

Defending Thematic Continuity Between Levitical Sin Offering and Christ's Atoning Death

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“Jesus died for our sins” is a true statement yet commonly understood only at a rudimentary level. Moving into an advanced understanding of the atoning death of Christ will involve the study of the sin offering under the Levitical system. In this essay, I will defend the thematic continuity between Christ’s atoning sacrifice (particularly concerning Matthew’s account of the Lord’s Supper (Mat 26:26-29)) and the Levitical sin offering (Lev 4-5). This is echoed by Isaiah’s suffering servant (Isa 53) and the eschatological overtone in Hebrews 9-10. Relevant themes that will be evaluated include “pouring out,” atonement, forgiveness of sin, “many,” blood sacrifice, substitution, and retribution.

I will present quick context for the two primary passages mentioned. God has set out to establish his holy kingdom. The reoccurring issue is the rebellion of those who are supposed to be the holy nation before God. Therefore, God gave the people a way to make amends for their sin. He addressed the sins of the priests first, and subsequently the whole Israelite community, leaders, and individual members of the community (Lev 4:3,13,22,27). Their sins will be accounted for through the ceremonial sin offering. Based on Leviticus 4:32-35, the process requires the sacrifice of a specific animal (depending on the subject) before the ‘tent of meeting,’ the priests place the blood as stated, then they remove and burn the fat from the animal on the altar. “In this way the priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven” (Lev 4:35).

Despite God’s grace, Israel continues to engage in rebellion. After having revealed Judas’s future betrayal, Jesus presented the Lord’s Supper to the Twelve. Jesus immediately made known the sacrificial nature of his anticipated fate by breaking and offering the bread which represented his own body: “Take and eat; this is my body” (Mat 26:26). Then as Jesus offered his cup to the disciples he said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out

for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mat 26:28). The long-awaited New Covenant has been sealed through the sacrificial offering of Jesus’s body and blood.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, before giving an account of continuity between these two texts, perhaps it will be beneficial to first identify immediate areas of discontinuity. Most obvious is the object of the sacrificial offering. In the case of the Levitical sin offering the object of sacrifice is never another human person but assorted livestock. While Abraham offered his son, Isaac, as a *sacrificial* offering, the backdrop of this cannot be seen as the sin offering described in Leviticus; rather, it ought to be seen in light of obedience to the divine command. Isaiah 53 gives insight into God’s righteous servant being treated as an offering for sin. As God’s righteous servant, Jesus displayed himself as the sacrificial offering for sin. Unlike the sin offering, the object of sacrifice under the New Covenant *is* a human person—Jesus Christ.

The other and more important discontinuous notion concerns the frequency of each offering made for sin. The sin offering is necessary only after an act of sin, followed by the ceremonial process, which then atones for that sin. There is no allusion in the text that points to a permanent efficacy of this atonement for future sins; it accounts only for any unintentional unatoned sin of that person or group up to that point in time. It does not speak of future sins committed after the ceremonial offering. In fact, I would argue it presumes (or at least hopes) that there would not be future sins. As it says regarding the day of atonement for the Israelites, “Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites” (Lev 16:34). The New Testament (NT) confirms this thought in Hebrews 9:25-26 and 10:10. Since Christ’s offering is sufficient to cover all sin, there is now no power to the Levitical sin offerings under this New Covenant: “And where these [sins] have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary” (Heb 10:18). Christ’s atoning sacrifice fulfilled the need for ceremonial sacrifice, making them

obsolete.¹ Hence, there is clear discontinuity between the duplicated practice of Levitical sacrifice and Christ's all-encompassing sacrifice. Related discontinuity exists in that 'the blood of Christ' (Eph 1:7), obviously pointing to Christ's death on the cross, uniquely to the NT means, in addition to atonement, justification and redemption.²

After displaying immediate points of discontinuity between Christ's sacrifice and the sin offering proclaimed under the Old Covenant, the areas of thematic continuity become clearer. To begin with the theme of atonement. Assumed in the very nature of atonement is the need to atone for some *thing*. Dr. William Lane Craig distinguishes between the etymology of the word "atonement," which is defined as the state of "at-onement" or reconciliation, and the biblical definition of atonement, which is the purification or cleansing of sin.³ In the case of the former, the object of atonement is the relationship between the person or group and God; in contrast, the object of atonement in the case of the latter is the impurity or sin of the guilty person. Considering these two ways of perceiving atonement, Craig argues that it is the broader sense of reconciliation that is achieved through the narrower sense of purification. In other words, it is through Christ's atoning sacrifice that sinners are cleansed of their sins, reconciling them to God. There are, however, reasons to doubt this bifurcation.

