# Atonement as Healing

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# 1. Biography

I had a wonderful childhood and godly parents. My mother once overheard me tell a neighbor friend that I couldn't play because I had to leave for "stupid church." I didn't mean, as the phrase might suggest, that I had a prior engagement with an assembly of fellow dimwits. My mother understood me perfectly well: I preferred playing over praying and resented that my parents preferred otherwise. When my mother's eyes welled with tears, I realized how much my parents cared about my faith and not just their own.

My siblings and I grew up in a Wesleyan church near Indianapolis. I received far more than I gave. And trouble largely left me alone thanks to a saintly youth pastor and a close-knit group of friends with deep integrity. After high school, I followed my brother's footsteps to Moody Bible Institute, where I studied biblical Greek.

At Moody, a professor of church history assigned Kallistos Ware's *The Orthodox Way*, a brief introduction to Orthodox faith and tradition. It made a deep impression on me—not quite so deep that I would ever visit the Orthodox parish along my daily walk to class, but deep enough that I would later revisit the book when I sought a version of Christianity compelling enough for me to remain a Christian.

This pursuit began soon after the philosopher J.P. Moreland guest-lectured in one of my final courses. He spoke about our desire to avoid uncomfortable truths, especially about ourselves. Consider our carefully crafted self-images. They mediate how we see ourselves, and how we want others to see us. We wrap ourselves in them. But if we admit an uncomfortable truth—and pull a loose thread—the image might unravel like an old sock. Perhaps we're not as devout as we'd like to think. Or, to Moreland's point, perhaps deep down we don't really believe what we say we do. Failing to square our genuine beliefs with our spoken commitments erodes our character and ultimately blocks the potential for genuine faith. Moreland encouraged us to level with ourselves about what we really do and don't believe.

I followed Moreland's advice and saw immediate results. I had grown increasingly uncomfortable with evangelical churches. For all their strengths—community, education, artistry, generosity—they often seemed to me like rudderless ships, carried by the currents of their leaders' idiosyncratic judgments and atop the waves of contemporary culture. Why were we making it all up as we went, in our own image, two thousand years later? I finally let this beach ball surface without pushing it back underwater. At the same time, my enthusiasm for biblical studies had also waned. I was grateful for my Moody education, but the styles of argument popular in theology and biblical studies did not appeal to me. So rather than honor what seemed like sunk costs, I converted twice. Academically, I switched to philosophy. Then, my wife and I went Anglican.

Not long after these conversions, I had a small personal crisis. Although I wouldn't have admitted it then, the root problem was excessive self-love. It affected my judgment and reverberated throughout my web of belief, especially my religious commitments. Core tenets of Christianity no longer seemed plausible enough to command whole-hearted commitment. I worried most about the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.

It may sound strange that self-love could undermine religious commitment. After all, Pascal appeals to self-interest to argue nearly the opposite: you should convert to Christianity—and "bet" on its truth—because "if you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing." Run the numbers, says Pascal, and he'll see you near the ambo on Sunday morning. But my calculator returned an error message. In a Christian universe, yes, authentic Christians gain all. But different values likely govern the cosmos depending on whether a Christian God exists or whether (gesticulating expansively) *all this* is it, the main options in my view. In an atheistic universe, would we really lose nothing if we placed a losing bet on Christianity?

St. Paul says that unless Christ has been raised from the dead, Christians are "of all people most to be pitied." That strikes a chord. The Christian life requires sacrifice. On the altar of a godless universe, Christian martyrs may, in the long run, further the species for purely evolutionary reasons. But for the negligible benefit of the species, each martyr might have lost a true pearl of great price—a long and fulfilling life. In a godless universe, our subjective preferences might be all that truly matters. And, in a godless universe, our preference for a long and fulfilling life might know no bounds, especially given the small, singular window we have for any life at all.

My view has always been that if Jesus rose from the dead, He is likely the all-compassionate Creator of the universe. If the Creator says, "follow me," I should follow Him, come what may. However, since reasonable belief in the resurrection falls well short of certainty, a sacrificial life built on its basis involves great personal risk. Place a losing bet, and you might relinquish the only potentially priceless thing in the universe—satisfying the preference for a long life full of whatever it is you value most. A certain amount of a certain kind of self-love is incompatible with taking such a risk. I want to pursue my desires on my terms. Could I surrender precious time and resources, forego desires and opportunities, and return grace for slights of every kind—all for a first-century rabbi whose bones, for all I really knew, remain scattered under Palestinian soil?

Still, I wondered whether the evidence for Christ's resurrection could sufficiently tilt the scales to justify the Christian life. So I did some historical sleuthing on the resurrection. A close friend recommended Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. Bauckham convincingly argues that the Gospels report eyewitness testimony. I found this testimony credible, especially on points like the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, its emptiness on the third day, and the appearances to Mary Magdalene and others. Jesus' resurrection seemed, by far, the single best explanation of these well-attested events, even if the disjunction of non-resurrection hypotheses bore a relatively high likelihood.

