

## A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF BIBLICAL ATONEMENT: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANS

Moses Idemudia  
and  
Muhammed D. Sule

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### Abstract

*Teaching atonement to an African can be a difficult task when it is done in isolation of African understanding of sacrificial rites. There is a need to draw from the abundance of African related concepts of atonement in this regard. Unfortunately most people tend to see this idea as syncretism. This work examines the biblical concept of atonement and its implications for African Christians. The paper explores the concept of atonement in the Old and New Testaments. It also looks at the appreciation of the concept by the Early Christians and beyond. The work draws a nexus between this concept and its understanding among the Africans. The work adopts hermeneutical, comparative and evaluative method and submits that the atoning work of Jesus Christ which adequately satisfies the requirement for man's restored relationship with God was foreshadowed in the Old Testament and can only be fully grasp by African Christians when it is contextualized using examples from their milieu.*

### Introduction

The in-depth meaning of atonement does not come to the fore immediately, except when it is used in relation to God and the fallen humanity. Atonement in Christian theology is the one word which summarizes all that God did in redeeming human kind from his fallen state. This idea is represented in both Old and New Testaments; and from Genesis to Revelation a need for blood atonement is clearly evident (McDonald, 1994). Also, the concept is not lacking in Africa. Expiatory sacrifices of all kinds abound in the African traditional society. Sacrifices are made to appease God/gods whenever Africans think they are in a predicament due to God/god's anger, brought upon them by certain misconduct or sin; or when facing certain challenges that threaten their lives.

The redemption of mankind takes place in a mysterious dramatic way, which at first was obscure to man, but with time gets unfolded to him stage by stage (McDonald, 1994). The place Christ took in the redemption process raises some questions in a critical mind. Why should his death be so significant and in some ways affects God's relation to humanity and to the world? What is the theological implication of Christ's death? How can African Christians relate with the idea of vicarious sacrifice of Jesus?

In Leviticus, series of atonement sacrifices were prescribed for the children of Israel. But getting to the New Testament another concept of atonement is presented and seen as the 'perfection of the shadow' of atonement in Old Testament (Bromily, 1994). This raises further questions: is there any parallel or differences between the 'physical sacrifices' in the Old Testament and 'spiritual sacrifices' mentioned in the New Testament? What is wrong with that of the Old Testament resulting to the New Testament atonement?

The Bible presents answers to these questions in a way that no serious seeker of truth can honestly ignore. The creation of man in the image of God, the temptation and the fall of mankind in Eden, the cause of sin and death, and the provision of a means of redemption in Jesus Christ are not offered as abstract doctrines to be debated on, but as revealed answers to the deepest and most desperate human need (Strong, 1970). Prominent in the purpose of this paper is the evaluation of Christ's atonement as the final sacrifice which takes away the sin of mankind. This work also aims at comparing biblical atonement with African concept of expiatory sacrifice thereby drawing parallels between them.

### **Atonement in Perspective**

Atonement is the one word which summarizes all that God did in redeeming the fallen human kind to his original position (Walwood, 1961). Etymologically, the words *at* and *onement* were combined by William Tyndale to form 'Atonement,' when he discovered that there was no direct translation for the Hebrew word *כַּפֵּר* (*kaper*) into the English language in his translation. Tyndale's words, "atonement explains the doctrine of Christ's sacrificial death, which accomplished both the remission of sin and reconciliation of men to God. According to Tyndale, this was done to overcome the inherent limitations of the word *kaper* to mean reconciliation since it incorporates some aspects of propitiation and forgiveness of sin. The word encompasses both actions. On the contrary, Averbeck (2003) holds that the word means 'to purge,' based on the Akkadian cognate *kupuru*, meaning 'to wipe away.' But for the English term 'atonement,' he agrees that it means 'to be or make one'. From the foregoing, one can infer that the concept of atonement has to do with the wiping away of sin and the resultant effect of uniting both parties which were at enmity.

