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Sacrificial Images in the New Testament

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The Problem of Atonement

A major problem in discussions of sacrifice is the almost overwhelming influence of Christian atonement theology, which shapes even the scholarly interpretation of sacrifice. Christian scholars regularly, if unconsciously, impose Christian atonement theology upon their interpretation of Old Testament sacrificial texts, as in the frequent assertion that the sacrificial animal takes on the punishment of the human sinner. This sounds much closer to Calvin than to anything found in the Pentateuch. In reaction against this, *other* scholars block out any interpretations that seem even remotely to echo Christian teaching. This also distorts interpretation. I think we should beware *any* blanket dismissal of prior interpretations, but should consult a wide range of scholarship.

Sacrificial Images and Metaphors

In English translations of the Hebrew Bible, “atone” or “make atonement” is the usual translation for the *pi’el* verb, *kipper* (כִּפֶּה). The verb signifies both the removal of impurity from the sanctuary and a parallel, *personal*, result. The instructions for purification offerings and guilt offerings in Leviticus 4–6 are explicit about forgiveness: “The priest shall make atonement (*kipper*) on your behalf, and you shall be forgiven (*nislah*),” says Lev 4:31, with almost identical wording in seven more passages (4:20, 26, 35; 5:10, 13, 16; 6:7).¹ Forgiveness is not explicit, but is implied, in the Day of Atonement narrative: “On this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse (*lětahēr*) you; from all your sins you shall be

¹ John Dennis, “The Function of the אָטַח Sacrifice in the Priestly Literature,” *ETL* 78,1 (2002): 117–119.

clean before the LORD” (16:30). Along with ritual cleansing goes *personal* cleansing from sins, and a restoration of good relations with Yahweh.²

But there are some less pleasant associations of *kipper*, seen in its non-cultic uses. In Numbers 25, the priest Phinehas finds a Hebrew man and a Midianitess making love, and he runs his spear through the pair. This action “has turned back my wrath from the Israelites,” the Lord says, and earned Phinehas “a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement (*yĕkappēr*) for the Israelites” (Num 25:11, 13). Psalm 106 honors this story; the act of killing is “reckoned to him as righteousness” (106:31). In an even more horrid example of violent atonement, David hands over seven relatives of Saul to be impaled by the Gibeonites so that “I make expiation” (*’ăkappēr*) for Saul’s violence against their town (2 Sam 21:3).

These and other texts show that *kipper* can signify not only the controlled cleansing of the priestly ritual but also appeasement through violence, as seen in the ethnic cleansing of Numbers, and the family revenge of 2 Samuel.³ The concept of appeasing someone who is angry, lies in the background of *kipper*, although the priestly author, P, suppresses such violent implications, making *kipper* mean cleansing, with a corollary of forgiving.

This is not to say that violence is the *main* component of *kipper*, but that violence is a well-established part of the social history of appeasement and conciliation, and of the narrative surrounding sacrificial ritual. The dangerous wrath of God concerning ritual matters shows up in many stories. When some non-priests presume to offer incense, “fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense” (Num 16:35). In fact, the priests Nadab and Abihu kindled a sacrificial fire that the Lord “had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them” (Lev 10:1–2). Even unintentional transgression is fatal: “Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God” to steady it, yet “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there” (2 Sam 6:6–7). *Any* inappropriate action in connection to ritual is fatal. “Fire from heaven” can also signal divine approval of a sacrifice, igniting the offerings on the altar, but observers

² God forgives without any connection to cult in Neh 9:17; Pss 25:18; 32:1; Prov 17:9; Isa 33:24; Jer 31:34.

³ Stephen Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2007), 11–13.

understandably are stricken with fear (1 Chron 21:26, 30; 2 Chron 7:1, 3). Priestly space is protected by divine violence.

Other texts suggest a linkage of atonement to payment. *Kipper* is cognate with *kōper* (כֹּפֶר), which is a payment. In Exod 30:12–16, a *kofer* is “a ransom for their lives” paid by the people to the priests. In Exod 21:30, a *kofer* pays for a goring by an ox. In Gen 32:20, Jacob gives livestock as a *kofer* or “present” to Esau to appease him.⁴

Looking at the examples of *kipper* through violence and at the cognate *kofer*, we can say that the semantic range of *kipper* includes concepts of pay-back or payment, as a means of setting something right, or of conciliating someone. This is true even if *kofer* is really just a token or symbolic payment. Biblical ideas of atonement are linked to the idea of payment.

Thus, even though, in P’s ritual texts, *kipper* means cleansing or purging, the idea of appeasing or conciliating an angry figure is still present in the semantic and philosophic background.

When we come to the NT, the *metaphorical* usage of sacrifice is far more important than literal sacrifice. In the epistles and Revelation, sacrifice is the dominant soteriological metaphor. In 1 John 1:7, the “blood of Jesus ... cleanses us from all sin,” just as a purification sacrifice would do, but with a permanent effect. In Eph 5:2, Christ offered himself up as a “fragrant offering,” recalling the smoke of sacrificial offerings. Our earliest NT author, the Apostle Paul, pictures Christ as the Passover sacrifice (1 Cor 5:7) and as *περὶ ἁμαρτίας*, or a sin offering (Rom 8:3, although NRSV translates it “to deal with sin”). But first we must look at sacrificial imagery in the Gospels.

Sacrifice in the Major NT Authors

Most scholars agree that there was some development over time, in Christian sacrificial thinking. Ferdinand Hahn argues that the idea of the death of Jesus as a covenant sacrifice (Mark 14:24) came before the idea of his death as a Passover sacrifice (1 Cor 5:7), which itself was prior to the conceptualization of his death as a whole offering (in Eph 5:2).⁵ A cove-

⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB, 3; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 1082–1083; Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (3rd rev. edn; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 161–170.

⁵ Ferdinand Hahn, “Sacrifice: NT,” in Erwin Fahlbusch (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Vol. 4: P–Sh (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 811.

nant sacrifice is not expiatory and is not linked with *kipper*. Paul is our earliest source of the metaphorical usage of expiatory sacrifice for the death of Christ, although he claims to have gotten this message from his Antiochene Christian teachers (1 Cor 15:3).

The prominence of the sacrificial metaphor in most of the letters and in Revelation is strikingly offset by the near-absence of this metaphor from the Gospels and Acts, which preserve concepts from the period prior to the emergence of sacrifice as the dominant soteriological paradigm, even though they were written later than the earliest epistles. To take note of the differing understandings of individual NT authors, we can start with Mark.

Mark and Matthew

For Mark, Jesus dies because he tells the truth about God and humanity, and because authority figures, both Jewish and Gentile, reject him. It is human sin, not God's plan, that gets Jesus killed. He dies because the tenant farmers (the priests) plot against the vineyard owner's son. The vineyard owner in the parable does not send his son in order to get him killed, which would be a very unnatural thing for a father to do, but sends his son to "collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard" (Mark 12:2).⁶ Standard Christian interpretation completely overlooks this clear teaching that God did not send the Son to die.

Three times in Mark, Jesus predicts his coming death, as exegetes have long noted. What they never seem to notice is that in none of the predictions is there a single word about dying as a sacrifice, as a substitute victim, or in order to make salvation possible. Has the fog of atonement theology deadened our ability to read what is written? These are not soteriological texts, but are practical warnings to the disciples of what is to come, which will test their faith. Jesus is trying to prepare them to handle the difficult experiences that lie ahead – for *them*.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus "had" to die only because of the hostility of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, and, secondarily, the incomprehension of the disciples. Nowhere is the forgiveness of sins linked with the death of Jesus, although this *does* occur in Matthew's version of the

⁶ This theme of the father *not* sending the son in order that he may die also militates against the common academic opinion that this parable came from the church, and not from Jesus.