Meanwhile, cracks had begun to ripple through the wall of self-love. Maybe God softened my heart. Maybe my male brain had begun to mature—I was in my mid-twenties, after all. Either way, I mattered less to myself. If Christianity were false, and I suffered needlessly, so what? If I gave everything away

for a false purpose, who cares? I will have been a blip in a meaningless and ultimately silent universe, one among many billions or even trillions of other blips, many of whom will have sacrificed more or suffered worse. Not only did the dialing down of self-love make the risk calculation for Christianity more appealing, it also restored the sensitivity of antennae seemingly designed for feeling Christ's love. By caring less about myself, then, I could follow Jesus come what may even though I would often settle for hope rather than full belief in the truth of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

For all that, though, I remained religiously homeless. My religious identity seemed less like a life-giving union with the divine and more like a badge for believing certain propositions, some of which I doubted anyway. The leading story about Christ's passion, one that I had claimed to believe, struck me as morally and philosophically problematic. And despite my upbringing and education, I had achieved little by way of Christlike virtue. So I longed for a home, one furnished with more effective tools for knowing Christ, for understanding the meaning of His life and death, and for becoming Christlike.

Over several years, these paths converged on the same place—the Orthodox Church. After a year of inquiry, but four years before I was baptized, I watched a livestream of Bart Ehrman and a local Orthodox Christian priest discuss faith and skepticism. The priest closed the discussion with an open invitation to visit his parish in Durham, NC. After a year of study and having remembered my affinity for Ware's *The Orthodox Way*, I went. Stepping inside the nave of an Orthodox parish made me feel like I had returned to a home I never knew. In time, the Orthodox Church also felt like a school where I could learn the faith of Jesus, a meeting place where I could encounter Him, and a hospital where I could receive His healing.

My conversion occurred primarily in the heart, not in my head. But an intellectual journey came first. In the first leg, I re-evaluated the merits of a story I'd always claimed to believe.

### 2. Western Views of Atonement

The atonement lies at the heart of Western Christianity. And Roman Catholics and Protestants usually teach the same two-part story about how Jesus' death atones for sin. First, humanity sinned and thereby incurred a "debt" to God. Second, God accepts Christ's death in lieu of our debt. More specific theories differ on details such as the nature of the debt and the degrees of freedom for potential repayment. For Anselm, Christ's death repays a debt of honor. For Aquinas, and most Protestant traditions, Christ's death repays a debt of punishment.<sup>2</sup> On this more widely held view, God delayed our punishment for sin until Christ could suffer it for us.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> I'm most comfortable with the detailed treatment in Allison (2021).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> On Aquinas, see Quinn (1989) and Breiner (2018).

I found these theories morally problematic. Consider Jesus's parable of the prodigal son.<sup>3</sup> And suppose the father had required someone's punishment before reconciling with his wayward son. This warps the parable's most powerful feature—the father's unconditional love and great generosity. But Western Christians often understand Christ's atonement along these lines.

Those defending Anselm or Aquinas (or Luther or Calvin) may reply:

This is just a parable, an "analogy." You can't expect an analogy to capture the whole theological truth.

Yet wouldn't the father seem less good if he had behaved as Anselm or Aquinas says God actually behaves—by requiring punishment or repayment of honor as a precondition for reconciliation? And didn't Jesus clearly mean for the father to symbolize the heavenly Father?

To this, I imagine yet another response:

The punishment of sin through Christ is a world-historical exception to a general rule. So the parable understandably omits it. It also enables everyone, including God, to exercise unbounded kindness forevermore. In fact, Christ's death itself is an exercise of this kindness. For it repays a debt that we ourselves could not pay.

How strange, then, that God's behavior conflicts with His Son's own teachings. Can we square Jesus' teaching about turning the other cheek and unconditional love for enemies with God's own alleged commitment to an eye-for-an-eye for the sin of His own creatures? Or can we square Jesus's silence in the face of humiliation and the teaching that overlooking offenses is one's glory (Prov. 19:11), with God's alleged refusal to withstand dishonor? Virtue for thee, but not for Me. How strange this would be if, as Christ says, he and the Father "are one" (John 10:30). This isn't the strangeness of mystery, as if some missing puzzle pieces might complete the picture. This is the strangeness of incoherence the pieces simply don't fit.

For many Western Christians, I've likely tripped an alarm. In popular Bible translations, certain passages directly support a Western view of atonement. Let's look closely at one such passage, Romans 3:23-25.<sup>5</sup> It reads:

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did

<sup>4</sup> Ruden (2021: 12 ff.)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Luke 15:11-32. Stump (2018: 63 ff.) uses the parable to support a particular view about forgiveness. I consider it here to raise questions about Western views of reconciliation. Stump's own account of atonement, like most others in the philosophical literature, fails basic tests of historical plausibility and displays a profound lack of curiosity about the concept of atonement in Jewish literature—the very concept applied to Christ by the early Jewish Christians.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In this essay, scriptural references follow the normal pattern of *Book chapter.verse*.

this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had *left* the sins committed beforehand *unpunished*... (NIV, emphasis mine)

The translation suggests that after having "left unpunished" (Greek, *paresin*) the sins of humanity, God had finally punished sin properly through Christ's death as a "sacrifice of atonement" (Greek, *hilasterion*) and thereby preserved His righteousness.

