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### The Accomplishment of Biblical Theology on Atonement

Braydon Pape  
Cedarville University, bpape@cedarville.edu

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# The Accomplishment of Biblical Theology on Atonement

## Abstract

This paper presents a brief overview of the biblical theological theme of atonement. This paper attempts to demonstrate that atonement is a central theme by using biblical theological tools to show its connection to the canon. Specifically, this paper observes the work of Leviticus and Hebrews, looking at the Day of Atonement and its relationship to Christ's atonement presented in Hebrews. This is accomplished through looking at specific aspects related to the atonement such as sacrifice and priesthood that allow the intertextual connections to be seen and demonstrated. These connections aid one in seeing atonement as a key biblical theological theme.

## Keywords

Atonement, biblical theology, sacrifice, priest, Day of Atonement, Leviticus, Hebrews

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# The Accomplishment of Biblical Theology on Atonement

Braydon Pape

*Biblical and Theological Studies — Cedarville University*

## Introduction and Methodology

Atonement is a crucial theme throughout Scripture. It is impossible for me to cover all the bases of this theme in this paper. However, my goal is to specifically examine the ways the theme of atonement connects the Old Testament themes of sacrifice and priesthood to the person and work of Christ as the fulfillment of these themes in the New Testament. I will develop this thesis by tracing the relationship between the sacrifice and priesthood in Leviticus and Christ's sacrificial work and priestly office in Hebrews. The covenants under which these ideas of atonement are expressed will aid in my development of the theme and articulation of the biblical theological task.

## Biblical Theology Tools

Biblical theology is the study of the Bible on its own terms using certain tools and methodology to connect texts, themes, and typology across the canon of Scripture. To discuss the unfolding of atonement across the biblical canon, I will use word/concept tools, big picture framework, and strategic selection. The word "atonement" isn't used in Scripture; however, we find concepts related to this theme throughout the Old and New Testaments. It is important to study themes and concepts related to atonement; especially, forgiveness, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation. When we understand how these concepts relate to the theme, we are able to trace atonement across the overarching story of the Bible.

## The Atoning Sacrifice

The concept of sacrifice is closely related to the theme of atonement both theologically and practically. In fact, "the Hebrew verb *kipper* (atone), expresses one of the primary purposes of sacrifice"<sup>1</sup> thus showing the interrelation between these terms. In the Old Testament,

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<sup>1</sup> R.T. Beckwith, "Sacrifice", *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) p. 754

atonement is accomplished through a sacrifice made to God in the place of a person. However, in the New Testament, Jesus is the sacrifice that atones sin. Scripture assists us in drawing intertextual connections between these themes. When we study the covenants within the canonical context and observe the type of sacrifice and accomplishment of the sacrifice, we better understand the relationship between New Testament and Old Testament atonement and sacrifice.

## Type of Sacrifice

Under the Mosaic covenant, atonement for sin was made through the sacrificial system. There were regulations for offering sacrifices and specific offerings for specific occasions. On the Day of Atonement, the people gave a sin offering for the priest and the people.<sup>2</sup> First, a bull was killed as a sin offering for Aaron, the high priest. The sin offering for the people had two parts involving two goats for atonement. The high priest was to “cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and use it as a sin offering, but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Jesus is presented as a sin offering in the New Testament for “he made him to be sin who knew no sin.”<sup>4</sup> The canonical context in which these sacrifices are made allows us to bring together the work of atonement under these two covenants by observing the intertextual comparison between the types of sacrifices.

Under the Mosaic covenant, an unblemished animal sacrifice was necessary to atone for sin. However, throughout the Old Testament, it is clear that atonement is not given through the work of sacrifice but in accordance with the heart of the worshipper. “It is only as the offering is properly handled by the priest and accepted by God, and as the people’s lives and hearts reflect loyalty to God, that the blood of a sacrificial offering achieves atoning force.”<sup>5</sup> The work of atonement; therefore, is clearly not enacted through an offering but by God’s granting of it. The Old Testament prophets testify to this truth saying, “as for my sacrificial offerings, they sacrifice meat and eat it, but the Lord does not accept them.”<sup>6</sup> “The sacrifices and offerings in Leviticus reveal humanity’s need for substitution and

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<sup>2</sup> There are also two burnt offerings (rams) offered after the sin offerings on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:24), however, these offerings do not play a role in atoning for sin rather they act as an offering that renews dedication to the Lord having just been cleansed from sin.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 16:8-10

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>5</sup> Terry Briley, “The Old Testament ‘Sin Offering’ and Christ’s Atonement” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 3, no. 1, (Spring 2000): 97