The Hebrew word group for atonement used in the Levitical sacrifices is *kpr*. The Greek equivalent in the NT is *hilasterion*. Although scholars are divided on this, the primary usage of both terms in the current context appears to be the *propitiation* of sin or appeasement of God's

¹ R. T. Beckwith, "Sacrifice," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 761.

² T. Rentz, "Blood," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 403.

³ William Lane Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 1-3.

wrath (as in the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant), and what follows with this notion of atonement is the achievement of reconciliation with God. In propitiation, therefore, the point is that atonement from a sacrificial offering requires no further bloodshed on behalf of the guilty party. What Craig means by purification and cleansing is the *expiation* of sin. “To expiate” is to remove sin; “to propitiate” is to appease or satisfy. The object of expiation is sin, and the object of propitiation is God.⁴ On the one hand, Craig seems to suggest that the definition of “make atonement” (*kipper*) is, at least in this context, expiation.⁵ On the other hand, he asserts that the “twin fundamental purposes” of animal sacrifices were expiation of sin and propitiation of God.⁶ The sin offerings in Leviticus 4 do not even mention cleansing or purification. To Craig’s point, however, using the same Hebrew word of atonement found in accord with the sin offering, the passage explaining the Day of Atonement does mention uncleanness on behalf of the Israelites and the *cleansing* (*taher*) of sin through atonement (16:16,30). Notwithstanding the connection to cleansing or purification, it appears to be an unwarranted leap to then state that the definition of atonement is to cleanse or to purify. Verse 16 mentions that “because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites” there is a requirement for atonement. Uncleanness is presupposed in the need for atonement. Verse 30 is more convincing when it says, “because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you.” From this alone, it supports Craig’s definition.

⁴ Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 18. It is quite obvious that the understanding of the Passover sacrifice is propitiatory, not expiatory. Whether atonement in the Levitical sense is only propitiatory is a separate question. This does appear to be at least a strong indication that the Israelites would have taken a propitiatory orientation even with regard to the sin offering. It is likely true that *kipper* in most cases ought to be interpreted as “to purify” or “to wipe off” or “to purify.” But there are evidences which point to *kipper* being interpreted as either “payment” or “to satisfy” or “to propitiate” surrounding the sin offering.

⁵ Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 22. This conclusion appears to derive from Milgrom, who, after exploring many possible meanings for *kipper* under various contexts, appears to agree that in this case expiation is the proper understanding. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* states that propitiation is the clear definition in non-Jewish Greek settings (Freedman, 1992, 519). However, it mentions that Dodd (1935:82-95) argues that the Jewish-Christian setting differs. From this view, God is the subject, not the object. That is, what is being atoned for is sin or the effects of sin—expiation; it is not directly an appeasement of God’s wrath—propitiation.

⁶ Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 19.

But consider the next sentence: “Then, *before the Lord*, you will be clean from all your sins” (*emphasis added*). The most plausible objective of this statement is not the cleansing of the sinner, but the ability to stand in the presence of God. Expiation of sin could simply be implied by the proper definition of atonement, although it does not *mean* expiation. This would account for why Leviticus 4 does not speak to it. After all, what good would it be to propitiate God’s wrath while remaining impure from sin? Craig is certainly correct that atonement in the biblical sense ought not to be simply translated as reconciliation, for the Greek has a distinct word for reconciliation (*katallasso*; see 2 Cor 5:18-20). It turns out the word atonement in the biblical sense cannot be broadly defined as reconciliation or “at-onement”; and “to purify” or “to cleanse” is probably too narrow. Instead, atonement, as presented in Scripture, even though expiation perhaps plays a vital role, at least primarily means propitiation to be reconciled to God (this becomes clearer when we consider the larger biblical-theological theme of restoration: since the fall of man, God has been working to restore the proper relationship with mankind). It is fair to conclude, as Craig does, that the NT authors view Christ’s atonement as both expiatory and propitiatory (as in Rom 5:9).⁷