Such an understanding depends on two key interpretive moves in verse 25:

- Translating *paresin* as 'left unpunished'
- Understanding *hilasterion* (translated above as 'sacrifice of atonement') to involve punishment as a precondition for reconciliation.

Neither move withstands scrutiny, I learned. When we peel away both misconceptions from the passage, we find that St. Paul means something more mysterious and beautiful. This realization gave me a new lens for understanding Christianity and made the Orthodox Church all the more compelling to me.

# 3. The Paralysis of Sin

Western commentators typically understand verse 25 as saying that the *paresin* of past sins had imperiled God's righteousness. English translations popular among Protestants and Roman Catholics translate *paresin* variously as "leaving unpunished" (NIV) "passing over" (ESV and RSV-Catholic Edition), "remission" (KJV), and "forgiveness" (New American Bible and Revised Edition). In context, these translations suggest that God mercifully withheld the punishment that righteousness required. Then, Christ finally receives punishment and satisfies God's righteousness. But the more likely meaning of *paresin* suggests an entirely different rationale for Christ's passion.

Since St. Paul uses *paresin* only once, in Romans 3:25, his corpus provides little clue about its meaning here. Around Paul's time, however, the word most commonly meant *paralysis* or *incapacitation*.<sup>6</sup> It is used or understood in this way by Philo, Josephus, Areteus, Hippocrates, Plutarch, and early Church Fathers like St. John Chrysostom.<sup>7</sup> Related verbal forms, all with a similar meaning, occur twice in the Greek New Testament and over twenty times in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible used by St. Paul himself and typically referred to as the LXX.<sup>8</sup> One such instance occurs in the LXX translation of the Song of Moses (Deut. 32). There, God promises to restore His people from having been "utterly weakened" (Deut. 32:36), and the Song concludes with God's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Holmes, C. T. (2013: 351).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Ibid., 357. The LXX is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the second- and third-centuries B.C. Both the name of the translation ('Septuagint') and the abbreviation in Roman numerals ('LXX') derive from the tradition that it was produced by seventy or, more exactly, seventy-two Jewish translators. For a brief introductory essay, see Law (2013).

promise to "cleanse" (or, in the Hebrew Bible to "atone") both His land and people (Deut. 32:43). Romans 3:25 echoes both the problem (*paresin*) and solution (atonement), and with clear linguistic parallels, to boot. Given the evidence, then, St. Paul most likely uses *paresin* in Rom. 3:25 to describe humanity's sad state, not God's temporary refusal to punish.

This proposal is not new. St. John Chrysostom, from the fourth century, is widely regarded as St. Paul's greatest interpreter and so-named (*chrysostom* translates to *golden-mouth*) for his facility with the Greek language in which Paul wrote. Chrysostom's brief explanation of Romans 3:25 explicitly identifies the state of *paresin* with "deadness" and then elaborates on the theme of paralysis: "For there was no longer any hope of recovering health, but as the paralyzed body needed the hand from above, so does the soul which has been deadened." This commentary makes no sense unless Chrysostom understood *paresin* to mean *paralysis*.

Here, then, is a more adequate translation of the relevant chunk of text:

This was to show God's righteousness because of the paralysis from past sins.

We then have a ready explanation for why Christ's atonement would "show God's righteousness" after sin had paralyzed humanity. To wit, our deathward spiral threatened God's goodness as Creator. Unless God did something to heal our paralysis, He would resemble an architect whose buildings collapse from poor design. Since the *problem* was not that delaying punishment threatened God's righteousness, the *solution* is not necessarily that Christ preserved God's righteousness through being punished. Outside of Nazi Germany or dark comedy, the solution to paralysis is not further suffering, but healing. We will return to that thought shortly.

When other Church Fathers discuss God's main rationale for the Incarnation, they, too, cite the threat to God's status as our creator rather than an imbalance in the scales of retributive justice. Consider, for example, St. Irenaeus, a second-century bishop:

For if man, who had been created by God that he might live, after losing life, through being injured by the serpent that had corrupted him, should not any more return to life, but should be utterly [and for ever] abandoned to death, God would [in that case] have been conquered, and the wickedness of the serpent would have prevailed over the will of God.<sup>11</sup>

Or consider St. Athanasius, the fourth-century bulwark of Nicene Christianity:

Man, who was created in God's image and in his possession of reason reflected the very Word Himself, was disappearing, and the work of God was being undone. ... It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The Hebrew text itself directly mentions atonement rather than cleansing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> St. Chrysostom, "Homily XII on Romans," in Schaff (1889: 378). Available at: <a href="https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf111/Page\_378.html">https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf111/Page\_378.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 23 in Schaff (1885a: 455). Available at: <a href="https://ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/against-heresies-iii/anf01.ix.iv.xxiv.html">https://ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/against-heresies-iii/anf01.ix.iv.xxiv.html</a>

nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil. As, then, the creatures whom He had created reasonable, like the Word, were in fact perishing, and such noble works were on the road to ruin, what then was God, being Good, to do?<sup>12</sup>