<sup>6</sup> Hosea 8:13a

atonement.”<sup>7</sup> Because God atones for His people’s sins only on the basis of their right sacrifices from a right heart, a perfect and complete atoning sacrifice is necessary. This perfect substitutionary sacrifice is found in the work of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus’ willing sacrifice on the cross is the perfect atonement that completes the sin offering on the Day of Atonement. Hebrews 9:13-14 testifies to the better sacrifice of Christ “for if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” The author of Hebrews draws Day of Atonement terminology as he presents the perfected atoning sacrifice of Christ. “The sin offerings presented on the Day of Atonement, or at any other time, had no effect on the consciences of those on whose behalf they were brought; they served merely in an external and symbolical manner to counteract the defilement of sin.”<sup>8</sup> The blood of goats and calves was only made atonement to the extent that it “purge the pollution rather than removed sin.”<sup>9</sup> However, the perfect atoning sacrifice of Christ is able to clear the guilty conscience and purify the sinful heart.

Animals are not moral creatures; the unblemished condition of those victims offered up was merely external and superficial in character for the purposes of ritual symbolism...By contrast, Christ, the Incarnate Son, is a fellow human being, partaking of our own human nature (Heb. 2:14), and therefore, as man, fully qualified to stand in for us as our substitute, and, as one without blemish, that is, as a man morally perfect with an undefiled conscience before God (Heb. 4:15;7:27), competent to offer up the completely efficacious sacrifice of his own unblemished person in satisfaction for our sins and for the purifying of our consciences.

Jesus’ own body, a perfect and willing human sacrifice, was the only type of sacrifice that could fulfill the Day of Atonement offering. The Mosaic Covenant sets up this sacrificial system while displaying an immediate need for a new one, with a better and complete sacrifice to atone for the perpetual sins of the people. This better sacrifice is found under the New Covenant through the atoning blood of Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael G. McKelvey, “Leviticus” *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016) p. 97

<sup>8</sup> F.F. Bruce, “The Epistle to the Hebrews” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990) p. 214

<sup>9</sup> John H. Hayes, “Atonement in the Book of Leviticus” *Interpretation* 52, no. 1, (January 1998): 8

## Accomplishment of the Sacrifice

Jesus offered himself as a sin offering in order to purify the conscience from guilt and sanctify the sinner from transgression. However, two other key aspects of Jesus' work of sacrifice is his accomplishment of forgiveness and the finality of his sacrifice. The theme of forgiveness is closely related to atonement; by tracing this concept through the canon and covenants it will enable us to identify the development of the theme of sacrifice from the Old Testament to the New.

The Old Testament primarily uses forgiveness to describe God's character. God proclaims his glory to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, "the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger yet abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." This description of God's character is repeated throughout the Old Testament;<sup>10</sup> however, it is difficult to grasp God's forgiveness of iniquity until the presentation of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31. "The famous 'new covenant' passage in Jeremiah looks ahead to a time when the Lord will forgive his people's wickedness and remember their sins no more."<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 8 picks up on Jeremiah 31 in order to show the means by which atonement and forgiveness are accomplished in this covenant. Hebrews states that the New Covenant eradicates the Mosaic covenant through a fulfillment of the sacrificial system and a true accomplishment of forgiveness through the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

In Leviticus, the Day of Atonement is summarized, "on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord for all your sins."<sup>12</sup> In order for a sinful people to remain in the dwelling place of a holy God, a sacrifice must be made on their behalf to make atonement. There were individual sacrifices that could be offered to atone for sin, but the Day of Atonement offered a clean slate to all people. For all people "had contributed to the piling up of sin and, by the grace of God, on this day every individual, Israelite and foreigner alike, was to be a recipient of his mercy and know their sins forgiven."<sup>13</sup> The Day of Atonement brings forgiveness through the sacrifices offered by the priest on behalf of the people.

However, Leviticus 16:34 also presents the Day of Atonement as a repeated sacrifice saying, "a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins." Thus, the main failure of the Levitical sacrificial system found in the Mosaic covenant was its inability to fully deal with sin and take away guilt for "it could make no provision for full and final forgiveness of the sinner. The various rituals

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<sup>10</sup> e.g. Numbers 14:18-19, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 103:8-10, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2

<sup>11</sup> R.W. Yarbrough, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation" *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), p. 500

<sup>12</sup> Leviticus 16:30

<sup>13</sup> Derek Tidball, "The Message of Leviticus" *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005) p. 199

needed to be repeated periodically, and a human mediator, who himself needed atonement, was required to declare God's absolving grace."<sup>14</sup> Hebrews compares the ineffectiveness of the sacrificial system found in Mosaic law to the perfect atoning sacrifice of Christ saying, "but as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, "the sacrifice of Christ, being a real sacrifice and not a token one, is perpetually effective and therefore calls for no repetition."<sup>16</sup> Thus, "considering the sacrifices and what they foreshadowed, it becomes clear that Christ's substitutionary atonement on behalf of his people fulfills that entire system."<sup>17</sup> The sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross ushered in the New Covenant enacting complete atonement for the guilty and providing eternal forgiveness for sin. "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."<sup>18</sup>

## Atonement and the Priesthood

Christ did not fulfill the Day of Atonement only by becoming a perfect sacrifice, but also by becoming a perfect high priest. The atoning work of Christ; therefore, is twofold. Through Christ's sacrifice, sin is completely atoned for, God's wrath is fully satisfied, and the conscience of the believer is truly purified. In addition, Christ's work as the mediator of his own sacrifice gives him access to God in the heavenly places on the behalf of the people and affects an eternal priesthood through his one blood sacrifice.