Therefore, in a broader sense, and in the context of this work, atonement is God's work on sinners' behalf to reconcile them to Himself. It encompasses all God did to control the problem of human sin and to restore him to an everlasting fellowship. It is in this same vein that Yarbrough (2006) asserts that atonement is the saving act of God which makes possible and in a sense constitute his redeeming and restoring work; it is the means by which his righteousness is re-established in a cosmic order marred temporarily by rebellion against its creator and king.

### **The Need for Atonement**

The book of Genesis is comprehensive enough to show man's nobility and cruelty, his genius and folly, his high hopes and dismal failures, and all the ironies and paradoxes that characterized human history. Man was created and made by God in his own image. The nature of this divine image in man is contained in both natural and moral attitudes; natural, such as reason, memory, self-direction or will, and freedom from sinful tendencies and dispositions (Strong, 1970), which were marred or tampered with at the fall. Furthermore, as a result of the fall, man lost his innocence and original righteousness, and with it he lost favour and fellowship with God. Adam and the entire human race are therefore ruined absolutely. These predicaments are the expression of divine displeasure and the consequences of the spiritual death in which the threatened penalty essentially consisted (Hodge, 1973). From this point on, man had tried everything from fig leaves to cocaine and alcohol to cover up for his sense of guilt, insecurity and inadequacy, but never found help (Deason and Bill, 1990).

Deason and Bill (1990) agree with Purkiser *et al* (1977) that both the Old and the New Testament portrays God as a Holy being, who reacts to sin not mildly, but vigorously and punitively. However, God in his infinite mercy had already proposed the way of escape for man. After the fall,

he came calling man to come out of his hiding because an infinite price had been arranged to be paid on man's behalf. It is quite interesting to know that despite God's reaction to sin by pronouncing judgments and curses upon man, he however in his love made a way of rescue when he cursed the serpent for the role he played in the fall. "I will put enmity between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). According to Anthony A. Hoekema (1986), these words are often called "*protoevangelium*" the (first gospel message) of the "mother promise".

The prophetic announcement was carried forward into history embellished and enlarged upon by further prophetic revelation as the fullness of time drew nearer. It was taken up into God's promise of blessing through the seed of Abraham; it was the beginning of Israel's messianic hope (Hoekema, 1986). Meanwhile, a status was established for the children of Israel to keep the promise. This status comprises of the various animal sacrifices of the Old Testament before the perfection through the "son of David," "the suffering servant," "the son of man," "Jesus Christ" (Deason and bill, 1990).

## The Old Testament Concept of Atonement

There are various kinds of sacrifices practiced in the Old Testament, they are adumbrated in Leviticus. Most of those sacrifices were offered as an expression of love for God and as a sign of worship. The following will attempt to delineate some of these practices.

**The Pascal Lamb:** The lamb to be slain as the Pascal lamb was to be without blemish; a lamb that was tested, slain and its blood sprinkled as a perfect propitiation against divine judgments, which is to be eaten the same day. The Pascal lamb sacrifice was to be done in commemoration of the Passover in Egypt. Israel's national and her abiding redemption were secure by the Pascal lamb. The Pascal lamb had two perspectives; first as the ground of peace, and second as the center for family unity.

**The Red Heifer:** The red heifer was to be killed, and part of the blood sprinkled directly before the tabernacle of the congregation where the people were to meet God, the rest was to be burnt outside the camp. The blood is sprinkled seven times as a perfect testimony in the eyes of God to the atonement made for sin. Seiss (1978) commenting on the importance of the blood states that, where sin is stayed and quenched, there must be blood. Blood is the substance of life and as sin involves the forfeiture of life, without the shedding of blood there is no remission.

**The Offerings:** There were five kinds of offerings offered in the Old Testament that has direct or indirect bearing with atonement. They are: the burnt, meal, peace, trespass, and sin offerings (Brown, *et al*, 2003). These are further grouped into sweet savour offerings meal, peace, and burnt offering and the non-sweet savour offerings-sin and trespass offering (Drane, 1998)

## The Old Testament Day of Atonement

Perhaps, the most significant day in the history of Israel is the Day of Atonement. The ‘day of atonement’ fell on the tenth day of the seventh month, known as *Tishri* תשרי tsom eht saw sihT. solemn Day of the religion of ancient Israel known as *yom kippuru* יום כפּוּר (3791 retniW). day of atonement was a gracious day each year when all the Israelites could experience a new beginning by being cleansed from their sins and restored to fellowship with Yahweh (Leviticus

16:30). On this day all sins will be taken care of, including those for which provision was not made. The major purpose of this observance was to make atonement in its detail, and special ceremony of propitiation was made for Aaron and his house, the Holy place, the tent of meeting, altar of burnt offering, and the entire congregation of Israel. Only the high priest could officiate on this day, all other priests are counted among the congregation (Hartely, 1982).