For Irenaeus and Athanasius, the Incarnation did not occur to balance the scales of honor or retributive justice. Instead, sin so afflicted God's creatures that they might prove Him a failure. God became man to heal and restore His creatures, not repay a debt of punishment or honor. As early bishops, Irenaeus and Athanasius sought to preserve the teachings of St. Paul, someone with whom they shared a common tongue. What a coincidence, then, that if Paul really did use *paresin* as it was most commonly used—as the Church Fathers would have known—then, those same Fathers who sought to preserve the teachings of St. Paul would have succeeded in doing so.

As I mentioned above, the two keys to understanding Rom. 3:23-25 are the meaning of *paresin* and Paul's understanding of the atonement. Even if we agree to interpret *paresin* as I've argued—as a condition in need of healing—one might still argue that Romans 3 supports a Western view of atonement. Here's how I imagine such an argument to go:

Paul says that "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement [bilasterion], through the shedding of his blood" (verse 25). Paul here understands Jesus in relation to the Day of Atonement sacrifice, where a goat stands as a substitute for the Jewish people and whose killing appearses God's wrath. Paul is saying that Jesus's death fulfills the same function, not for Jews only, but for everyone.

This line of argument fails because St. Paul and other early Jewish followers of Jesus would have understood the Day of Atonement quite differently. To see how, we must inquire into the meaning of the Day of Atonement rituals. This is our next task.

To forestall the worry that I might rely too heavily on research from Orthodox Christian theologians or the writings of Eastern Church Fathers, I will draw almost exclusively from non-religious scholars or those from non-Orthodox religious traditions—Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, or what have you. This is easy to do, not only because these very scholars helped pave my conversion to Orthodoxy, but also because they represent some of the best in historical research about ancient Judaism, which is why I consulted them in the first place.<sup>14</sup>

For those with Western sympathies, I must issue a disclaimer: some of what follows will sound foreign, so foreign that it couldn't represent mainstream research on ancient Judaism. This reflex to dismiss research about the Day of Atonement, I'll argue, is itself a symptom of Western Christianity's estrangement from the traditions of the apostles. Like the descendants of immigrants who gradually

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Athanasius (1998: 31-32).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Of course, God couldn't heal us by surrendering His other virtues. So, as Athanasius argues, healing couldn't require that God renege on His word from the Garden that all men would die.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> I first wrote about all the main ideas in this essay in 2012, three years before I was baptized, for a seminar on the problem of evil with Marilyn McCord Adams.

lose their ancestors' fluency with the native tongue, Western Christianity has strayed some ways from the Jewish roots of Christianity and the faith of the apostles.

# 4. The Logic of the Atonement

### 4.1. Azazel, the fallen angel

1 Enoch was a widely read Jewish apocalyptic text written between 300-150 B.C. In 1 Enoch 9, God's people cry out for help amidst the devastation caused by fallen angels, especially Azazel, a major source of evil and corruption. Then, in 1 Enoch 10, Raphael—whose name means "God heals"—receives instructions from "God Most High":

- bind Azazel and cast him into the darkness of the desert, with jagged rocks
- heal the earth, which had been corrupted by the fallen angels
- heal humanity, which had been perishing from the secret knowledge imbued by Azazel
- banish all sin, along with Azazel

The Healer suffers no punishment. Nor does anyone repay a debt of honor to God. Instead, God heals land and people and banishes the evil one, Azazel, along with the sins of the people. As I'll explain shortly, this scene provides the meaning behind the Day of Atonement rituals as described in Leviticus 16.

Although Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement rituals, it leaves their meaning somewhat of a mystery. Sadly, centuries of bad English translations have obscured an interpretive clue from Leviticus 16 itself. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest has two goats. One is "for the Lord" (Lev. 16:8). The priest slaughters this one and sprinkles its blood around the tabernacle. We'll revisit this goat shortly. Then, following the 16th century translator, William Tyndale, most English translations say that the second goat is "for the scapegoat" (Lev. 16:8). Hebrew scholars generally agree that this is a mistake. Tyndale didn't know how to translate "Azazel," the proper name for a powerful demon who appears frequently in Jewish literature. This is our clue—once lost, but now found.

