

The Atonement in Isaiah 53

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The evangelist D. L. Moody used to say that reading the Bible is like eating fish; you eat the meat and leave the bones aside. So no Christian should say, “I am not eating fish (reading the Bible) because it is full of bones (there is much in it that I cannot understand).” Of course how much of the Bible is “bone” to a reader depends on his background with respect to the Bible. But there is enough “meat” in the Bible that anyone who can read can understand.

The book of Isaiah as a whole is rather bony, but Isaiah 53 is amazingly meaty. Anyone who can read can understand much of it, at least the basic teaching. For the basic teaching is repeated so often and in such clear language that one cannot miss it. Consider: “he was pierced for our transgressions ... upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace” (verse 5); “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (verse 6); “he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people” (verse 8); “he bore the sin of many” (verse 12).

The Messiah and the Atonement

These excerpts (and also the verses cited below unless otherwise indicated) are taken from the English Standard Version. The other English translations say essentially the same thing. When so many translations agree, we can be assured that the Hebrew text is clearly saying the same thing. So there is no need to belabor to establish what is already obvious in the text: someone called “the righteous one, my servant” (53:11; cf. 52:13) will suffer and die on behalf of sinners to atone for their sins.

People who reject this obvious meaning do so not because the text is not clear enough. There are biblical scholars who do not agree with this basic teaching but are honest enough to admit that it is clearly there in the text. Take for instance Otfried Hofius. Even though he objects to the teaching, he confesses that “the idea of substitution or place-taking [is] *evident* in Isaiah 53” (emphasis added). He objects to it because the teaching is “outrageous” and it is impossible “that *God* transfers the guilt of one person to another person or persons.”

It is indeed true that the teaching, which theologians call “penal substitutional atonement,” is outrageous and that it is impossible for God to transfer the guilt of one person to an innocent person and punish that person instead. Surely whoever sins must bear the consequence of his own sin. Do we then join Hofius in objecting to the basic teaching of Isaiah 53?

We need to first look at who that “righteous servant” is, who is said to die on behalf of sinners. Jews today take for granted that this servant is the nation of Israel. However Michael Brown, a “Messianic Jew” (Jewish Christian) who was originally trained to be a rabbi but now debates with rabbis, has pointed out that the traditional Jewish understanding is that the servant in Isaiah 53 is an individual, most often taken to be the Messiah. It was only in the eleventh century AD that the legendary rabbi Rashi introduced the idea that the servant refers to (the righteous remnant of) Israel. A century later, Rabbi Ibn Ezra, who read Isaiah 53 with the assumption the servant is Israel, commented, “This is an extremely difficult passage.” In response Brown says: “But when we read it with reference to Yeshua [Jesus], it is not difficult at all. Rather, it is wonderfully clear,

giving the reader the distinct feeling that the chapter was written [as though] *after* the Messiah's crucifixion and resurrection."

Of course no biblical scholar would claim that Isaiah 53 was written after Jesus' death, not even those who do not believe in miracles and thus deny there is such a thing as predictive prophecy. In this case their standard argument to deny the reality of predictive prophecy in the Bible—the "prophecy" was written after the event it purports to predict—cannot be used. For the Hebrew Bible as we have it today existed long before Jesus was even born.

So if a biblical scholar rejects the traditional Christian belief that Jesus has fulfilled Isaiah 53, he would do so by reading against the grain of the biblical text to avoid the obvious meaning. Even then, he cannot deny that the account of Jesus' death in the Gospels uncannily matches a plain reading of Isaiah 53 even to the mundane details that "they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death" (verse 9), which turned out to mean Jesus was crucified with criminals and was buried in a rich man's tomb (Matthew 27:38, 57-60). He may then resort to discrediting the historical reliability of the Gospels. But he will find himself arguing against the grain of historical evidence both within and without the New Testament.

Atonement and Forgiveness of Sin

It is understandable why anyone would object to a plain reading of Isaiah 53. For the plain teaching is not only outrageous to the extreme but it also has far-reaching philosophical, theological, moral and religious implications that some find extremely objectionable. No one can remain neutral when one understands this teaching and its implications.