Last Supper. In all four gospels, Jesus saves people long before his death, and without any reference to a future sacrificial death.

Heyman says that Mark presents a “communal meal,” bringing out the “covenantal overtones” of the Lord’s Supper (14:24), while Matthew (26:28), by speaking of forgiveness of sins, is bringing out the expiatory sacrificial dimension.⁷ Matthew has sacrificial overtones that are not present in Mark.

Yet Matthew also has those intensely anti-cultic passages, where Jesus twice quotes Hosea’s “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6), once to show that the desire for salvation is more important than purity concerns (Matt 9:10–13), and once to show that Sabbath law should not be taken more seriously than the need to eat, at least for people who are doing holy work (Matt 12:1–7). In Matthew 12, he shows that the cruelty of the Pharisees is linked to their purity mindedness. He says “if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Matt 12:7). Infatuation with purity renders one incapable of understanding the prophet.

In Matt 5:23–24 Jesus says, if one is at the altar and remembers an unresolved dispute with someone, one should leave the gift at the altar and go be reconciled with one’s brother *first*, then return to offer the gift. Jesus allowed participation in the cult, but his main point is that reconciliation is more important than cult, and happens *independently* of cult, through face-to-face encounter. Some scholars use this passage to assert that Jesus *assumes* the sacrificial cult, but it is more important to notice the *point* of the story: that cult is less important than face-to-face reconciliation.

The Synoptics are in strong agreement that Jesus placed a high priority on ethics and personal piety, and that he was either loose or indifferent as regards cultic purity, something that got him criticized for the company he kept and the slackness of his disciples regarding purity rules.

What distinguishes Matthew from the other two Synoptics is that Jesus is said to die for the forgiveness of sins. The angel who appears to Joseph tells him that his wife’s son “will save his people from their sins” (1:21), and in the remembrance supper, Jesus refers to his blood as “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28), a saying unique to Matthew. The standard Eucharistic liturgies are a blending of Matthean and Pauline

⁷ George Heyman, “Sacrifice, Social Discourse, and Power,” in Christian A. Eberhart (ed.), *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 146.

wording. Although the forgiveness of sins is an important issue in Matthew, only in these passages at the beginning and end of the Gospel is it linked with Jesus' death, as though Matthew were only beginning to assimilate a doctrine that was becoming influential. In the course of Christian reflection, the idea of Jesus' death as a sacrifice and/or as a redemption payment was gaining strength.

The Ransom Saying in the Synoptics

What does occur in Mark is a single redemption metaphor, where Jesus is made to say that the Son of Man came "to give his life a ransom (λύτρον) for many" (10:45). Ransom language belongs mainly in the realm of economics and politics; λύτρον could signify a means of deliverance generally, or more specifically the manumission of a slave, or "ransoming a captive or prisoner of war from slavery."⁸ The ransom saying is copied by Matthew (20:28), but not by Luke. Luke has the same pericope, but has Jesus ably communicating the central point – selfless service – without ransom imagery, saying "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). This absence from Luke is important. The message of unselfish service that Luke emphasizes fits well with what Jesus proclaims in all four Gospels. The notion of dying as a ransom is out of place in the Gospels, but is typical of Paul and of the deutero-Pauline letters (see 1 Tim 2:6). As a great scholar of a century ago argued, the ransom words "suggest a report coloured by the later doctrinal teaching of the Church."⁹

Luke and Acts

Luke's Jesus is very conscious of having to fulfill what the Scriptures foretell about the suffering of the Messiah, but Luke never quotes particular passages, and may not know which ones are meant. The Messiah's suffering was fated, for Luke, but this does not necessarily mean that salvation was dependent on this suffering. Rather, faith-trust seems to be the means of salvation. Like Mark and Matthew, Luke recounts instances where Jesus heals people and tells them "your faith has saved you." He tells the woman who anointed his feet (7:38), "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (7:50), and he tells a blind man of Jericho, "Receive your

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC, 38A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 169.

⁹ Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of the Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 29.

sight; your faith has saved you” (18:42), nor does he instruct either one about his own coming death. Luke’s view may not be that much different from Mark’s: it is only human sinfulness and stubbornness that makes the Messiah’s suffering inevitable. What Luke emphasizes is that it was all foretold in Scripture.

Luke focuses on Jesus’ suffering and on its injustice, yet he seems to have no atonement teaching. Luke sees humanity trapped in a pattern of sin and violence, but he does not subscribe to the Pauline interpretation of sin and atonement, although he is aware of it, allowing Paul to express it exactly *once* in Acts, when Paul says “shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son” (Acts 20:28). Luke allows Paul’s atonement theology to be heard in only this one verse.

Luke grants Paul’s atonement view only this minimal place in the record. He lionizes Paul as a great preacher and Spirit-filled wonder-worker, but he never again voices Paul’s atonement doctrine, although he wrote a larger portion of the NT than any other single author. Since I consider the “blood” saying in Luke 22:20 an interpolation, I can say that Acts 20:28 constitutes the sum total of atonement teaching in the 52 chapters in Luke’s two books.

Many scholars believe that the Gospel of Luke did not originally contain what came to be 22:19b–20, which closely follows the wording in 1 Cor 11:24–25 about a body “given for you” and a cup of “the new covenant in my blood.” The great 19th century scholars, Westcott and Hort, argued for the authenticity of the “shorter version” found in the manuscript tradition, which has Jesus promising to “drink of the fruit of the vine” with his disciples in “the kingdom of God,” then breaking a loaf of bread, and ending by saying “this is my body” (22:18–19a).¹⁰ That is what we find in the oldest “Western” Greek manuscript (D) and the oldest Latin, Syriac, and Boharic translations. The Pauline “given for you” and “covenant in blood” wording was simply not present in the manuscript tradition behind the oldest translations. Most Greek manuscripts aside from D, however, do contain vv. 19b–20: “‘which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’” However, these clauses and sentences occur in at least six differ-

¹⁰ B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek with Notes on Selected Readings* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988, from the original 1882 edition), Appendix, 63–64.

ent sequences in the manuscripts.¹¹ The idea of saving power in “the blood” is alien to the Lukan corpus (aside from Acts 20:28), and there is substantial non-Lukan vocabulary in these verses.¹²

We have to decide whether it is more likely that some familiar Pauline language got added to the Lukan textual tradition, or that this familiar language was originally present but was dropped from a large number of manuscripts. I agree with those who see an “extreme improbability” to the notion that D and the translations would retain the unfamiliar Lukan wording while dropping “the most familiar form of the Words of Institution” (Paul’s form).¹³ Much more likely is that words were added to Luke, as it was copied and handed on in Greek-speaking churches, to make it conform with emerging liturgical practice.

Many are the times that Luke mentions the foretold death of the Son, but he never gives the reason, except to link it to the unjust persecution of the prophets, a fated and bitter fact of life (4:24; 6:22–23; 11:47–50; 13:33; 20:15).

The Historical Jesus

Luke is not the only late first century Christian text that lacks any atonement concept in connection with the Lord’s Supper. The detailed Eucharistic text in the *Didache*, a church manual from 100 C.E. or earlier, makes no mention of “the body” and “the blood,” speaking instead of the bread symbolizing the church gathered from many nations (as grain is gathered from many hillsides), and the wine symbolizing the vine of David (a Messianic idea). The absence of the “my blood” wording from the *Didache* and its likely absence from Luke is circumstantial evidence for the possibility that the historical Jesus did not utter any atonement-related concepts at the Last Supper. The evidence is not a slam dunk, of course, but the case can be made that it is the early church, and not the historical Jesus, that gave rise to the body-and-blood Eucharistic wording found in First Corinthians, Mark, and Matthew.