All that to specify the correct biblical understanding of atonement in an attempt to identify this area of continuity between Christ’s atonement and the Levitical sin offering. Now atonement under the New Covenant can be seen in light of the Old Covenants. Although the Matthean account of the Lord’s Supper does not use the word atonement, a survey of the related passages leads to a clear allusion. Just as the sin offering under the Old Covenant was made as a propitiation for sin, so Christ has been offered as a propitiation for sin: for “God presented Christ

⁷ Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 33. In fact, it is probably the case that expiation and propitiation are two sides of the same coin even in some OT contexts (Balentine, 2015, 60).

as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith” (Rom 3:25). But the propitiation is not the full objective. As Paul mentions, “we were reconciled to [God] through the death of his Son” (Rom 5:10). That is, the primary objective, as understood by the proper interpretation of atonement, was how Christ’s sacrifice accomplished the reconciliation between God and his people. This was precisely the same mindset of the Levitical sin offering. Under both offerings is the divinely ordained activity to resolve the problem of human sin so that humans may exist in perfect fellowship with their Creator and Sustainer.⁸ Continuity is presented in the form of mankind needing to atone for its sinfulness and God’s willingness to make a way for the redemption of sin and a reconciled relationship to occur.

Atonement specifies God’s objective to reconcile; the *method* of atonement is consistently one of a *sacrificial* offering. Craig argues that the chief theme for a biblical understanding of atonement is sacrifice. The portrayal of Christ’s death as a sacrificial offering is the predominant motif used in the NT to characterize atonement.⁹ Accordingly, the words sacrifice and offering are interconnected. For the sacrifices were not merely a violent act involving the gratuitous shedding of innocent blood.¹⁰ Instead, the sacrifice is to be seen as an offering or gift to God. As Isaiah foretells of the Suffering Servant, “he was led like a lamb to the slaughter.... The LORD makes his life an offering for sin” (Isa 53:7,10). Hebrews 10:12 uses both terms in the same verse: “But when this priest [that is, Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” Hence, Isaiah’s account of the Suffering Servant, the Levitical sin offering, and Christ’s sacrificial death all share a consistent emphasis

⁸ R. W. Yarbrough, “Atonement,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 388.

⁹ Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 15.

¹⁰ Paul M. Hoskins, “A Neglected Allusion to Leviticus 4–5 in Jesus’s Words Concerning His Blood in Matthew 26:28,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 30, no. 2 (15 June 2020): 236. <https://doi.org/10.5325/bullbiblrese.30.2.0231>.

on the necessity of a sacrificial death as the remedy for sin.¹¹ Notice additionally that the sacrificial animal offered is to be without blemish or defect, just as Christ represents the sinless sacrificial lamb, without blemish or defect (1 Pet 1:19). Pertinent is not just any sacrifice but *blood* sacrifices (Heb 9:22). It is the death of a clean animal which remedies the guilt of sin.¹² Craig's concern for expiation becomes more apparent in the aspect of blood, for the blood acts in a ritualistic sense as the means for removing impurities which otherwise compromise the purity of the sanctuary and altar.¹³ The primary distinction of the sin and guilty offerings from the other forms of sacrificial offering is the *application* of the blood, which is used for atonement.¹⁴ On no such account ought the blood be consumed, for it symbolized life laid down in death, constituting atonement.¹⁵ Just as blood symbolizes the passage from life to death, so ritual blood symbolizes the passage from guilt and death to atonement and life.¹⁶ Especially apparent in the NT, there is not a special power associated with blood itself; rather, it is the shedding of blood in the sacrificial sense.¹⁷ This was a sign of God's covenantal faithfulness. Consider the Passover: the blood sacrifice was made so that God would save his people. Also see what follows the sacrificial offering of the Suffering Servant: "he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand" (Isa 53:10). Blessings of the covenant were received through blood sacrifice, which is continuous in the NT (Heb 10:14).