Note that Isaiah refers to the servant of Isaiah 53 as the "arm of the LORD" (verse 1). Earlier he has referred to the "arm of the LORD" as the person who long ago dried up the sea so that the redeemed might cross over (see Isaiah 51:9-10). This means the servant of Isaiah 53 is God. Actually this should not be surprising as Isaiah 9 has already revealed that the Messiah is God (see especially verse 6).

In other words, what is really outrageous about the basic teaching of Isaiah 53 is not so much that the innocent servant substituted guilty sinners, but that the substitute is God Himself! Ironically, only this extremely outrageous teaching can explain why Jesus the Messiah could die on behalf of sinners to atone for their sins.

It was noted earlier that anyone who sins must bear the consequence of his own sin, *unless he is forgiven*. As theologian James Buswell puts it succinctly, "The guilt of one individual's sin against another *can* morally be borne *either by the sinner* (as in the case of justice without forgiveness) *or by the one sinned against* (as in the case of forgiveness)." It is the very nature of forgiveness that only the offended party can forgive the guilty party. And since all sins are ultimately offences against God, only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:7). It is also the very nature of forgiveness that when the offended party forgives the guilty party, he willingly bears alone the consequence of the offence—whether it is emotional pain, physical harm or material loss—and let the guilty party go scot-free as though he did not commit the offence. True forgiveness is indeed painful and difficult.

Therefore, to forgive sins God must Himself bear the consequence of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23; cf. Genesis 2:17). Thus God must die. But God cannot die unless He first becomes a man. That was exactly what happened in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ did not die for our sins as an “innocent third party” but as the offended party. Paul spells out that Christ was involved even in the creation of the universe (Colossians 1:16). So unless this extremely outrageous teaching—the Creator of the universe was born a baby and died a criminal’s death as a righteous man to atone for sin—is true, Christians are still in their sins.

Not only the death, but also the resurrection of the Messiah is predicted in Isaiah: (after his death) “he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand” (53:10). The verse that follows then reveals what the death and resurrection of the Messiah have accomplished. The Hebrew text on what have been accomplished is clear enough though the verse as a whole is not completely clear. The Bible translations differ on the details but the overall meaning should not be far from this composite translation: “After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied (NIV). And because of his experience (NLT), shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous (ESV), for he will bear all their sins (NLT).”

The word translated “experience” (NLT) is the standard Hebrew word for “knowledge.” In the Hebrew Bible this “knowledge” is not what we call “head knowledge” but is “experiential knowledge.” Hence the verse means, after the Messiah has experienced (having known) death and resurrection, he will “make many to be accounted righteous” (ESV; “make it possible for many to be counted righteous” NLT; “acquit many” NET Bible; “justify many” NIV, NASB, NKJV, CSB). Therefore the resurrection is crucial to the atonement, not just as a public confirmation that God has accepted the death of Christ as an atonement for sin, but also in rendering the death of Christ efficacious to “make it possible for many to be counted righteous” (NLT; cf. Romans 4:24-25).

The atoning death and resurrection of the Messiah, first prophesied in Isaiah 53, is found throughout the New Testament, not only in the Gospels and Acts but also in the Epistles including Revelation. The death and resurrection of the Messiah were predicted hundreds of years beforehand so that when the predictions came true, no one could have the excuse that God had not given enough evidence for him to accept such an outrageous teaching. Daniel even predicted that the death of the Messiah to atone for sin would happen before the destruction (again) of Jerusalem and the Temple (Daniel 9:24, 26), which happened in AD 70.

Atonement and Blood Sacrifices

There is no reasonable doubt that Isaiah 53 prophesied the death of the Messiah for sinners. We have applied the theological term “atonement” to what happened. If there is any doubt at all for using this term here, it is that the standard Hebrew word that is translated “to make atonement” (*kipper*) is missing in Isaiah 53.

In a thorough and even-handed study for a theological dictionary, Old Testament scholar Richard Averbeck shows that there is an intense competition between two options for the meaning of *kipper*: “to pay a ransom” or “to wipe away.” Both meanings are clearly found in their

respective contexts. Based on a syntactic analysis, he concludes that “to wipe away” is the basic meaning and “to pay a ransom” is derived from it.