¹¹ *The Greek New Testament* (4th edn; edited by Barbara Aland, et al; Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1993), footnote to Luke 22:17–20.

¹² Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 197–199, 202–209.

¹³ Westcott and Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Appendix, 63.

Regarding the historical Jesus' attitude toward sacrifice, we seem to get differing messages from two groups of data in the gospels. First, let us look at evidence that leans in an anti-sacrificial direction. Jesus is repeatedly shown to forgive sins without even mentioning the sacrificial cult, which may imply the irrelevance of the priestly cult to the process of forgiveness in Jesus' movement. Nor is this as exceptional as Sanders implies when he says that, for Jesus, people "would be included in the kingdom even though they did not repent as it was universally understood."¹⁴ But the priestly teaching was not really "universal" among Jews; some Jews eschewed the Temple cult, for instance the Ebionites, who were anti-sacrificial Jewish Christians. Usually the canonical Jesus ignores the sacrificial cult, but in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus twice quotes Hosea's "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," and there may be some historicity in these accounts. In both cases, the message is consistent with Jesus' rejection of purity-infatuation that we see in all four Gospels. When he says "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matt 9:13), he is rejecting the snobbery of the Pharisees who are criticizing him for eating with tax collectors and "sinners," an action that fits with the portrait of Jesus in all four Gospels. Matthew 12 shows the psychological insight that is characteristic of the canonical Jesus: purity thinking has made the Pharisees hard-hearted; they have "condemned the guiltless" (Matt 12:7).

On the other hand, a few passages have Jesus calling for resort to priestly procedures. He sends a leper to the priest to "offer the gift that Moses commanded" (Matt 8:4). It is likely that he is recognizing and building on the beliefs the person already holds, similar to the way that he puts clay and spittle on another person's eyes and tells him to go wash himself in the pool of Siloam (John 9:6-7; cf. Mark 8:23), likely because the man already believed in the healing powers of a holy man's spittle, and of the water of Siloam. These were ways of enlisting those persons' faith, getting them to take an active role in their own healing. These passages do not mean that Jesus believed in the efficacy of sacrifice, any more than he believed in the healing power of spittle or of the pool of Siloam. We constantly see Jesus using, to good purpose, the beliefs already held by those who come to him for help. When interrogated, he might begin his answer with "What is written in the law?" or "Is it not

¹⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 207. Saying they were included "while they were still sinners" (206) is to neglect Jesus' exhortation "go and sin no more" (John 8:11 KJV).

written in your law?” (Luke 10:26; John 10:34). By doing this, he enlisted their minds in answering the question, and he then fills out the answer for them. On balance, we cannot be completely certain of Jesus’ attitude toward sacrifice, although it is clear that he always values “justice and mercy and faith” over ritual observances.¹⁵ Humankind was not made for the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–27).

John the Evangelist

The Lamb of God in 1:29, 36 is probably an image of the Passover lamb. What is unusual is the emphasis on forgiveness of sins (1:29), which is not an aspect of the Passover. Therefore, it appears that the Passover has been assimilated to the sin offering. One scholar speaks of John’s conflationary move as the “Yom Kippuring” of Passover.¹⁶

This gospel repeatedly describes Jesus traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the principal feasts (2:13; 5:1; 7:14; 10:22; 12:12). He suffers on “the cross on the day before Passover (18:28; 19:14, 31) at the same hour the lambs were being slaughtered for the Passover meal.”¹⁷ The evangelist presumably is saying that the new covenant builds upon or fulfills the holidays and truths of the old covenant. The Eucharistic-sounding language in John 6:52–58 is “remarkabl[y] brutal,” including the image of “‘chewing’ (*trōgein*) the flesh.”¹⁸ Chilton finds this language, so offensive to Jewish ears (6:60–61), to be part of John’s deliberate break with Judaism,¹⁹ which implies (but does not prove) that this did not originate in the all-Jewish circle of Jesus and his immediate followers.

¹⁵ Matt 23:23; see also 12:5–12; 15:11, 20; Mark 7:5–8; Luke 11:42. In the parable of the wineskins (Matt 9:14–17; Mark 2:22), the new wine (truth) will burst apart the old forms (old, unstretchable wineskins).

¹⁶ Jeffrey S. Siker, “Yom Kippuring Passover: Recombinant Sacrifice in Early Christianity,” in Christian A. Eberhart (ed.), *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011), 72, 77.

¹⁷ Hans-Josef Klauck, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (NT),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. V (edited by David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 889.

¹⁸ Klauck, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings,” 889.

¹⁹ Bruce Chilton, “The Eucharist and the Mimesis of Sacrifice,” in Ann W. Astell and Sandor Goodhart (eds.), *Sacrifice, Scripture, and Substitution: Readings in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 148.

Abstraction of Sacrifice in Paul

Even fifteen centuries after the cessation of the practice of animal sacrifice, a thoroughly abstract and re-worked concept of sacrifice is very influential today: soldiers sacrifice their lives, parents sacrifice their time and money, dieters sacrifice their favorite foods. "Sacrifice" has now become an abstract and complex term signifying self-giving, serving others, or foregoing pleasures in pursuit of some goal.

There is an enormous contrast between first century thinking and ours, between the effect of Paul's metaphors in *his* day and in ours. The survival of his works implies that his soteriological metaphors were effective in the first century. It does not mean they were always understood accurately. The reception of Paul's metaphors has *always* been filtered through reinterpretation; 2 Peter 3:16 says "some things" in Paul's letters are "hard to understand." And this is followed by more than nineteen centuries of filtering and interpreting of Paul's teachings. It may not be Paul whom we "understand" at all, but a popular version of Calvin's re-shaping of Augustine's reinterpretation of Hebrews' restatement of Paul. But the problem begins even earlier. Paul himself is shaping and blending cultic imagery, the redemption image, and martyrology, creating new meanings of sacrificial terms.

There is no starting point to the problem of differing understandings of sacrifice, which is subjected to continuous reinterpretation in every sacrificial culture. Even if we discover what sacrifice meant to the P author of Leviticus, or to the H author, or to the Sadducees of Paul's day, that does not mean that we know what sacrifice meant to Paul. Paul is not bound by the interpretations of his predecessors, nor was there unanimity among them, although certain ruling ideas can be discerned. One dominant idea in Paul's time was that sacrifice was a necessary demonstration of the human desire to repent, that it either restored human beings to good standing with God or was a necessary accompaniment to such restoration. The priests were more focused on blood sprinkling procedures than were laymen, who were more interested in the result.

Cultic Metaphors

Paul applies cultic metaphors to Jesus' death in several key verses, often at the introduction or summary of an argument. In Rom 3:25 and 8:3, Paul takes two key terms from the sacrificial cult and applies them to Jesus, saying that Jesus was the *ἱλαστήριον* (the mercy seat, where the supreme

cleansing action of Yom Kippur took place; 3:25) and was sent *περὶ ἁμαρτίας* (as a purification sacrifice; 8:3). The implication is that Jesus is the *new* mercy seat or the *new* purification sacrifice, by which Israel is cleansed and restored to good standing with the Lord. In 1 Cor 5:7, Paul says “our paschal lamb (τὸ πάσχα), Christ, has been sacrificed (ἐτύθη).” Paul is making an ecclesiological point here, demanding that someone be thrown out of the congregation, but even here, a cultic image for the death of Christ suggests itself to Paul’s mind.

The pivotal passage in Rom 3:25 provides the soteriological answer to the problem of sin in the first three chapters of Romans. Christ was put forward as *ἱλαστήριον διὰ πιστέως*. Not only Jews, but some Gentiles who had heard synagogue sermons, would recognize that Paul is picturing Christ as a new mercy seat of faith. In the Septuagint, *ἱλαστήριον* translates *kappōret*, the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place in the Temple, the place where the purifying blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:14–16).