The high priest, as a representative of the congregation, was required to bring the animal for sacrifice to the tent of meeting; he was to present a young bull, to serve for purification offering and a ram for a whole burnt offering. A bull, the most prized sacrificial animal, was required because of the high priest's high standing in the covenant community. Then the high priest receives from the congregation two male goats, one for sin offering and the other to be released into the wilderness and a ram for a whole burnt offering. The high priest takes the goat to the entrance of the tent; there he casts lots over them. One lot designated the goat that is for Yahweh; it was to be sacrificed at the altar. The other lot designated the goat for *azazel* *taht eno eht* "עֲזָזֵל carries away," also known as scapegoat. Some scholars see Jesus' atonement in the New Testament as the fulfilment of this requirement (Hartely, 1982).

During the main ritual, a special blood rite were performed with the blood from the purification offerings in the holy of holies, sins were confessed over the goat of *Azazel* and it was released into the wilderness, which was viewed by the ancient as the ominous region (Jenson, 1999). The priest made sure that the goat did not return to the inhabited area by pushing it over a cliff (Douglas *et al*, 1987). The priest then offered the regular whole offering. To this effect, the high priest must first sacrifice his own bull as purification for himself and his house before he could do for others at the altar.

Old Testament atonement is not only a vicarious punishment for sin, just as it does not only mean forgiveness of sin but combines both of these elements. It is the restoration of a living relationship with God through the actual event of a vicarious death. Thus virtual atonement overcome sin and also reveals sin at the same time.

### **Atonement in the New Testament**

Throughout the New Testament, the nature of salvation is the major concern of the writers than the precise way in which it has been achieved (Marshall, 1974). Therefore, Tuckett (1992) opined that it would probably be wrong to press any one image too far and claim that this represents the central view of the New Testament. This is because atonement is described in the variety of situation in which human being find himself before Christ's intervention which possibly leads to the different explanation of how it was altered by his work. Thus if human situation is described in term of sin or in term of being under hostile power, then the atonement could be considered as a sacrifice for sin or as a redemption or victory over powers. If seen as ignorance then the atonement could be seen as enlightenment or revelation.

However, atonement is generally described as an expression of God's love to humanity. Apostle Paul gave a classic exposition of this when he said, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8). Also, from the teachings in the gospels, it is made clear in variety of expressions that atonement is the work of God directed to the highest moral and spiritual ends. Generally, the New Testament teachings testifies to the fact that

atonement is the realization of the purpose of God in reconciling man to himself and this was done and consummated in Jesus Christ.

### **Terms Expressing New Testament Concept of Atonement**

The words commonly found in the New Testament that express the atonement, relate to the work of Christ in the salvation of mankind. Such terms includes, sacrifice, redemption, ransom, reconciliation, propitiation, justification, etc.

**Propitiation:** The word ἱλαστήριον *hilasterion* is the Greek word translated “propitiation” in Romans 3:25 to describe the effect of Jesus’ death in relation to man’s sin. The *Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary* defines the verb “propitiate” as an action taken to stop somebody from being angry by trying to please them. From this application, one can deduce these facts; there is an offence, an angry or offended person, and the offender. It therefore shows that the offended person is propitiated, that is appeased.

Some scholars argued that God is not being propitiated, because he is not a man to get angry. As a result some translators translate the word ἱλασμός *hilasmos* as “expiation” rather than propitiation. The basis for this is if one insists on speaking of God being propitiated, he turns the loving God of the Bible into a capricious and vindictive deity who inflicts punishment on those who do not bribe him with their gifts and offerings. The Old Testament presented a vindictive God, but in the New Testament “mercy” is emphasized. This is due to the atoning sacrifice of Christ for man.