Biblical theology aids in our understanding of Christ's priestly office. For not only does intertextuality aid in our comparison between the Levitical priesthood and Christ, but the canon foreshadows a better high priest that is coming, Christ Jesus. The covenants under which the two priestly lines perform sacrifices and mediate atonement allows for a framework in connecting the relationship of priesthood to the atonement.

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<sup>14</sup> R.K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1980) p. 176

<sup>15</sup> Hebrews 9:26

<sup>16</sup> F.F. Bruce, "The Epistle to the Hebrews" *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990) p. 230

<sup>17</sup> Michael G. McKelvey, "Leviticus" *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016) p. 102

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 10:14

## Type of Priesthood

“The priesthood highlights the need of a mediator to go between the people and Yahweh to offer sacrifices on their behalf.”<sup>19</sup> This role of mediator is seen in Leviticus 16 for, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was not only commanded to make atonement on behalf of the sanctuary and the people but also for his own sin. “Thus, the phrase ‘for himself’, used seven times, underscores the absolute necessity that the ranking clergyman first rectify his own errors.”<sup>20</sup> Hebrews 5:1,3 says of the high priestly office, “every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer sacrifices for sins...[for] he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.” The role of the Levitical high priest on the Day of Atonement was to mediate between the people and God; however, atonement could not be accomplished or mediated unless he first had been purified from his sin. It is evident that, “complete physical cleanliness was necessary before he entered the heart of God’s sanctuary, symbolizing the complete inner purity required of this servant of God.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, this necessitates a need for a perfect high priest of a new order who would not need atonement “for himself” but could always enter into the Holy of Holies to present a perfect sacrifice on behalf of the people. For “if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood, what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek.”<sup>22</sup> However, the imperfection of the Levitical priestly order is highlighted by its own need for atonement.

Through Jesus, God inaugurated a new and better priestly order. Similar to the atoning sacrifice, the priesthood of the New Covenant makes the Aaronic priesthood of the Mosaic Covenant obsolete. “Jesus’ office as high priest does not depend on lineage or law. It is directly and solely by divine appointment.”<sup>23</sup> So, his priesthood is better than that of the Levites because of his perfection and permanence. Psalm 110:4, speaking of Jesus, says, “you are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” This prophecy about the type of Jesus’ priestly order foreshadows the eternal nature of his priesthood in addition to the fact that he is a “priest of the Most High God.”<sup>24</sup> Additionally, “he has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did once for all when he offered up himself.”<sup>25</sup> Hebrews 7:23 says, “the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.” Christ has an eternal

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<sup>19</sup> Michael G. McKelvey, “Leviticus” *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016) p. 103

<sup>20</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) p. 273

<sup>21</sup> Derek Tidball, “The Message of Leviticus” *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005) p. 190

<sup>22</sup> Hebrews 7:11

<sup>23</sup> R.J. McKelvey, *Pioneer and Priest: Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013) ch. 5

<sup>24</sup> Hebrews 7:1 cf. Gen 14:18

<sup>25</sup> Hebrews 7:27



priesthood, having been raised to life after his atoning sacrifice, he is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Furthermore, Hebrews 7:26 describes Jesus' as "such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." Because Christ's priesthood was perfect and established by God, "[Jesus] is able to save completely those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."<sup>26</sup> Through Christ's self-sacrifice, atonement is given once and for all. He is able to continually mediate before God by the perfection of his priestly office on behalf of his people in the heavenly tabernacle.

Thus, the author of Hebrews "sees in the mysterious figure of Melchizedek a foreshadowing of a priesthood higher than that of Aaron, and fulfilled in Jesus."<sup>27</sup> The book of Hebrews uses the "two words, 'shadow and likeness,'"<sup>28</sup> to contrast the types of priesthood, the priesthood of Aaron and Melchizedek. The priesthood of Aaron was merely a shadow<sup>29</sup> through mediation on behalf of the people while the priesthood of Melchizedek was the likeness<sup>30</sup> of Christ's priestly mediation due to his holiness and eternity as priest of God Most High.