The NRSV’s translation of *ἱλαστήριον* as “sacrifice of atonement” is simply wrong. Daniel Bailey meticulously examined the usage of *ἱλαστήριον* within and outside the Bible, showing that *ἱλαστήριον* is *never* used to signify a sacrificial victim or act.²⁰ The *ἱλαστήριον* is the installation at the heart of the sacrificial arena, but it is never the word for sacrifice itself.

There is a different meaning for *ἱλαστήριον* outside the Bible. The etymology of *ἱλαστήριον* suggests the meaning “place where *ἰλάσκομαι* is accomplished, where someone is appeased or conciliated.” In Hellenistic culture, *ἱλαστήριον* was applied to many different kinds of propitiatory offerings, gifts, or monuments.²¹ Those familiar with the Bible would have thought of the mercy seat, while those unfamiliar with the Bible would have thought of a propitiatory offering or monument. In either case, it is likely that people would have understood Paul to be saying that Jesus’ death was a new and better means of atonement or appeasement. Here I depart from Bailey, who wants only the Pentateuchal meaning, the *kappōret*, to be in the minds of the auditors of Romans. I think the audience would have understood *either* that Christ accomplished what the Jewish

²⁰ Daniel P. Bailey, “Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul’s Use of *Hilasterion* in Romans 3:25,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 51 (2000): 155–156. This condenses the points from his dissertation, still unpublished, which bears the same title.

²¹ Bailey, “Jesus as the Mercy Seat,” 157.

cult was said to accomplish, or that his death functioned as a kind of propitiatory offering. Functionally, the end result is similar.

Noble Death and Divine Anger

Paul is not the first person to use cultic metaphors for a significant death that benefited others. This was a common theme in the Greek tragedies of the 5th century B.C.E. Some of the characters die nobly for Thebes or Athens, others die for their families. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the heroine dies for a religious idea: providing respectful burial, which provides rest for the soul of the deceased. She invokes Zeus and Dike (Justice) against Creon's decree that her brother's corpse should be left exposed (1.450–455). A number of plays have female characters dying a "noble death," such as Euripides' *Alcestis* dying for her husband. The Romans adapt the noble death idea to their patriotic stories of heroic death in battle.

Jewish authors are using the same theme when they write *Second and Fourth Maccabees*, where a father and his seven sons die under torture by a Seleucid emperor rather than eat pork and renounce the Jewish Law. In Paul's time, the Jews of Antioch commemorated the noble deaths of these heroes of the faith. *Second Maccabees* recounts the martyrs' last words as they die "nobly for the ... holy laws" (2 Macc 6:28). The last son says "I ... give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation ... and ... bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation" (2 Macc 7:37–38). This concept of the martyrs' deaths having a vicarious saving effect is greatly heightened in *Fourth Maccabees*, where it speaks of "the blood of those devout ones and their death as [a place of atonement]" (4 Macc. 17:22). Here I reject NRSV's mistranslation of *ἱλαστήριον* as "atoning sacrifice," a gloss that is attested nowhere in the literature, and use "place of atonement," which preserves the function of the *ἱλασ*-root. Still, *Fourth Maccabees* is using language of conciliation that is related to sacrifice, and Paul did so as well, although it is not clear whether Paul or *Fourth Maccabees* wrote first.

Martyrdom shares with sacrifice the result of making God "show mercy" (*ἰλεως γενέσθαι*, 2 Macc 7:37). The violence of human enemies will be avenged by divine violence; the martyr in that passage tells the tyrant that he "will receive just punishment" (2 Macc 7:36). Similarly, a threat of God's violence lies in the background of *all* sacrificial thinking. A threat can be discerned in the divine demand for "my offerings by fire, my pleasing odor, you shall take care to offer to me at its appointed time"

(Num 28:2). “Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed” those who improperly handled sacrificial materials in Lev 10:1–2, and the earth swallowed up two hundred fifty men guilty of another liturgical revolt in Num 16:29–35. The divine violence lying behind sacrifice is made most evident in a NT text, Hebrews, which we will look at next, where the alternative is between “a sacrifice for sins” or “a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire” (10:26–27).

We also see Divine anger playing a strong underlying role in Paul, especially in his earliest and longest letters, First Thessalonians and Romans, respectively. Salvation comes through “Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thess 1:10; cf. 5:9). Only two choices are available: wrath or Jesus. In Romans, people can be called “the objects of wrath that are made for destruction” (9:22); the sinner is “storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath” (2:5; cf. 1:18). But “now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God” (Rom 5:9).²² A recent article confirms that, in Romans 3, “God’s righteousness is both ... saving ... and ... retributive.”²³

Of course, there are other elements in Paul’s soteriology, such as participation, transformation, adoption, grafting-in (Rom 11:17–24), and resurrection, but salvation from wrath through the Son’s death is definitely present. Reconciliation to God is “through the death of his Son” (Rom 5:10).

Conflating Sacrifice with Purchase and Justification

Paul usually mixes the sacrificial metaphor with other metaphors. In Gal 3:13 and 2 Cor 5:21, Jesus “becom[es] a curse for us,” or God “made him to be sin,” which sound like what happens, not to a sacrificial victim, but to the scapegoat.²⁴ On Yom Kippur, after the sin-offerings, the high priest

²² Horvath sees God’s *anger* being propitiated in Rom 5:9–11, and God’s *justice* being satisfied in Rom 3:21–26; Tibor Horvath, *The Sacrificial Interpretation of Jesus’ Achievement in the New Testament: Historical Development and Its Reasons* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1979), 54.

²³ Benjamin J. Ribbens, “Forensic Retributive Justification in Romans 3:21–26: Paul’s Doctrine of Justification in Dialogue with Hebrews,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2012): 565.

²⁴ The scapegoat as cursed or sin-bearing: *Barnabas* 7:7, 9; *m. Yoma* 6:4; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3.7.7; cf. Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century* (WUNT, 163; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 147–158.

is to “lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness ... The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities” (Lev 16:21–22). It is not a sacrifice, not a gift to God, but a sin-bearer (“sent away into the wilderness to Azazel,” 16:10). The conflating of sacrificial and scapegoat images appears to already have occurred in Isaiah 53, where the Servant of the Lord “bore the sin of many” (53:12), which looks like a scapegoat image, and is called “an offering for guilt” (53:10 ESV).²⁵ Even though the MT speaks of an *’āšām* (guilt offering) and not a *ḥaṭṭa’t* (purification offering), sacrifice and scapegoat are being blended and made to serve a martyrological point.

Paul uses two other metaphors (redemption and justification) along with the mercy seat metaphor in Rom 3:24–25, which reads, after correcting the NRSV’s translation of *ἰλαστήριον*, “They are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as mercy seat of faith, by means of his blood.” Redemption is *ἀπολύτρωσις*, the common term for the ransoming of hostages or the manumission-payment that purchases a slave’s freedom.²⁶ This metaphor would be particularly appealing to slaves and former slaves in the audience who knew how wonderful it was to have someone provide an *ἀπολύτρωσις* (whether for freedom or for a kindly new owner).

He uses a different redemption word, *ἀγοράζω*, or “buy,” when he twice utters the slogan “you were bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Paul is stressing that believers should know to whom they belong, and should be grateful that they were purchased by a benevolent master. Purchase is a central part of the redemption metaphor, whether *ἀπολύτρωσις* or *ἀγοράζω* is used. A recent article by Benjamin Ribbens confirms that “Paul ... knew that *ἀπολύτρωσις* included a sense of payment.”²⁷ The conflation of redemption with a sacrificial image in Romans 3 brings out the *payment* implications of sacrifice.