While the Healer in 1 Enoch banishes Azazel to a rocky wilderness, the high priest in Leviticus 16 banishes the goat "for Azazel" to the rocky wilderness. And as the Healer banishes sin with Azazel into the wilderness, the high priest confesses the people's sins over the goat and the goat "carries"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> According to Pinker (2009:4), this "is also the dominant opinion in the Midrashic literature from the early post Biblical period to the very late Midrashim."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> The Rabbinic literature has other guesses, too, but they are just that, no better reasoned than Tyndale's own.

them into the wilderness (Lev. 16:21-22). Perhaps, then, this goat *represents* Azazel.<sup>17</sup> In the second century, Origen says exactly this, and even identifies Azazel with Satan, the chief fallen angel.<sup>18</sup>

What about the other goat, the high priest, and the other atonement rituals? To make progress on those questions, we must first understand the symbolism behind the arena where these rituals occurred—the tabernacle and, later, the temple.

### 4.2. The Cosmic Temple

The temple symbolized the entire cosmos, and, conversely, the cosmos itself was thought to be a temple—God's dwelling place. According to Brant Pitre:

...there is overwhelming evidence for this cosmic temple symbolism in both Scripture and Judaism at the time of Jesus. Indeed, the Old Testament, the Second Temple literature, and the rabbis all bear witness to the fact that the Jerusalem Temple ... was designed and decorated to represent the entire universe: the heavens, the earth, the sea, the stars.<sup>19</sup>

The temple-cosmos symbolism is not a modern invention. The 1st century Jewish historian, Josephus notes the parallelism with regard to its predecessor, the tabernacle:

For if one reflects on the construction of the tabernacle and looks at the vestments of the priest and the vessels which we use for the sacred ministry, he will discover that our lawgiver was a man of God and that ... every one of these objects is intended to recall and represent the universe, as he will find if he will but consent to examine them without prejudice and with understanding.<sup>20</sup>

Space prohibits a complete rehearsal of the evidence for the temple and cosmos parallelism. Instead, consider the Genesis creation story alongside the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus. Whereas the creation narrative is broken into seven days, the tabernacle narrative is broken into seven divine speeches with a parallel theme.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Pinker (2009: 18). Also see Milgrom (2004: 166 ff.)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Schaff (1885b: 593). Available at <a href="https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04/anf04.vi.ix.vi.xliii.html">https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04/anf04.vi.ix.vi.xliii.html</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Pitre (2008: 56-57).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Josephus (1957: 403).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> For these parallels and more, see Kearney (1977).

Divine	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Sixth	Seventh
Speech	Ex. 25:1-30:10	Ex. 30:11-16	Ex. 30:17-21	Ex. 30:22-33	Ex. 30:34-38	Ex. 31:1-11	Ex. 31:12-17
Day of	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Creation	Gen. 1:2-3	Gen. 1:6-8	Gen. 1:9-10	Gen. 1:16	Gen. 1:21	Gen. 1:26-28	Gen. 2:1-3
Theme	Light	Upper/Lower	Seas	Heavenly	Sea Creatures	Human	Sabbath
		Divisions		Bodies		Cultivators	Rest

Consider the priests in the sixth speech of Exodus alongside humanity's appearance on the sixth day of Creation. The parallel suggests a deeper meaning about the first humans: God created them to serve in the *original* temple—the cosmos. This is, indeed, exactly what we find. In Genesis 2:15, God places Adam in the Garden of Eden "to work" and "to keep." In the underlying Hebrew, these words together most often connote priestly service in the temple and the protection against unclean intruders.<sup>22</sup>

We could produce much more evidence for the parallelism. It is, as Pitre says above, overwhelming.<sup>23</sup> Yet we must carry on. And now that we've reviewed the temple's meaning, we may cover its purpose.

#### 4.3. The Ontological Disease of Sin

In the Hebrew Bible, God brings order out of chaos, and establishes covenants with His people to keep chaos at bay.<sup>24</sup> But sin loosens these bonds with the Source of Life, and the pollution of sin threatens to unleash disorder on creation and revert it back to its chaotic and lifeless state. Consider Isaiah 24:

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The earth is defiled by its people;
they have disobeyed the laws,
violated the statutes
and broken the everlasting covenant. (Is. 24:5)
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Then, the chaos that God kept at bay overcomes the earth and its inhabitants:

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Beale (2004), as well as Fletcher-Louis (2004), Kearney (1977), Levenson (1985, 1987), Pitre (2008).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Beale (2018: 10).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Levenson (1987).

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The floodgates of the heavens are opened,
the foundations of the earth shake.
The earth is broken up,
the earth is split asunder,
the earth is violently shaken. (Is. 24:19)
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Sin is a destructive force in the Hebrew Bible. It is an ontological disease that corrupts the cosmos and threatens to tear it apart at the seams.

Given that the tabernacle symbolized the cosmos in ancient Judaism, it should also reflect the vulnerability of the cosmos to sin. And that's exactly what we find. As the portrait of Dorian Gray bore the marks of his soul's decay, the tabernacle symbolically bore the pollutive marks of sin.<sup>25</sup> According to Jewish scholar Jacob Milgrom, the more serious the sin, the more proximate to the Holy of Holies were its destructive effects.<sup>26</sup> Since the tabernacle, like the cosmos, served as a protective cover against chaos through its bond with heaven, its vulnerability to sin imperiled heaven's bond with earth and, consequently, all life within it. To save the cosmos, the tabernacle required repair.

