, but also as the victor in conquering death through the resurrection. Also, this verse represented Christ as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 and also as the Passover lamb used in the Mosaic law.²⁶ John was the only gospel who used the language of the Passover Lamb to signify Christ as the Messiah.

In addition, the gospel of John contributed to the development of the doctrine of

²⁵F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, Reprint (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 267.

²⁶E. Ray Clendenen, ed., *The New American Commentary*, vol. 25A, *John 1-11*, by Gerald L. Borchert (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 135.

Messiah's work of atonement in an unusual way. John referenced the scheming remark of Caiaphas in Jn 11:50 which stated, "Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." Then, in the following verses (Jn 11:51-52) John commentated on Caiaphas' statement sharing that he had prophesied how Jesus would serve as the Messiah in dying as the substitute for the people instead of all of mankind perishing in their sin under God's just condemnation. According to John, Caiaphas testified to Christ's atoning sacrifice without knowing that his suggestion served more than just as a political comment.²⁷ As in Mk 10:45 and Mt 20:28, John also revealed Christ's penal-substitutionary work of the atonement in his gospel.

The continuing themes in the Gospel of John that signified Christ's role as Messiah contributed to the fact that Jesus was not unaware of the imminent suffering and death which He would face in order to atone for the sins of mankind once and for all. However, John's stylistic differences depicted Christ as being "lifted up", "the bread of life", and as the "resurrection and life" rather than being strictly described by the dark tones of the violent death which awaited Him (Jn 3:14; 6:51; 11:25-26).²⁸

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to define the atonement in view of the comparison of its evidence and nature revealed in the Synoptic Gospels to the meaning of the death of

²⁷Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 173.

²⁸Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1986), 67.

Jesus in the gospel of John. Due to the research and results displayed above in the various sections of the paper, the Synoptic Gospels and the gospel of John agreed in two main areas concerning the atonement. First, all four gospels similarly depicted the vocation of Christ's Messiahship with His passion as the goal (Mt 17:12, Mk 9:12, Lk 9:22, Jn 12:32-33). Second, the gospels all testified to the fact that Jesus' death served as the fulfilled promise of the atonement of the new covenant which designated the removal of sins from God's people once and for all (Mt 20:28, Mk 10:45, Lk12:50, Jn 1:29). Therefore, Christ's sacrifice paralleled the inaugural sacrifice of the old covenant. His sacrifice was the first and final blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins in the new covenant (Heb 9:22, 10:10). Moreover, the old covenant became obsolete with the replacement of the better and superior promise of the new covenant (Heb 8:13).²⁹

The theological application of the gospels' teaching on the atonement, specifically from the mouth of Jesus, is of great importance for sound doctrine. Scholars interpreted the atonement in the New Testament in different ways. Three main viewpoints of the atonement are vicarious atonement, sacrificial atonement, and penal-substitutionary atonement.³⁰ Though from the nature of the discussion, it can be argued that the penal-substitutionary atonement best suits the theology and teaching of the gospels on the atoning sacrifice of the Messiah.

The penal-substitution theory defined the atonement in two ways. First, Christ took upon Himself the penalty of sin. Man broke the law of God and the penalty of sin

²⁹I. H. Marshall, *The Work of Christ*, 2nd Ed (Carlisle, U.K.: The Paternoster Press, 1994), 97-8.

³⁰Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement*, 67-70.

was death (Gen 3:19, Rom 5:12, 1 Cor 15:55-57). The fact that there was a penalty implied the need for an atonement. This work of Christ was necessary because for mankind exclusion of fellowship from God because of sin resulted in eternal punishment (Mt 25:26). Second, Christ substituted Himself in the place of sinful man under the curse of sin (Gal 3:13). Therefore, Christ bore the sin of the world in their place in order to give a ransom to God so that the forgiveness of sin might be purchased and that the remission of sins in Christ would be eternal (2 Cor 5:21, 1 Pet 2:24).³¹

In conclusion, the penal-substitutionary theory of atonement best supports the true work of Christ on the cross. Because of the penalty, Christ suffered and died. Because mankind was unable to sufficiently meet the requirements of the law, Christ's substitution in their place represented the particular and special power of God to be the only source to overcome the grip of sin and then offer forgiveness, hope, and eternal salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Therefore, in view of the fact that all four gospels attributed the atonement as the mission of Christ's role as Messiah and as the nature of the atonement assuming the theological theory called penal-substitution, Christians ought to teach and preach this truth and doctrine. As with Mark, Christ's work of salvation in His life, death, and resurrection is the good news of the gospel. The Apostle Paul called the gospel the power of God unto salvation in Rom 1:16. And in his admonition to Timothy in 1 Tim 4:16, Paul urged him to teach and preach sound theology because of how it determined not only his salvation but also the salvation of those who heard him.

³¹Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 134-5.

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