Justification in Romans 3 is a form of the verb *δικαιόω*, which usually signifies a legal pardon or acquittal. But the more literal meaning of

²⁵ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Finding Meaning in the Death of Jesus,” *Journal of Religion* 78 (1998): 177–178.

²⁶ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 227; Benjamin B. Warfield, “The New Testament Terminology of ‘Redemption’,” *Princeton Theological Review* 15 (1917): 211–215, 229.

²⁷ Ribbens, “Forensic Retributive Justification,” 558.

δικαιῶ is “making just,” and the word sometimes has a transformative meaning. Paul is capable of intending *both* meanings, being *made* just in a court of law and being *made* just through a transformation of character, although this is less obvious in Romans 3 than it is in Rom 8:29, “to be conformed to the image of his Son,” in 2 Cor 3:18, “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another,” and in 1 Cor 2:16, “hav[ing] the mind of Christ.” What is stressed here in Rom 3 is that Christ brought atonement by functioning as a new mercy seat through the shedding of his blood, which purchased people’s freedom, or got them acquitted.

Obviously, Paul likes to mix his metaphors, implying that the redeeming action was also *sacrificial*, that the sacrificial action was also a *purchase* and a rescue. This fits with the sole atonement passage in Acts, which has Paul saying that God “obtained” the church “with the blood of his own son” (Acts 20:28).

The result of Paul’s conflation of metaphors is that a cultic substance, blood, acts to bring about a social result (redemption), a judicial result (justification), and an interpersonal result (escape from God’s wrath), as seen most clearly in Romans 5: “justified by his blood ... saved ... from the wrath ... receiv[ing] reconciliation” (Rom 5:9, 11).

Paul is not worried about the imperfect fit between his metaphors. Place of atonement, acquittal, redemption – they all describe salvation as a *transaction* taking place at the cross. It is not correct to say that Paul’s thinking is thoroughly *participationist* without any concept of a transaction that pays for sin. Paul’s thinking is both transactional and participationist. There is an acquittal at a heavenly judgment (a transaction), and believers *do* take on Jesus’ righteousness (participation).

The logical problem with Paul’s theology is that the forgiveness of God seems to be undermined by being linked to sacrificial payment. Jesus had taught that “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32), and “freely you received, freely give” (Matt 10:8 ASV), but Paul wants to use the metaphor of “bought with a price.” These cannot really be reconciled. Either there is forgiveness, or there is purchase, but not both at the same time. True forgiveness involves no payment. But this was, and possibly still is, an insight too radical for popular consciousness to accept. The valorization of the sacrificial model is too ingrained in Christian thinking to be easily expunged, even today, and certainly in Paul’s time, when sacrifice was both a practice and a compelling metaphor.

It is difficult to detach sacrifice and atonement from manipulation. Paul is not to blame for the primitive belief in a sacrifice-demanding God, which existed for untold generations, but he did choose to *perpetuate* that belief with his metaphors, which imply the purchasing power of sacrifice. Paul does occasionally deny that God was persuaded, as in Rom 5:8 when he says that the initiative was God's, and even in 3:25, where God puts forward the new *ἱλαστήριον*. But by linking sacrifice with redemption and deliverance from "the wrath," Paul is picturing Jesus' death as a transaction with God. Despite Paul's insistence on God's initiative, the metaphors themselves imply a *purchased* salvation.

Of course, Paul's use of cultic metaphors does not mean that he believed salvation was *literally* a ritual or a financial transaction, only that those were recognizable and vivid preaching metaphors, and they evidently were. They could hardly have been so effective if sacrifice concerned only the purification of the temple,²⁸ and not the corollary restoration of *persons*. The sacrificial metaphor carried power because of what sacrifice was thought to do for one's standing before God. It is difficult to know whether Paul's metaphors are meant to imply the *forgiveness* or the *purification* function of cult. Perhaps both are in view.

Typology

So what is Paul *doing* with the sacrificial metaphor? He is presenting a theology of fulfillment, suggesting that the biblical reality was a "type" (a "stamp" or "impression") while Christ is the antitype, the completion and perfection of the type. The Hebrew Bible had a *prophetic* function, for Paul: "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" (Rom 15:4); "these things occurred as examples (τύποι) for us" (1 Cor 10:6). It is important to recognize that, for Paul, the new and perfect antitype is superior to the type; Christ is not just a mercy seat, but is the mercy seat *of faith*, signaling the primacy of faith in salvation. The Spirit's glory is "much more" than Moses' glory, "a glory now set aside" (2 Cor 3:8, 11).

Typology puts the stress on the interpretive idea. The type ceases to have much value apart from its newly revealed *meaning*. Christ now ac-

²⁸ As alleged by Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 207–210.

completes (and more perfectly) what sacrifice and redemption and adoption were thought to accomplish.

Failure to recognize this point (the superiority of the fulfillment to the prefiguration), has led some scholars to misinterpret Paul's metaphorical usage, claiming that Paul has high respect for the sacrificial cultus,²⁹ or even that he ascribes the power of soul repair to the sacrificial cult.³⁰ Rather, he is using any metaphor that is vivid and useful in describing the astonishing reversal of fortunes that Christ has brought about. The metaphors are *illustrative*, but no single metaphor (not even sacrifice) is all-controlling.

Paul's use of numerous metaphors may be meant to prevent any one metaphor from becoming dominant, although a blended justification-redemption-sacrifice metaphor *did*, in fact, become dominant in the deuter-Pauline tradition. But a fuller Pauline theology would need to account for the use of other metaphors than just the triad of justification-redemption-sacrifice. As Dunn points out, Paul also uses metaphors of reconciliation, rescue, putting on new clothing or armor, being grafted, being harvested, being sanctified (set apart), having access, cleansing, rebirth, even circumcision (Phil 3:3).³¹ Sacrifice is not the all-consuming, dominant metaphor in Paul, as it is in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Paul is not glorifying the cult when he uses it metaphorically; the cult is significant *as* a prefiguration. Of course, Christianity immediately generates a new ritual in the Eucharist, which is given sacrificial meaning and treated as having *literal spiritual* force (1 Cor 11:27, 30). Paul is content to let the cultic symbol be powerful and suggestive, without drawing allegorical meanings from all the details of the cult (as the Epistle to the Hebrews does). Despite these remarks concerning Paul's non-literal use of cult, it is important to note that he does use cultic logic, and that his soteriology conveys cultic thinking. Through Christ we attain "access to this grace" and are "reconciled to God through the death of his son" (Rom 5:2, 10), which parallels what sacrificial ritual does. Even when he uses a sacrificial image to convey a moral, more than a soteriological, message, cultic logic is necessary for the metaphor to work: "Clean out the old

²⁹ David Lindsay Olford, "Paul's Use of Cultic Language in Romans: An Exegetical Study of Major Texts in Romans Which Employ Cultic Language in a Non-literal Way" (Ph.D. thesis, Sheffield, 1985), 58, 321.

³⁰ Otfried Hofius, *Paulusstudien* (WUNT, 51; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 41.

³¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 328–331.

yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7).

Hebrews’ Dilemma about Sacrifice

The NT author who is most thoroughly focused on the concept of sacrifice, is the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. I also use the term “Hebrews” to signify the epistle’s anonymous author.

Hebrews is very interested in the priestly practice of sacrifice, but seems not to care about any of the other functions of priests, such as divination, or leadership in public ceremonies and prayers. Sacrifice is of consuming interest, and Jesus fulfills the highest conceivable priestly function: “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ ... our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (10:10, 22). The cultic action involves Christ as both high priest and sacrificial victim. His saving action is equated, step by step, with the actions of the high priest: entering the tent, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, taking blood, obtaining redemption and purification (9:2–3, 7, 11–12, 18, 22) – but Jesus’ action was “through the Spirit,” not through animal blood, so “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience” (9:14).