#### 4.4 God, the Healer

Leading up to the description of the Yom Kippur rituals in Leviticus 16, we find

... many examples of defective coverings: the skin of a body, the garment of wool or skin that covers the body, the house whose walls cover the garments on the bodies of inmates. ... Leviticus has elaborated a series of torn covers as figures for the violated tabernacle.<sup>27</sup>

Since the tabernacle serves as a covering to protect against chaos and death, a "tear" in the tabernacle requires repair to prevent further damage to the cosmos. This repair occurs on the Day of Atonement.

Behind our modern conceptions of atonement stands the Hebrew notion of *kpr*. In the context of Leviticus, Mary Douglas argues most convincingly that *kpr* means:

...to cover, or recover, cover again, to repair a hole, cure a sickness, mend a rift, make good a torn or broken covering. As a noun, what is translated as atonement, expiation or purgation means integument made good; conversely, the examples in the book indicate that defilement means integument torn. Atonement does not mean covering a sin so as to hide it from the sight of God; it means making good an outer layer which has rotted or been pierced.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The seminal work is Milgrom (1976).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Milgrom (1976: 393)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Douglas (1993: 123).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Douglas (1993: 117-118).

So kpr does not connote punishment, appeasement of wrath, or a dismissal of past sins as if God were erasing our liabilities on a heavenly ledger. It connotes healing. Not healing through punishment or repayment of honor. Just healing. The Day of Atonement is the day of healing.

Healing involves medicine. In Leviticus, the healing agent is blood. Blood is a fitting medicine, too, given Leviticus 17:11:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. (ESV)

On the Day of Atonement, this blood comes from the goat "for the Lord" (Lev. 16:8). Whereas the goat "for Azazel" most likely represents Azazel, the goat "for the Lord"—to complete the parallelism—most likely represents the Lord, partly because it wears the name of the Lord.<sup>29</sup>

The high priest also wears the Name, on a golden head plate (Ex. 28:36), which likely explains the high priest's special roles and responsibilities. The high priest had the power to bear the sins of the people and access the Holy of Holies, a privilege denied even to the lower ranks of angels. Inside the Holy of Holies, the high priest wore the white robe of an angel. And outside the Holy of Holies, he wore a vestment made from the same material as the veil, which both symbolized material creation and veiled the Lord's own glory—as if he were God enrobed in earthly elements. Philo, a Jewish contemporary of Christ, conceived of the high priest as the divine Logos. So the high priest, in tandem with the goat, likely represent the Lord whose self-offering provides life-giving medicine for the entire cosmos.

Notice, then, that the atoning goat does not suffer punishment as a means to heal. Symbolically, the atoning goat suffers no punishment at all. The Lord, both "compassionate and gracious," simply "forgives all ... wrongs and heals all ... diseases" (Ps. 103: 3, 8). The only actor who receives punishment is the author of sin, Azazel. The people's sins are carried off to the wilderness, which separates sinners from their sin "as the east is far from the west" (Ps. 103: 12). By purging sin (through banishment) and healing the effects of sin (through atonement), God restores His covenant, renews creation, and "performs righteous acts ... for all the oppressed" (Ps. 103:6)—by making straight or *justifying* what had been bent out of shape through the disfiguring effect of sin. This is the eschatological drama found in Jewish apocalyptic literature and captured poetically in Psalm 103. The properties of the sufficient of t

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Barker (1996, 2003)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Barker (2003: 167).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> In fact, the traditional icon of the Annunciation has Mary, Jesus' mother, weaving the temple veil (the bridge between heaven and earth) as she weaves within her womb Jesus's flesh as the incarnate Son of God.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Ben Ezra (2003: 109)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Excerpts from Ps. 103 come from Alter (2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> See Pinker (2009: 19-20).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Orlov (2016).

Well before the first Christmas, the Day of Atonement rituals had communicated that sin corrupts the cosmos and leads to death and that God offers His life to defeat death and heal the cosmos. The early Jewish Christians understood atonement as a rite of healing before applying the notion to Jesus' death. 36 Sadly, Western Christianity has for the most part lost this understanding of atonement. And Western philosophers of religion, buoyed by poor translations and generally ignorant of the historical background, have instead concocted fanciful metaphysical theories from the armchair.

#### 4.5. Romans Revisited

I was once one of these philosophers, of course. So the above series of discoveries shifted the tectonic plates of my biblical understanding, especially of those passages that seemed to support Western views of atonement. As we return to Romans 3, let me explain.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would sprinkle blood in various places around the tabernacle, including the *cover* of the Ark of the Covenant (the *kapporet*), called the *hilasterion* in the Greek of the LXX, Hebrews 9:5, and, most notably for our purposes, Romans 3:25. So in Romans 3:25, St. Paul does not say that Christ is the "sacrifice of atonement" (NIV) but rather the mercy seat, God's throne on earth, flanked by cherubim, and a recipient of God's immortal life-blood for the purpose of universal healing.