¹¹ Hoskins, "A Neglected Allusion," 238. Though I must add, given the complexity of sacrifice under the Judaic system, it should not be assumed in every case that language related to Christ's sacrificial death is a reference to sin offering under the Levitical system (Freedman, 1992, 519).

¹² Beckwith, "Sacrifice," 755.

¹³ T. Rentz, "Blood," 402.

¹⁴ Beckwith, "Sacrifice," 759.

¹⁵ Beckwith, "Sacrifice," 758.

¹⁶ T. Rentz, "Blood," 402.

¹⁷ T. Rentz, "Blood," 403.

Blood is also known as a mark of the covenants themselves. During Matthew's account of the Lord's Supper Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant" (26:28; some manuscripts include the *new*). Moses inaugurated the Old Covenant under the same language (Exod 24:8; confirmed in Zech 9:11). Hence, throughout both Testaments the covenant is sealed by *blood* sacrifice. This New Covenant, however, marked an everlasting covenant of salvific redemption (Heb 13:20). OT passages link blood and wine (e.g., Gen 49:11; Deut 32:14,38), as wine was also known for its connection to the New Covenant, which explains why Christ chose to present the New Covenant to his disciples through the sharing of wine, and why he emphasized blood more than body. And so, the beneficiaries of the blood sacrifice of Christ become the people of the New Covenant.¹⁸

Additionally, Christ likely alludes to his sacrifice when he says in the same verse, "This is my blood of the covenant, *which is poured out*." Pouring out blood has two meanings, both of which are probably represented by Christ, given the context: one is a violent death and the other is in connection with sin offering. Leviticus 4 is the only other offering in which the blood is "poured out," and does so repeatedly.¹⁹ Thus, it is reasonable to assume Christ was intimating the continuity between sin offering and his own death. There is another theme at play within this verse, namely, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out *for many*." Atonement for the sins of the many is expressively made known in Isaiah 53:11-12: "my righteous servant will justify many.... For he bore the sin of many." The Suffering Servant as depicted by Isaiah atones for the sins of many. As mentioned above, the Levitical sin offerings were made for both individuals and groups. Just as during the Passover the sacrifices were made for numerous

¹⁸ Hoskins, "A Neglected Allusion," 238.

¹⁹ Hoskins, "A Neglected Allusion," 235.

individuals. Hebrews 9:28 reiterates the corporateness of Christ's atonement. "Many" under the new covenant alludes to all those who are identified with Christ's atoning sacrifice, including the Gentiles. Hence, explicit overlap of words and concepts for continuity's sake. Lastly, the verse concludes with, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*." Forgiveness is frequently mentioned and deeply woven in the concept of animal sacrifices for sin (Lev 4:35). Contained within both Jesus's sacrifice and the sacrificial sin offerings is the opportunity to be forgiven of sin.²⁰ Here again is the sign of God's faithfulness—that God has made a way for genuine persons to be forgiven, and he is consistent in granting his promise of forgiveness. Such forgiveness is heavily tied to the concept of reconciliation—the kind of reconciliation in mind from atonement. God's willingness and desire to forgive and be reconciled, along with the people's need for forgiveness, are continuous notions from the OT and into the NT.²¹ Given the evidence, it is plausible to think Jesus was referring to these OT sacrifices during the Lord's Supper. At the very least, the biblical data suggests Christ's atoning death and the Levitical sin offering bring continuity regarding these themes.

Thus far I have provided evidence backing the display of continuity between Christ's atonement and the Levitical sin offering under the following themes: atonement (propitiation and expiation), blood sacrifice, "pouring out," "for the many," and "for the forgiveness of sin." The final two themes—retribution and substitution—are probably more controversial. These themes become potentially problematic for the biblical theologian as he wishes to prevent presupposing a systematic conclusion back into his biblical-theological research. With that in mind, consider retribution first—which is closely identified or even synonymous with judgment and

²⁰ Hoskins, "A Neglected Allusion," 237.