The efficacy of the blood is empowered by the Spirit. The death was physical, but the saving *cultic* effect takes place on the Spirit-level. Christ functions not *like* a priest, but *as* a priest. But “unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day” (7:27). He was “offered once to bear the sins of many” (9:28), which conflates the sin-bearing scapegoat with sacrifice. Because of his perfect sacrifice, “there is no longer any offering for sin” (10:18). The sacrificial system has been completed. The Messiah’s moral purity gave his death an effectiveness that *physically* pure animal sacrifices did not have.

The shortcomings of the Levitical sacrificial system are its repetition “year after year” (10:1), its strictly *physical* cleansing (“regulations for the body ... their flesh is purified,” 9:10, 13), and its apparent foolishness (the ineffective “blood of bulls and goats,” 10:4). Jesus is even said to have quoted the anti-sacrificial Psalm 40: “when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired ... in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure. ... He abolishes the first in order to establish the second’” (10:5–6, 9).

These remarks in chapter 10 have led some scholars to argue that Hebrews is *really* anti-sacrificial.³² I must call this wishful thinking. Hebrews' thinking is sacrificial from the first word to the last, even though it is *metaphorical* sacrifice. Sacrifice is used to explain everything about the (*supposedly*) new covenant. Christ offered himself as a "sacrifice for sins" (10:12); he made "purification for sins" (1:3). Hebrews does not overcome cultic logic; salvation only comes through a *cultic* act. Popular Christian theology follows in Hebrews' footsteps here, assuming that Christ's atoning action is the perfecting of an ineffective or superficial sacrificial system, assuming that it is only *through* his death that Christ saves: salvation is "by the blood of Jesus" (10:19); he was glorified *because* he suffered "death for everyone" (2:9).

Even the "new covenant" is interpreted in cultic terms. Believers are to imagine themselves coming to "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (12:24). As Susan Haber writes, "the concept of covenant is reinterpreted from a cultic perspective."³³ Cult obscures covenant. The covenant emphasis on a close "binding of God and people" is replaced with "the necessity of ... atonement through blood."³⁴ The blood of the covenant in Exodus 24 is just a covenant-sealing gesture, but Hebrews associates it with "purification and atonement, a connection that is entirely absent from the Exodus account."³⁵

Abolishing What Was Ineffectual

By repeatedly picturing, interpreting, and understanding the death of Christ as a sacrifice, Hebrews enshrines sacrifice at the heart of soteriology. The criticism of Levitical cult in chapter 10 only weakens the meta-

³² Just one example: Poong-In Lee, "Is an Anti-sacrificial Reading of Hebrews Plausible?" in Ann W. Astell and Sandor Goodhart (eds.), *Sacrifice, Scripture, and Substitution: Readings in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 425, 429.

³³ Susan Haber, "*They Shall Purify Themselves*": *Essays on Purity in Early Judaism* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 143.

³⁴ Haber, "*They Shall Purify Themselves*", 148.

³⁵ Haber, "*They Shall Purify Themselves*", 146. Haber finds "a deliberate [shift] away from moral impurity ... to ... ritual impurity ... systematic dismantling of the Levitical code ... as a polemic against a competing theology of atonement that threatens the Christological view of expiation" (155–156).

phor, implying that Christ's atonement was based on a practice that was ineffective, superficial, and (at least until Christ came) incoherent.

But it is *Hebrews* who is not entirely coherent on this subject. The continuing resort to sacrificial concepts seems to contradict the argument for the obsolescence of sacrifice. Sometimes *Hebrews* says that the old cult was effective ("without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" 9:22), sometimes not ("cannot perfect the conscience," 9:9), depending on whether he needs to use the logic of fulfillment or the logic of replacement. Either kind of logic can be used to make the Christological point. Either "the blood of goats and bulls ... sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ ... purify our conscience" (9:13–14) – or "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10:4). One statement uses a "how much more" argument, the other alleges the ineffectiveness of sacrifice. The sacrificial system was a type of the better thing to come (9:13–14, 18, 22–23; 10:1), or it cannot "take away sins" (10:4, 11), making necessary "a change in the law" (7:12), so that the "old will soon disappear" (8:13). In chapter 7, "There is ... the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual" (7:18), and in chapter 10, "He abolishes³⁶ the first in order to establish the second" (10:9). This is truly supersessionist, having Jesus' sacrifice replace the old sacrificial system, but it is *conceptual*, not *ethnic*, supersession. *Hebrews* never speaks of Gentiles superseding Jews. There is no indication that the blessing has passed from the Jews into the hands of other people.³⁷ In fact, Jesus came for "the descendants of Abraham" (2:16), and Gentile Christians are never even mentioned. But the epistle *does* speak of a new practice and covenant superseding an old practice and covenant, appealing to Scripture to prove it. That the old covenant or cult or law is abrogated or obsolete is repeatedly stated (7:11–12, 18; 8:6–7, 13; 10:1–4, 18). Again, I am speaking of *ideational*, not *ethnic*, supersession.³⁸

³⁶ Bauer translates ἀναίρειν as "take away, do away with, destroy" (*BAG*, 54).

³⁷ Richard B. Hays, "'Here We Have No Lasting City': New Covenantalism in *Hebrews*," in Richard Bauckham, et al. (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 152, 154, 161.

³⁸ And so, agreeing with Hays on this point ("'Here We Have No Lasting City'," 161–162).

Platonizing Thinking

Through Platonic ontology Hebrews tries to overcome the contradiction between affirming and replacing the previous cult. Because “the first covenant was inaugurated [with] blood ... *thus* (οὕτως) it was necessary for the [earthly] sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these” (9:18, 23). The reason given (οὕτως) for bloodshed in the new covenant was the bloodshed in the old. Christ’s action has “made ... obsolete” the first covenant (8:13). In a hair-splitting distinction, Hays prefers “made old” to “made obsolete” as a translation for *πεπαλαίωκεν*,³⁹ but the negative connotation cannot be removed: if the first covenant had been blameless, a second would not have been needed (8:7).⁴⁰

In Platonic thinking, unity is superior to plurality. “The one” is superior to “the many,”⁴¹ and Hebrews is appealing to this principle when he compares Jesus’ “single sacrifice” to “offering again and again the same sacrifices” (10:11–12). What is earthly and repeated cannot compare with what is heavenly and unique. Hebrews is not anti-sacrificial but anti-earthly. The heavenly tent is “greater” because it is “not made with hands” (9:11). And yet, the heavenly looks a lot like the earthly; a priest enters into a “Holy Place” (9:12); the effectiveness of blood is established by a “how much more” argument (9:14), and what operates on “the heavenly things” are “better sacrifices” (9:23). All that is new is the absence of repetition. Platonized sacrificial thinking perpetuates sacrificial thinking.

Apparently unable to describe the heavenly in anything other than cultic terms, Hebrews asserts the superiority of the heavenly to the earthly. The earthly temple was a “shadow of the heavenly one” (8:5), but really the heavenly looks like a shadow of the earthly. Salvation is through cultic cleansing; it is a “way into the sanctuary” (9:8). The affirmation of sacrificial concepts outweighs any critique of sacrifice. The old sacrifices were not pointless, they were simply not perfected. The salvation that Jesus brings is through an *effective* sacrifice. *Because* Christ “offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins ... we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus” (10:12, 19).

³⁹ Hays, “‘Here We Have No Lasting City,’” 161.

⁴⁰ Correctly, Haber, “*They Shall Purify Themselves*,” 148.

⁴¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, KY: WJK, 2006), 244.