**Redemption:** The idea of redemption came from the Old Testament world of slavery where the social, spiritual or physical weakness of those subjected to bondage looks to the strong or rich to affect their redemption. The Greek word translated redemption is derived from λυτρον *lutrou* “to redeem or ransom,” and αγοράζω *agorazo* “to buy.” These words are often used with the prepositions “from” or “in place of” to show the place, position and method “the redeemer” used. The Hebrew word from which these Greek words were derived means “to tear away,” “to break,” “to rescue,” “to deliver,” and “to buy” (Brown, 1988). In a nut shell, redemption involves paying or fulfilling the requirement that the one under bondage cannot afford for his freedom.

**Substitution:** Substitution refers to the suffering of one in place of another so that by suffering on the part of one the other is wholly relieved. The entire work of Christ for the redemption of mankind begins from this point (*Wikipedia*).

**Reconciliation:** Reconciliation comes from Latin roots *re* “again”, *con* “with”; and *sol* a root meaning “seat.” Reconciliation therefore means “to seat again with”. The Greek word used in the New Testament has a close meaning to the English word “reconciliation;” καταλλάσσω *katallasso* comes from the secular world and it indicate the improvement or change of a negative relationship. It also has a compound form αποκαταλλάσσω *apokatallasso* which is a technical term used in politics and eschatology to mean a partial or universal restoration. These verbs and their derivatives originally mean to restore to a previous state (Vorlander, 1987). Therefore in Christian theology, reconciliation means “atonement through the death of Jesus Christ”. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross brought to an end the enmity which existed between God and man. Man’s hostility towards God is removed and therefore is reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18). As discussed above, various terms are used to describe atonement in both Old and New Testaments. These terms

are so used because they deal with the effect of atonement, and its implication. However a better understanding of atonement can only be gotten when the terms are viewed together, because none of the terminologies in isolation explains atonement in its totality.

### **African Concept of Atonement**

One of the major questions raised earlier in this paper which relates to the second part of this work, concerns the implications of biblical atonement for African beliefs. This is important to this work because many African biblical scholars believe and argue that when the Bible is read in an African perspective, it make more impact on the lives of the African Christians. Hence, there have been suggestions for the development of African cultural hermeneutics (Adamo, 2005).

The work has also noted earlier that the concept of sacrifice is no alien to Africans. It can hardly be disputed that Africans have more sacrificial rites than any other cultures in the world. Imasogie (2008) agreed that sacrifices are vital parts of African Traditional religions. Perhaps, the Old Testament alone compares African Traditional Religion in terms of the expression of ritualistic sacrifices.

Metuh (1985) explores the coverage areas of sacrifice and sacrificial rites in African Traditional Religion especially with reference to the Ibos of Nigeria. According to him, the types of sacrifice prevalent in Africa include: sacrifice of consecration; sacrifice of propitiation; sacrifice of purification; and sacrifice of exorcism. A careful look at these will reveal a correlation with the biblical idea of atonement as already presented.

According to Fatokun (2010) there are many stories of some individuals who died as saviour-gods and goddesses in attempt to save their communities from one evil or the other, while others were simply offered as sacrificial victims to appease the gods of the Land in Africa. A case of the *Osu* system in Igbo land comes in handy in this instance. An individual, especially criminals, were dedicated and offered to the gods in blood covenant for the ritual purification of the community. The *Osui* i.e the person for the sacrifice, after a communal prayer led by the shrine priest, is believed to have carried away all the troubles, sicknesses and all other misfortunes in the community.

Also, the Yorubas of Western Nigeria have similar saviour-gods or goddesses. Prominent among them are the *Ayelala* and *Eleguru*. *Ayelala* is a popular goddess among the Ilaje and Ijo Apoipeople in Okitipupa, she was a very religious slave girl offered by her people to appease the gods and cleanse the land of heinous crime of sexual immorality committed by one Keko with chief Temetanan's wife (Fatokun, 2010).