Thus, Romans 3:25 does not say that Christ's suffering demonstrates God's righteousness after having failed to punish sin properly. Instead, it argues that Christ fulfills the ancient Day of Atonement rituals. By offering His life-giving blood, Christ is both the Healer of the cosmos and the locus of healing. Furthermore, by healing sin-paralyzed humanity, Christ both preserves and demonstrates God's righteousness as our Creator. And Christ restores humanity freely, much like the prodigal's father restores his son.

Since early Jewish Christians like St. Paul saw Christ as the *fulfillment* of the Day of Atonement, I had to conclude that Western Christianity lacked the resources to explain the theology and the liturgy of early Christians. This came as both a shock and a relief. At the time, I wasn't aware that Western views were *Western* views. I simply thought they were *the* views.<sup>37</sup> I was shocked because it meant Western Christianity had become enmeshed with relatively late theological innovations. Western views of atonement arose from misunderstandings of scripture, which then fueled later mistranslations in direct support of those misunderstandings. I was relieved, however, because, unlike Western views of atonement, the healing view of atonement, let's call it, represented God as having a moral character harmonious with Christ's own.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Barker (1996).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> I was familiar with Abelardian and Christus Victor views, of course, but I saw them neither as entirely *Western* nor as *theories* of atonement in their own right. I'd endorse both as playing some role within an overarching healing theory in which the Eucharist plays a central part, as I'll explain below.

# 5. Jesus, Cosmic Healer

The temple is the locus of healing, where life defeats sin and death. So it comes with little surprise that, as the new temple (John 2:19, Mt. 12:6), Jesus heals everywhere he goes.<sup>38</sup> He even begins his public ministry in the Gospel of Luke by saying that he fulfills the passage from Isaiah 61 about setting the world right (Luke 4:16-20), a prophecy connected to the Day of Atonement, through the Leviticus 25 description of the Year of Jubilee—the Year of Jubilee would begin on the Day of Atonement.

The Gospel of Matthew also frames Jesus's passion as a Day of Atonement sacrifice, even though it occurred over Passover. In Matthew, Pilate presents not two similar goats, but two Sons of the Father (which is what *bar-Abbas* means). The crowd, however, chooses the wrong "goat." From both Leviticus 16 and the Mishnah (Yoma 6), we know that a non-Israelite guides the Azazel goat to the wilderness, ties scarlet wool around its horns, and, because the non-Israelite becomes impure, washes himself (Lev. 16:26). Similarly, Pilate, a non-Israelite, washes his hands after sending Jesus outside town (Mt. 27:24) and before someone adorns Him with a scarlet robe (Mt. 27:28). For educated Jews, the parallels would have been glaringly obvious. They would have understood Matthew's point: Jesus is the one who gives his life for the life of the world even as His own people treated him as the demonic goat—the culmination of the Pharisees' rejection of Jesus as demonic (Mt. 12:22-30). 39

So Jesus atones for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2), not because he bears the punishment we deserved for our sin, but because He heals the world broken by sin. He unites in himself all things (Eph. 1:10) and binds and reconciles in himself all things with the peace wrought through his blood (1 Col. 17-20). He who makes all things new (Rev. 21.5), emptied himself (Phil. 2:7), and healed us through his wounds (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus is the Great High Priest (Heb. 4:14) who "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" (Heb. 9:12).

For all this, how does Christ's sacrificial atonement, long ago, heal us, now? According to Orthodox bishop and theologian, Irenei Steenberg:

A statement such as "Christ atoned for our sins upon the Cross" is incomplete, from the testimony of the Church's liturgical practice, until we see the work of the Cross as completed in the chalice. The atonement for sins did not happen at the moment in the past: it happens at the moment of man's communion in the divine mystery of Christ's Body and Blood, when the joining-together of God and man that took place in Bethlehem, that reached throughout all of life and even death through the Cross, that defeated death in the Resurrection, is made real and present in the faithful communicant who receives into his human body, and is joined bodily and spiritually with, the divine-human person of the incarnate Son. (Steenberg 2016: 40)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Pitre (2008).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> The parallel is made explicitly in Letter of Barnabas 7, a first- or second-century text. See Ehrman (2003: 39). Also see Hebrews 13:12.

The Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church is a continuation of the Day of Atonement whereby communicants receive healing through what St. Ignatius, a second-century bishop of Antioch, called the *pharmakon athanasias*—the medicine of immortality.<sup>40</sup>

My first reaction to an Orthodox Christian Divine Liturgy was not too dissimilar from Margaret Barker's. In February 1999, the Methodist and Old Testament scholar witnessed an Orthodox liturgy for the first time. Her "eyes were opened," and, in her telling, realized that she was witnessing the very Day of Atonement rituals she had studied for much of her career: "I had never dreamed that this world of the temple had survived in the liturgy of the Church."