Since sacrifice provides Hebrews with the meaning of Christ's saving act, the implication is that the Jewish cult had *some* limited effectiveness, some hint of God's way of dealing with sin. The nature of the limitation varies in different passages: it had only a temporary effect, needing repetition (7:27); or it was superficial, unable to "perfect the conscience" (9:9); or it cleansed only "sins committed unintentionally" (9:7; as in Lev 4:13–14). In any case, the old way is now superseded: "the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form" (10:1). The cult was fundamentally a *type*, a foreshadowing, but now the Messiah has obtained "eternal redemption" (9:12).

The New Old Covenant

Hebrews tries to develop the logic of "a new covenant ... not like the [old] covenant" (8:8–9), but ends up following the old sacrificial logic, claiming it is "a better covenant" with "better promises" (8:6), but proceeding on the old sacrificial pattern. "Every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; *hence* it is necessary for this priest *also* to have something to offer" (8:3). The purification accomplished may be *better*, but it is not *different from* the old covenant's purifications.

Hebrews not only fails to achieve the philosophic transcendence of which Platonism is capable, but also fails to achieve the better potentials of the biblical moral vision. The new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke involved a deep inward transformation; God would write his law "on their hearts" (Jer 31:33). Hebrews quotes this passage (Heb 8:10; 10:16), but it is "the blood of Christ" that will "purify our conscience" (9:14); it is "through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ" that believers are sanctified (10:10). Everything is accomplished vicariously and by the actions of "a great priest" (10:21), unlike Jeremiah's God-wrought change, without priestly mediation. "They shall all know me," Jeremiah's God says, "from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity" (Jer 31:34). But in Hebrews it requires a "faithful high priest before God, to expiate (*ἰλάσκεσθαι*) the sins of the people" (2:17 NAB⁴²).

Where forgiveness was direct and unmediated for Jeremiah, it has to be mediated, for Hebrews. The prophets Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, and

⁴² The more general "expiate" is better than the NRSV's too-specific "make a sacrifice of atonement."

the author of Isaiah chapter 1⁴³ were ready to leave sacrificial thinking behind,⁴⁴ but the NT epistles resuscitate it (none more vigorously than Hebrews), and filter Jesus' own teaching through a sacrificial lens. Psychologically speaking, NT theology is an amalgam of mature, personalistic insights and retrogressive thinking about the magical efficacy of sacrifice.

Just as a Deuteronomist tried to domesticate Jeremiah's text with Temple-centered theology, Hebrews acts like a latter-day Deuteronomist, introducing sacrificial thinking into Jeremiah's new covenant concept. The logic of salvation is based on the logic of what "even the first covenant" did, and on what happened "under the law" (Heb 9:1, 22). Cleansing, in both New and Old Covenant, happens by entering a sanctuary with sacrificial blood (9:12, 14, 24, 26). Priestly categories drown out Jeremiah's vision of a radical change of heart, unrelated to priests or cult.

Comparisons with Paul

The new covenant idea was the crowning achievement of Jeremiah's prophetic reflection, but new covenant is a *starting* point for Hebrews, as it was for Paul. At least rhetorically, Paul and Hebrews are *new covenant* theologians, although much of what they are doing is re-configuring old ideas. Paul and Hebrews simultaneously perpetuate and transform sacrificial categories of thinking, just as Hindu thinkers perpetuated and transformed sacrificial thinking when they spoke of "the sacrificial fires in himself," while ceasing the practice of Vedic sacrifice.⁴⁵

There is a major difference between Paul's and Hebrews' sacrificial images. Paul is content with the vivid first impact of his metaphors; he never pronounces upon the sacrificial ritual itself, neither its supposed necessity nor its supposed obsolescence. Paul never allegorizes on the different parts of sacrificial ritual, while Hebrews spells out parallels in many cultic details (veil, priest, sanctuary, lampstand, showbread, blood-

⁴³ Isaiah uses cultic imagery at 2:3 and 35:8, and has his commissioning call in the Temple (6:1). The *extremely* anti-cultic tirade in Isaiah 1 may indicate that it was written by a younger, more radical, Isaiah.

⁴⁴ This is not meant to imply that all the prophets were anti-sacrificial; Joel, Ezekiel, and Malachi were not.

⁴⁵ *Manusmṛti* 6.25, 38; cf. *Bṛhad-Araṇyaka Upanishad* 1.4.17; J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 39.

carrying, blood-sprinkling, mercy-seat⁴⁶), mentioning the insufficiency of sacrifices while relying on sacrificial *thinking* about blood and death (9:14–23). While he quotes Psalm 40’s anti-sacrificial remark, he does not quote the more intensely anti-sacrificial Isa 1:11–15 (“I have had enough of burnt offerings”), Amos 5:21–25 (“I despise your festivals”), or Hos 6:6, not to mention the mocking remarks of Isa 66:3 (“whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being”), Ps 50:12 (“if I were hungry, I would not tell you”), or Mic 6:7 (“Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?”). Truly radical thinking about sacrifice is beyond Hebrews’ reach. Hebrews’ new covenant is more priestly than prophetic.

“The blood of Christ” acts to “purify our conscience” (Heb 9:14), but this cleansing is entirely vicarious. The cultic act of Jesus performs magical cleansing on the inner nature of believers. This takes an aspect of Paul’s teaching (believers’ justification achieved vicariously through Christ’s action) and magnifies it so as to obscure something that is equally important for Paul: believers *actually* dying to sin, being *actually* transformed and con-formed to Christ (Rom 6:4–11; 8:29; 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18). Thus do the successors of Paul turn his highly participative and transformative soteriology into a mere second-hand experience, wherein one *believes* that one has been magically redeemed by Christ’s action.

Paul and Hebrews are similar in that the actual saving act is accomplished by Christ’s sacrificial death, but Hebrews exaggerates this to the point of suppressing other key features, hammering home the vicariousness: Christ obtained redemption “with his own blood” (9:12); we are sanctified through his self-sacrifice (10:10, 14). Hebrews is trapped in cultic thinking; even his use of anti-sacrificial prophets does not liberate him from the conceptual form of sacrifice. The new covenant follows the logic of the old.

Paul had taught that the law was not able to “make alive,” but “now that faith has come,” believers are made “children of God through faith” (Gal 3:21, 25–26). Similarly, Hebrews teaches that Christ was “bringing many children to glory,” destroying “the power of death” (Heb 2:10, 14). Hebrews uses cultic imagery for Christian living, while Paul can often drop the cultic image when speaking of being “conformed to the image of his Son,” of having “the mind of Christ” (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 2:16; Phil 2:5).

⁴⁶ This is in Heb 9:5, the only other occurrence of *ἱλαστήριον* in the NT besides Rom 3:25, but in Heb 9 it is just part of a list of cultic objects of which “we cannot speak now in detail” (9:5).

Nevertheless, Paul contributes as much as Hebrews does to the later doctrine of salvation being dependent on the blood sacrifice and payment of the Son's death. The difference is that Paul offers another model of salvation along with that one. Thus, while Paul does not contradict himself on sacrifice, he does offer two soteriological models that are not entirely reconcilable: on the one hand, salvation through the death, a payment for human sin; on the other, salvation through participation and transformation, being con-formed to Christ.

Sacrificial Giving

Paul and Hebrews

There is another usage of sacrificial terminology in both Paul and Hebrews that will grow in importance in the course of Christian thought. This is where sacrificial language signifies self-giving by believers. Dedicated service is pictured with sacrificial imagery. In Phil 2:15, the faithful are “without blemish,” like sacrificial animals, and in 2:17, Paul uses three sacrificial terms, saying “I am being poured out as a libation (σπένδομαι) over the sacrifice (θυσία) and the offering (λειτουργία) of your faith.” Both Paul's service and the believers' faith are pictured with sacrificial terms. In Rom 15:16, he speaks of “the priestly service of the gospel of God,” and “the offering (προσφορά) of the Gentiles be[ing] acceptable.” In Rom 12:1 he uses five or six sacrificial terms: “present (παρίστημι) your bodies (σῶμα) as a living sacrifice (θυσία), holy (ἅγιος) and acceptable (εὐάρεστος) to God, which is your spiritual worship (λογικὴν λατρεία).”⁴⁷ Sacrificial terminology is needed only in the first verse, and the rest of Romans 12 is taken up with ethical exhortation. In each of these three passages, Paul packs some sacrificial terms into one or two sentences, and then makes his ethical point without needing further sacrificial imagery.