²¹ R. W. Yarbrough, "Forgiveness and reconciliation," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 499.

punishment. A simple reading of the Passover narrative leads to the conclusion that the animals were sacrificed so that, by God's grace, God would pass over them and save them from the ensuing wrath of God as punishment for sin, evident by the strike of every firstborn male (Exo 12:12). Divine wrath, judgment, and punishment are well-established qualities of the OT; the relevance lies in the connection with the Levitical sacrifice for sin. Recall the biblical definition of atonement being one primarily of propitiation (although it is fair to include an expiatory element). The object of atonement then is God rather than sin. So what then is being propitiated or appeased? The only explanation is God's wrath. Sin offerings were made under the Levitical system to forgive and reconcile the people to God by way of satisfying the divine punishment against sin. Contained in Isaiah's Suffering Servant is an unmistakable notion of punishment (53:4,5,6,8,10). This same context is present in Paul's writings: "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Rom 5:9). Also, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), where ransom (*lytron*) stands for the release from the penalty for sin.²² Hence, Christ's atonement shows a continuous theme of retribution as present in the OT offering for sin.

I would argue that substitution, while not explicitly mentioned, is alluded to as a continuous theme. For blood sacrifice, the blood serves as a *substitute*, enabling the ransom and forgiveness of the life of the guilty party.²³ Consider the ceremonial process. For the priestly sin offering, he is to lay his hand on the bull before slaughtering (Lev 4:4). Scholars show that this probably indicates substitution—that is, the fate of the offeror is symbolized by the sacrificed

²² According to Strong's Greek Lexicon.

²³ T. Rentz, "Blood," 402. Possibly identified in Leviticus 17:11.

animal.²⁴ The transference of sin to the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:21-22 is ‘clearly implied’ by the placing of both hands.²⁵ Regarding that passage and others, according to Milgrom, substitution and ransom are represented by *kipper*.²⁶ Craig agrees and continues, “The animal’s life is given instead of the sinner’s” (Craig, 28, 2020). Not all scholars agree. According to *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, thinking that the sacrifice serves as substitute for the sinner, and thus incurs a punishment of God’s wrath instead, is very unlikely under the old sacrificial system. For the sacrifice which has the hands of the sinner laid upon is the scapegoat, not the one actually being sacrificed.²⁷ Even if true, this does not discredit the reference to the priest’s laying of the hand on the animal to be sacrificed in Leviticus 4. Moreover, Isaiah 53 speaks of the righteous servant who will bear the iniquities of the people; that is, he is punished *instead* of the people. The OT therefore speaks greatly to the combination of both atoning sacrifice and vicarious punishment.²⁸ Substitution in light of atonement is likely portrayed in the NT as well: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21). At least in some theological sense Christ is seen as standing in the place of sinners, especially against the backdrop of Isaiah 53. There are good reasons, therefore, for retribution and substitution to be seen as continuous themes from the OT to the NT. This essay, within its constraints, succeeded in demonstrating thematic continuity of atonement, blood sacrifice, “pouring out”, “many”, forgiveness of sin, retribution, and substitution between the sin offering detailed in Leviticus 4 and Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross.

²⁴ Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 25.

²⁵ Beckwith, “Sacrifice,” 757.

²⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 1082.

²⁷ David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 1 (A-C)* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 519.

²⁸ Beckwith, “Sacrifice,” 760.

Biblical Theology is a highly pursued discipline not only for its academic rigor but also for its application to Christian living. I will attempt to provide application points based on the discussion above. Sacrifice was seen in the ancient Judaism as a form of worship.²⁹ As noted, Christ's atoning sacrifice is comprehensive for all sin for those who are in him. We, as believers, no longer need to be concerned with desirable sacrifices for God *to atone for our sins*. Our atoning sacrifice is found in our identification with Christ. Now instead, through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us, we offer various *spiritual sacrifices* to God, including acts of prayer, praise, discipleship, ministry, and suffering in Christ.³⁰ Our connection with God is now in right standing, so we approach him as blameless and faithful servants (Eph 3:12; Heb 10:22). Because of the ultimate sacrifice paid for by Christ's own blood, we may live in the Spirit. We should feel nothing but grace and gratitude for the privilege of living in this New Covenant, where animal sacrifices are obsolete. But Christ is not done, "he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Heb 9:28).

²⁹ Beckwith, "Sacrifice," 754.

³⁰ Beckwith, "Sacrifice," 761.

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