## Mediation of the Priesthood

One of the priest's primary roles was to mediate between God and the people. Under the Mosaic covenant, the law required purity and cleanliness from sin by the high priest in order for atonement to be made through the mediating of sacrifices on behalf of the people. The flaws of this covenant displayed the necessity of a new covenant that could bring atonement through a perfect sacrifice mediated by a perfect eternal priest.

In the Mosaic covenant, the sacrificial system was the means by which this mediation was accomplished. On the Day of Atonement, there was a specific way by which the high priest would come into the Holy Place. It was necessary for the high priest to offer sacrifices first to atone for himself, then for the sin of the people. "Aaron shall offer a bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and his house,"<sup>31</sup> and, similarly, offered on behalf of the people and objects of the tabernacle. "Once people and objects had been cleansed from impurity by the rite of atonement, they could safely come into God's

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<sup>26</sup> Hebrews 7:25

<sup>27</sup> P. Ellingworth, "Priests", *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) p. 700

<sup>28</sup> L.D. Hurst, "Priest, High Priest" *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997) p. 964

<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 8:5, 10:1

<sup>30</sup> Hebrews 7:15

<sup>31</sup> Leviticus 16:6

presence.”<sup>32</sup> However, this sin offering only allowed the high priest to enter once a year to atone for sin, so that sin would accumulate all throughout the year. Additionally, this mediation was done in the earthly tabernacle, which merely serves as “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.”<sup>33</sup> For “every high priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.”<sup>34</sup> The necessity for a better mediator is evident; the people need a mediator who could allow them to come into God’s presence continually that their sin might be always atoned for.

The New Covenant presents this mediator, Jesus, as the perfect high priest in the book of Hebrews. “When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with human hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”<sup>35</sup> “Whereas Aaron and his successors went into the earthly holy of holies on the Day of Atonement by virtue of animal-sacrifices—Christ has entered the heavenly sanctuary by virtue of his own blood.”<sup>36</sup> “Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance;”<sup>37</sup> for “Christ’s atoning work is the source from which all the blessings of the new covenant flow.”<sup>38</sup> “This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.”<sup>39</sup> The atonement of the New Covenant is mediated by Jesus, who eternally intercedes on behalf of his people so that they may be able to “draw near to the throne of grace.”<sup>40</sup>

The Day of Atonement happened only once a year; consequently, atonement for all people was only offered on this one day through the mediation of the high priest. However, even on this day, no common Israelite could enter the Holy of Holies because the sacrifice only cleansed people’s sin, it did not make the person holy. In contrast, “Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, Jesus is the fulfillment of the priestly work on the Day of Atonement as he is “such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true

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<sup>32</sup> John W. Kleinig, “The Blood for Sprinkling: Atoning Blood in Leviticus and Hebrews” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 33, no.3, (1999): 129

<sup>33</sup> Hebrews 8:5

<sup>34</sup> Hebrews 10:11

<sup>35</sup> Hebrews 9:11-12

<sup>36</sup> F.F. Bruce, “The Epistle to the Hebrews” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990) p. 213

<sup>37</sup> Hebrews 9:15

<sup>38</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1977) p. 327

<sup>39</sup> Hebrews 7:22

<sup>40</sup> Hebrews 4:16

<sup>41</sup> Hebrews 9:24

tent that the Lord set up, not man.”<sup>42</sup> Through Christ, the perfect high priest, his people “have the entry of Jesus with his blood into the heavenly sanctuary,”<sup>43</sup> the most holy place before God. Here, Jesus intercedes on their behalf that they might receive atonement leading to forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

## Conclusion

Biblical theology aids our understanding of the theme of atonement across the canon by tracing it through the covenants. There are a multitude of other texts which could have supported the connection of this theme across the canon. However, to keep this paper at a reasonable length, I did not cover every aspect of atonement. Specifically, we observed the connection between the sacrifice and priestly work done on the Day of Atonement with the sacrificial and priestly work of Christ. The intertextual connections between Leviticus and Hebrews shape the way we understand this theme. As we have seen, the sacrificial work and priestly order presented in the Day of Atonement demonstrate the need for a better sacrifice offered by a better priesthood. The fulfillment of the Day of Atonement comes in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For “the goal of Christ’s sacrificial and priestly work is the complete transformation of the Christian from unholy to holy, from sinner to saint, and from being unlike Christ to being just like him. This is the redemption that Yahweh has promised and foreshadowed in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Leviticus.”<sup>44</sup> The accomplishment of Christ’s sacrificial and priestly work is then presented in Hebrews as the promise of atonement in the New Covenant fulfilled, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hebrews 8:1-2

<sup>43</sup> John W. Kleinig, “The Blood for Sprinkling: Atoning Blood in Leviticus and Hebrews” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 33, no.3, (1999): 132

<sup>44</sup> Michael G. McKelvey, “Leviticus” *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016) p. 104

<sup>45</sup> Jeremiah 31:34

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