In the Corinthian correspondence, Paul three times calls the Christian community or individual “the temple” or “God's temple” (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19–20; 2 Cor 6:16). In 1 Cor 6:11 he makes a contrast between common Gentile sins and the Corinthians' current status of being “washed” and “sanctified,” which are priestly terms.⁴⁸ He goes on, “do you not know

⁴⁷ λογικὴν λατρεία (“spiritual worship”) occurs also in *Corp. Herm.* 1.31; 13.18 (Klauck, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings,” 889).

⁴⁸ Nijay K. Gupta, *Worship That Makes Sense to Paul: A New Approach to the Theology and Ethics of Paul's Cultic Metaphors* (BZNTW, 175; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 160, 164.

that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (6:19–20). The “body” is singular, τὸ σῶμα in v. 19 and τῷ σώματι in v. 20, while “your” is plural (ὑμῶν). Thus, as God was thought to dwell in the Jerusalem Temple, so now God dwells in the individual and the group. In 2 Corinthians he says “we are the temple of the living God,” and goes on to exhort the Corinthians to “cleanse” themselves (καθαρίζω) in “holiness” (ἀγιωσύνη) (2 Cor 6:16; 7:1). The cultic image is not just a metaphor, but a conceptual framework for understanding devotion to God. Scholars frequently speak of this cultic language having an ethical meaning, but it involves identity as well as ethics. Gupta speaks of “Paul’s constructive use of holiness language,” meaning the construction of Christian identity; “believers possess a new position of purity,” and are held to a high standard of purity, as priests were.⁴⁹

Ephesians follows the pattern of Paul’s usage closely, exhorting Christians to be “imitators of God ... live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice (προσφορὰν καὶ θυσίαν) to God” (Eph 5:1–2).⁵⁰ This occurs within a setting of moral exhortation (Eph 4:15–5:33), where the linkage between Christ’s behavior and the believer’s behavior is made numerous times (4:16, 19–21; 5:1–2, 25, 27, 29, 32).

Hebrews 13 seems to be an expansion upon Pauline and deutero-Pauline usage of such terminology to designate service. Hebrews 13 starts out discussing hospitality and kindly visitation and service. Cultic terminology suddenly takes over in vv. 10–13, with a complicated metaphor referring to altar, tent, high priest, sin offering “burned outside the camp,” and sanctification by blood. Believers are exhorted “Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured” (13:13). “Outside the camp” probably means leaving “any sense of belonging” in their old community.⁵¹ There is “no lasting city” here for believers (13:14).

⁴⁹ Gupta, *Worship That Makes Sense to Paul*, 163–164.

⁵⁰ This is one of the passages Eberhart uses to argue that “*New Testament soteriology* does not focus exclusively on the death of Jesus but *includes his life and mission*” (Christian A. Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus: Understanding Atonement Biblically* [Facets; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011], 133; cf. 105–106). This much is convincing, but not the further insistence that “the ‘blood of Jesus,’ therefore, does not evince vicarious dying” (p. 122).

⁵¹ David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews in Social-Scientific Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 81.

Sacrifice itself seems to stand for self-giving, made evident in v. 12, where Jesus died “in order to sanctify the people.” The sacrificial terms continue in vv. 15–16: “Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God ... Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

Here we see sacrifice being re-defined to mean service to God and to one’s fellows. That is why we must be careful to explain what we mean when we say “sacrifice.” Do we mean ancient cultic sacrifice, sacrificial concepts and metaphors, or the transformation of the term to mean “unselfish giving”?

Ethical sacrifice is also implied in Heb 2:9, where Christ offered himself for others, and 5:1, where a high priest makes offerings on behalf of the people. John Driver refers to these passages, saying “Sacrifice in Hebrews is spiritualized in terms of Christian living ... offering spiritualized service of praise, good works, and general sharing.”⁵² However, the extent to which such giving can really be called unselfish is doubtful, given that it occurs within a patronage system, a system of benefits and expected gratitude. Sacrifice is part of a patronage system, of benefits, payback, and reciprocity. The gifts from God are not free; we, as ground, must produce good crops; if we produce “thorns,” we are “on the verge of being cursed” and “burned,” as Heb 6:8 makes clear.⁵³ The fate that awaits an ungrateful client is “a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire” (10:27). Patronage language of “grace,” “help,” and accompanying warnings about ingratitude or “spurning” or “neglect” abound in Hebrews (2:3, 9, 18; 3:12, 17; 10:29; 12:25–29).⁵⁴

First Peter and First John

The social and ethical usage of the image of sacrifice becomes more prominent in later writings. First Peter 2:5 describes Christian life in terms of priestly service: “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.”⁵⁵ Members of such a “royal priesthood” should “abstain from the desires of the

⁵² John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1986), 142.

⁵³ See deSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 124–125.

⁵⁴ See deSilva, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 97–105, 125.

⁵⁵ “Temple and sacrifice are spiritualized and applied to the life of the new people of God” (Driver, *Understanding the Atonement*, 24).

flesh,” and their “honorable deeds” should be observable “among the Gentiles” (2:9, 11–12). Thus, the image occurs in a paraenetic passage. The other atonement passage in First Peter is soteriological in nature, and it combines three images: redemption, the Passover victim, and a sin-offering: “you were ransomed ... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish” (1 Pet 1:18–19).

Two verses in the Johannine literature bring out the *cleansing* theme: “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7), and martyrs have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:14). The cleansing blood in 1 John enables the repudiation of sin. The Revelation passage talks about God comforting the martyrs who *did* resist sin. Another passage in First John talks about the love of God, who “loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice (*ἱλασμός*) for our sins,” followed by an exhortation that Christians “also ought to love one another” (4:10–11). Thus, sacrificial images in the Johannine literature can be eschatological, paraenetic, soteriological, or a combination of these, which is also what we saw with Paul and Hebrews. The passages in 1 Peter 1 and 2 were soteriological and paraenetic, respectively.

Robert Daly spent some decades studying “the Christian theology of sacrifice.”⁵⁶ He argues that “true Christian sacrifice means putting oneself totally, body and soul, at the disposition of God and neighbor. ... It is an incarnational spiritualization of sacrifice that is operative in the New Testament ... incarnating proper dispositions in human action.”⁵⁷

Daly makes an important soteriological observation: “It was not ... the suffering of Christ that saved us. Rather, what saved us is the love with which he suffered.”⁵⁸ In my words, the way he died *demonstrated* the saving love, but the death itself was not what brought salvation. The historical Jesus made it clear that the Father would have preferred that the vineyard tenants share their produce with the Son, rather than killing him, and that they let him gather them under his wings as a hen gathers its chicks. The Godly love embodied in the Son saved people *before* his

⁵⁶ Robert J. Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1978), 8.

⁵⁷ Daly, *Origins of the Christian Doctrine*, 66, 138. See the very different discussions of spiritualization in Daly, *Origins*, 6–10, and Stephen Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul’s Cultic Atonement Metaphors* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 47–68.

⁵⁸ Robert J. Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 236.

death, and *independently* of his death, and would have continued saving people even if his society had recognized and accepted him. God saves us *in spite* of the crucifixion, not *because* of it.