Several features of the Divine Liturgy could trigger such a response:

- Traditionally, both the tabernacle (the temple) and the Orthodox Christian parish face east.
- In many Slavic and Byzantine parishes, the liturgy begins with Ps. 103 (102 in the LXX),<sup>43</sup> the atonement Psalm (see Section 4.4 above).
- A wall of icons, the iconostasis, serves as a temple veil. Whereas the veil hid the *kapporet* (the Ark cover), the iconostasis hides the altar.
- Whereas the *kapporet* served as God's throne flanked by Cherubim in the temple, the iconography behind the Orthodox altar typically depicts an enthroned Jesus or the infant Jesus sitting on his mother's lap, flanked by Cherubim.
- As the high priest symbolized the Lord, the Orthodox Christian priest represents Christ.
- Whereas the high priest on the Day of Atonement enters the Holy of Holies and then exits with life-giving blood for the renewal of creation, the Orthodox priest makes the Great Entrance with wine and then exits with the consecrated gifts for communion.
- Just as the Lord is symbolically both the officiant of the sacrifice and the sacrificed on the Day
  of Atonement, the Orthodox liturgy addresses Jesus as "the One who both offers and is
  offered."<sup>44</sup>
- Whereas the blood represents the Lord's cosmic medicine in the Day of Atonement, the Orthodox liturgy repeatedly references the healing effects of the Eucharist for both body and soul.<sup>45</sup>

And, of course, the Orthodox priest says that Jesus "delivered himself up for the life of the world" before reciting Jesus's own words of institution about the bread as his body and the wine as his blood, "for the remission of sins" (Mt. 26:26-28)—this is Day of Atonement language embedded among rituals inspired by the Day of Atonement.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Schaff (1885a: 58). Also see Hart (2016).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Barker (2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Barker (2008).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> The Orthodox Church uses the LXX in its prayers and services. And the LXX uses a slightly different renumbering of the Psalms.

<sup>44</sup> See https://www.goarch.org/-/the-divine-liturgy-of-saint-john-chrysostom.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Ibid.

These observations led me to conclude that the Orthodox Church had best preserved the rituals and teachings of the earliest Jewish Christians, not merely on dusty bookshelves, but in the very life of the Church. And this preservation extended beyond the liturgical practice and theology of atonement.

As I soon discovered, the life of a typical parish revolves around the readings of the Psalms, ancient liturgies, and prayer schedules. The common ground among the faithful includes compelling teachings about prayer and the development of Christlike virtue in works that have stood the test of time, often honed over centuries of practice: the sayings of the desert fathers,<sup>46</sup> the *Prologue of Ohrid*,<sup>47</sup> the *Philokalia*,<sup>48</sup> and the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*.<sup>49</sup> In a typical parish, the faithful read these regularly and adhere to the ancient practice of fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays—a practice encouraged in the *Didache*, one of our oldest surviving Christian documents.<sup>50</sup>

Eventually, I figured that if I became an Orthodox Christian, I would have the most effective resources for becoming Christlike and achieving union with Christ. So this wasn't for me a matter of finding flaws in Christian traditions and deciding to join the last tradition standing. It was, instead, a matter of finding the most resourceful tradition.

## 6. Conclusion

At the conclusion of my very first liturgy, an elderly Greek woman approached me with a piece of the *antidoron*, blessed bread. I politely declined because I mistakenly thought it was reserved for the Orthodox faithful. With eyes full of compassion and a heavy accent, she insisted: "Eat—food is love." In the Orthodox Church, food is love. And life.

I wanted this life for myself and especially for my family. In July 2015, my wife and two young children were chrismated and baptized into the Orthodox Church. A third child joined us a few years later.

I rarely discuss my faith in public. This is not for fear of embarrassment or loss of professional opportunities. And it has little to do with my original fear of giving my life to a long dead Palestinian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> For a recent translation of the sayings of the Church's early monastics, see Ward (2003).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> The *Prologue* has readings, lives of the saints, and prayers for every day of the year. The author-compiler, St. Nikolai Velimirovich, wrote a dissertation on the philosopher George Berkeley at Oxford, and is known as the Serbian Chrysostom. He was also imprisoned for a time in the Dachau concentration camp during WWII. See Velimirovich (2017).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> The *Philokalia* is a multi-volume prayer manual cultivated over several centuries with entries by several authors. Its focus is the Jesus Prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," as one variant goes. In our available English translations, the order of essays has little rhyme or reason. Laypeople consequently get lost, not realizing that new monastics often follow an introductory program of readings called the *Traditional Path of Entry*. I have compiled one version of a path of entry and published it to my website at <a href="https://craigwarmke.com/s/path.pdf">https://craigwarmke.com/s/path.pdf</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Written by St. John Climacus in the seventh century, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is a guide for the development of Christlike virtue, where each rung on the ladder provides instructions for overcoming some vice or fostering some virtue. The last rung is love. See Climacus (1982).

<sup>50</sup> Ehrman (2003: 429).

rabbi. I fear instead that I will fail Him—publicly. Yet I wrote this essay anyway. I hope I'll have done more good than bad with it. So I'll close with a prayer that seems fitting:

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.

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