Averbeck pays much attention to Leviticus 17:11, which gives the reason why God prohibited the people from eating the blood of an animal: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement (*kipper*) for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement (*kipper*) by the life.” Averbeck recognizes that in this context *kipper* takes on the derived meaning of “to pay a ransom (for sin)” but without losing sight of the basic meaning. In other words, the purpose of the blood sacrifice is “to wipe away (sin)” and the means is “to pay a ransom”—the blood of the animal as a substitute for the life of the sinner.

In the ancient biblical world people associated blood with life, and so to eat blood amounts to eating life. This is why God prohibited them from eating blood as it would cultivate a lack of respect for the sanctity of life. And because an animal’s life is in the blood, when the blood is poured on the altar, it is the life of the animal that is given up in exchange for the life of the sinner that makes atonement. It is in this sense that “without the shedding of blood [giving up of a life] there is no forgiveness of sin” (Hebrews 9:22).

Atonement and the Blood of Christ

Of course as the book of Hebrews spells out, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4). It was only symbolic and a temporary measure God used under the Mosaic Covenant in anticipation of the ultimate and only means that can take away sins—Christ’s death under the New Covenant as prophesied in Isaiah 53. A blood sacrifice then functioned like a “credit card” that God accepted under that system so that when a sinner offered it in repentance and faith, God would forgive him on the basis of the future death of Christ (Hebrews 9:15; Romans 3:25). Hence it is actually the shedding of the blood of Christ and not that of the animals that makes atonement for sin even then.

Now since “the shedding of blood” basically means the giving up of a life, though the standard term for making atonement (*kipper*) is not found in Isaiah 53, the standard act of making atonement—a life given up on behalf of sinners—is everywhere in Isaiah 53. In fact we have a better word already highlighted above, which literally means “cause to be righteous” (verse 11). Now just like Abraham’s faith in God, Paul says one’s faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead will be “counted to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:22-25; Genesis 15:6). So the word “cause to be righteous,” which is also in the context of the resurrection of Christ, actually means “make to be accounted as righteous” or “justify” as in the Bible translations. Hence not only is sin (unrighteousness) “wiped away,” righteousness is “rubbed in.”

According to philosopher Eleonore Stump, the English theological term “atonement,” literally at-one-ment (with God), “was coined to indicate the nature of the solution to the problem, as Christian theologians understood it.” Of course the problem assumed in Leviticus 17:11 and expressed in Isaiah 53 is sin. As for the solution, in Leviticus 17:11 it is expressed as *kipper* (referring to the death of the sacrificial animal) and in Isaiah 53 it is the death of the Messiah. Hence the word “atonement” is not actually a translation of *kipper* (to wipe away sin through paying a ransom), but rather a description of its goal (to be “at one” with God). And since we

cannot really be “at one” with God without being “accounted as righteous” before Him, the term “atonement” describes better what we read in Isaiah 53.

In any case Isaiah 53:10 refers to Christ’s death as “a guilt offering” (NASB, CSB, NIV original translation) though some translations render it as “an offering for guilt/sin” (ESV/NIV, NJKV, NLT). The Hebrew word is the standard term for the “guilt offering” in Leviticus. Also, in Daniel’s prophecy on the death of the Messiah “to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, ..., to bring in everlasting righteousness,” the word *kipper* is used: “and *to atone* for iniquity” (Daniel 9:24). Thus standard atonement language is actually applied to the death of the Messiah.

By using the standard word for “guilt offering” to describe the Messiah’s death, Isaiah is pointing to the ultimate Sacrifice that takes away sin once and for all. Evidently it is on the basis of Isaiah 53 that John the Baptist proclaimed: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). After all, Isaiah prophesied about the ministry of John too (Isaiah 40:3-5; Luke 3:4-6).

Atonement and the Lord’s Supper

Since “the blood of Christ” refers to the death of Christ, when we think of “the blood” of Christ as the basis for the atonement and hence the forgiveness of sin, we need to be consciously aware that it is actually the death of Christ and not the literal “blood” of Christ that atones for sin.

This is crucial because it is a natural human tendency to see intrinsic efficacy in numbers, words, objects and actions, especially in rituals. This means attributing built-in efficacy (magical powers) to numbers, words, objects and rituals to accomplish something. Thus for the Chinese, the number 8 is believed to bring a blessing while the number 4 a curse. Westerners have the number 13 as the counterpart to the Chinese number 4. This is basically pagan superstition. As human beings, Christians are not spared from seeing magical powers in numbers though they are more likely to see intrinsic efficacy in words, objects and rituals.