*Eleguru*, the savior-god of the Ijebu-ode people is another example of atonement sacrifice in African traditional society. *Eleguru* was a diviner-priest who voluntarily sacrificed himself to pacify the Lagos lagoon goddess as a way of putting an end to constant deluge of his land believed to be caused by this goddess who resulted in the yearly loss of lives and properties. *Eleguru* in sacrificial act sat with his diviner's tools on a magical mat which floated on the lagoon and started moving as he was uttering some incantations until it reached a spot in the middle of the river where he allegedly sank and drowned (Fatokun, 2010).

The idea of atonement suffuses the expression of sacrificial rites among Africans. Ebhomienlen and Idemudia (2012) demonstrated the resemblance of the Old Testament Scapegoat of atonement and the *Isusu* goat sacrifice among the Benin people of Nigeria and argued that both have the same effect of atoning for the sins of the people.

The story of Inikpi among the Igala people of Kogi state, Nigeria will further help to illustrate how atonement is conceived in some African setting. The idea presented in it clearly shows its resemblance to the New Testament concept of atonement. Inikpi, the daughter of Attah, the king of Igala kingdom, was a heroin with great attributes. Once there was war between the Benin Kingdom and the Igala people. No house was

safe, the market square as well as the farm. The streams were poisoned causing women and children to die. Fear gripped the people for a long time. They consulted the oracle and found that their victory would not come unless the princess was buried alive.

Princess Inikpi was the beloved and only daughter of Igala, the then Ayegbu Oma Idoko, she willingly gave herself to be buried alive after a long time of deliberation by the father who wished there could be an alternative. She went voluntarily to the bank of river Niger where she was buried alive. After the sacrifice, as the Benins were advancing towards the Igalas, they saw the whole town in flame of fire and went back thinking there was no need taking war to a place already on fire, but it was the blood of Inikpi that deceived them (Lajaja, 2012).

It is evident from the preceding that the concept of expiatory sacrifice is a common theme in both early Christian doctrine and African indigenous tradition. Both share the same belief on the necessity of expiatory sacrifice for atonement for sin and the supreme importance of blood for the removal of sin.

### **Implications for African Christians**

The New Testament theology holds that the sacrifices of the Old Testament period were shadows of the reality of the death of Jesus on the cross. It is on this basis the first sets of Christians who had their foundation in the Jewish religion were able to relate with the atoning work of Jesus Christ. It is strongly held here that African Christians, who have also had their foundation in African traditional religion, should as well see the manifestation and expressions of their traditional sacrifices as shadows of the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Fatokun (2010) rightly observed that there is no equal or equivalent sacrifice to the atoning work of Jesus in all of Africa's expiatory sacrifices.

The implication of the above is that Africa Christians must now submit to the final atonement for man and see in Jesus' blood not only a remission of sin but a total restoration to right relationship with God. Another significant implication of work is that the preaching of the gospel to the unsaved in Africa requires that the message of Jesus' work on the cross be systematically explained so that it reflects the African concept of sacrifice as its shadow. This will require an appropriate understanding of the various sacrificial rites so as to avoid syncretism.

Also, the atonement of Christ secures healing, deliverance, and cleansing for the entire human race, including Africans. As part of the redemption plan, God put in view those other implication of human sin as well as his spiritual death and separation from fellowship with him. Therefore the African Christian only needs to appropriate that provision without further sacrifices.

### **Conclusion**

Once adapted to the sacrifice on the cross, the entire concept of atonement takes a whole new meaning. Thus Jesus becomes the perfect sacrifice that brings man to his right relationship with God. The theological implication is far reaching as it renders the other forms of atoning sacrifices inferior, because in the atonement of Christ, the sinner is set free from his condemnation, slavery to sin; he is delivered and healed from the consequences of sin. In this paper, efforts were made at examining the concept of atonement as presented in the Old and New Testaments. The African concept of atonement was also briefly x-rayed. In all, the work submit that atonement in the New Testament is foreshadowed in both African and Old Testament religions and they serve as the foundation for the understanding and appreciation of Jesus' death as the final superior atonement for man.

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