Now in the Lord’s Supper, the wine in the cup represents “my blood ... poured out for you” and the bread, “my body, which is given for you” (Luke 22:19-20). Both the wine and the bread represent the death of Christ. Thus “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim *the Lord’s death* until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). The Lord’s Supper is an essential ritual because as human beings we are both body and soul, which are a functional unity, and thus need to use our soul as well as our body in remembering and thus proclaiming the death of Christ. Similarly in Baptism, the other Christian sacrament, we use our soul as well as our body to express and proclaim faith in Christ.

Partaking of the Lord’s Supper then is not only a sacred but also a moving experience as it involves both body and soul. It is thus easy to think and feel that the sacred elements have intrinsic efficacy for the forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness of sin comes from God and God alone, received through faith in God and God alone, and not faith in God plus anything else, not even the sacred elements. So even if we acknowledge that forgiveness of sin comes from God but not apart from the partaking of the elements, it is still practically attributing magical powers to the elements. When the Lord’s Supper is thus observed as though it has intrinsic efficacy, it has become a pagan rite and no longer a Christian sacrament.

Healing through the Atonement

As human beings we are both body and soul, so we need to consider what is accomplished through the atonement in relation to both soul and body. Since the atonement is about the forgiveness of sin, its relation to the soul is clear. What about the body? We need sound Scriptural answers. Matthew cites Isaiah 53:4, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” in the context of Christ’s healing ministry: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases” (Matthew 8:17). The Hebrew words in Isaiah 53:4 translated “griefs” and “sorrows” can be rendered “illnesses” and “diseases” respectively as the former means “pain” and the latter means “sickness.” So in highlighting physical healing Matthew is not wrong in terms of meaning. However he applies it to the public ministry, and not the atoning death, of Christ. Thus Matthew is saying Jesus was burdened by the people’s sicknesses and thus healed them.

Hence we cannot use Matthew 8:17 simplistically to make any conclusion about the atonement in relation to the body. Peter cites Isaiah 53:5 and explicitly applies it to the death of Jesus on the cross: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). Without taking “By his wounds you have been healed” out of context, it is clear that it explains what happened when “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree,” the purpose or result of which is “that we ... die to sin and live to righteousness.” Thus Peter highlights healing through the atonement with respect to the soul for the purpose of his epistle, and says nothing about the healing with respect to the body.

Let us then consider Isaiah 53:5 as presented by Isaiah himself:

But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

The text is formatted to highlight the poetic lines as in Bible translations. One need not be familiar with the dynamics of Biblical Hebrew poetry to see that “with his wounds we are healed” is another way of saying “the chastisement [upon him] brought us peace.” And “the chastisement” and “wounds” refer to the piercing and crushing for our transgressions and iniquities. Hence the healing is about undoing the consequence of sin through the atoning death of the Messiah, bringing about “peace.” The Hebrew word translated “peace” is *shalom*, which basically means completeness or wholeness. In the context of the healing of persons through the atonement, it has to mean wellbeing in body and soul as a person is both body and soul.

This is because the consequence of sin is death, which is why to undo it Christ had to die on our behalf. When death is undone, both body and soul are healed. And the bodily resurrection of Christ demonstrates that death is undone once and for all, and replaced with a perfect “wellbeing”—a redeemed body that is imperishable and immortal (1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 53-55)—where illnesses and diseases are not even possible. However Paul qualifies: “And ... we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit ... wait eagerly for ... the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved” (Romans 8:23-24).

Thus the redemption of our bodies is still a hope but it has already been accomplished through the finished work of the atonement. In this sense “we are healed” even with respect to our bodies. This is demonstrated by the Spirit dwelling within our bodies as the “firstfruits,” that is “the guarantee” (Ephesians 1:14) for the redemption of our bodies. It is like having ordered and paid in full for a product from overseas, and it has already been shipped out with the guarantee that it shall surely arrive in perfect condition. Since the guaranteed redemption of our bodies is still a “hope,” we have not yet received it. Therefore we can still fall sick **and** we shall still die unless Christ returns before that, in which case, unlike Christians already dead, we shall experience the hope without having to die first (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). What a marvelous hope awaits everyone who is in Christ!

References

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