
A table of contents for *Epworth Review* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_epworth-review-01.php

Atonement

(1) FRANCES YOUNG

The first article in this series points to our cultural difficulties with atonement and then considers the matter in terms of real life situations. The interplay between our world and that of the Bible is necessary and can be fruitful. Its result is a corporate understanding of atonement which embraces the whole creation.

'FOR the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life' (Lev. 17:11).

Such a statement is virtually meaningless to most of our contemporaries. They may be English speakers, they may even have some links with a church, but meaning does not rest in abstract ideas. Meaning relates to a shared culture, to a set of assumptions built into the normal patterns of social interaction, and the necessary set of assumptions for understanding these words seems no longer to exist.

In an earlier generation, these words were related to a set of assumptions arising from what has been called the 'introspective conscience of the West'[1] and the need for salvation from guilt, a need thought to have been anticipated in the sacrificial rituals of the Jewish scriptures and met through the blood of Christ. True, scholars sought to go behind these assumptions to the original meaning of the Hebrew words in Ancient Near Eastern culture, but they were largely modifying, not revolutionising, the assumptions they shared with everyone else; and they were not much heard, since what they claimed depended on too much specialist knowledge and too great a leap of the historical imagination for most people. The scholarly distinction between propitiation and expiation was hardly an issue of everyday life!

And now? Some are guilty about the guilt-producing preaching of the past. Furthermore, the thrust of most serious theological writing lies elsewhere; the problem of suffering, or current issues like ecology, feminism, liberation, etc., have replaced atonement, even salvation. Yet this is the so-called Decade of Evangelism, and the 'simple Gospel' is still heard in Black churches and Gospel Halls. Growth is reported in churches which still sing about the blood of Christ and create a shared set of cultural assumptions in which that seems to make sense, largely by appealing to its authoritative givenness in scripture. Is all this language simply an albatross round our necks? If not, how can it make sense?

That very question implies abandoning the kind of approach to biblical interpretation that has dominated the last couple of centuries, and fuelled the debates between so-called liberals and those who claim to be fundamentalist or evangelical. The issue is not simply a matter of 'getting back to the original', or 'taking the text literally'. We may or may not be able

to do the historical reconstruction depending on the adequacy of the evidence: such reconstruction may or may not be illuminating when it comes to trying to appropriate the ideas in a different cultural setting; but if we cannot bring a text of the past into meaningful relation with the social realities of the present, then eventually no-one will behave as if it is of any significance, except those who artificially idolise it. Good preachers have always known that 'the Word' has to be 'applied'.

Let's begin with a list of words commonly regarded as biblical and associated with the 'work of Christ'; atonement, justification, propitiation, expiation, reconciliation, redemption, revelation, salvation, sanctification. How might we define them?

The important thing to recognise is that despite appearances they mostly are or derive from 'ordinary' words used in daily life. Apart from religious connotations, Chambers dictionary suggests the following:

atonement: the act of atoning, originally making-at-one, or reconciliation; or giving satisfaction or making reparation. (We might add making amends, or paying compensation.)

justification: the act of justifying, and to justify is to prove or show to be just or right. (We might add that to justify oneself is to make excuses.)

propitiation: the act of propitiating, and to propitiate is to render favourable or appease, from the Latin *propitius* meaning well-disposed. (We might add that this implies making up to someone, often offering a gift or paying compensation.)

expiation: the act of expiating, which is defined as making atonement, or the means by which atonement is made (see above).

reconciliation: the act or means of reconciling, and to reconcile is to restore or bring back friendship or union; to bring to agreement or contentment; to pacify or conciliate.

redemption: the act of redeeming, and to redeem is to buy back, to recover or free by payment, to ransom or rescue.

revelation: the act of revealing, and to reveal is to make known, disclose, from Latin to unveil.

salvation: act of saving, and to save is to bring safe out of evil, rescue, protect.

sanctification: (the exception which proves the rule) the act of sanctifying, and to sanctify is to make, declare, regard as or show to be sacred or holy (which is the only specifically religious act in this list).

The list of definitions shows that the key words are almost all to do with restoring broken relationships. This kind of thing is not remote from our culture or society! It may help to consider the following episodes and situations.

Episode 1: A boy comes home from school with a friend. They disappear down the garden. Next thing we know is that they are throwing stones at a window in an old barn next door. True, it looks like a dilapidated building, but it has in fact been converted into a pleasant flat and is occupied by an old couple, who not only find their lounge window shattered, but are faced

with the hazard of flying stones bouncing across their floor. An event has happened to shatter peace between neighbours, however remote their relationship. What has to happen to make it possible for them to live side by side without endless recrimination?

Is apology enough? Scarcely!

Is a box of chocolates and a bunch of flowers enough? Hardly!

Both are necessary, but only as an adjunct to compensation, to the repair of the damaged window.

Atonement implies that the offender satisfies the offended party by offering reparation, making amends by putting things to rights and going further to demonstrate sincere repentance and to offer a token of future goodwill.

But the boy cannot afford it. So who carries the can? His parents, of course. But that does not absolve the boy from the shame and embarrassment of personally apologising and offering the bunch of flowers and box of chocolates.

Situation 1: Israel's existence is some compensation for the Holocaust.

Situation 2: Whites have to make amends for the years of apartheid.

Episode 2: Two girls are running along a canal bank. It's in need of repair. One slips and ends up in the lethal filth of an urban waterway, the other panics. Can she save herself? It's more likely that her life will depend on someone being around to pull her out with a lifebelt or something else that happens to be at hand.

Salvation means rescue, and its 'content' is related to the mess someone is in. Usually it depends on receiving assistance from someone else, and that may mean giving up the struggle and collaborating with instructions.

A youth cycles by, but ignores the situation. His parents justify his indifference on the grounds that he was too young to do anything — they are relieved he didn't get involved and run risks himself. The inquest determined that if he had used his bike to alert a policeman on a nearby bridge, help could have arrived in time. His irresponsibility was not justifiable.

Situation 3: Records reveal that the British authorities ignored information about Auschwitz because it was simply incredible.

Situation 4: Agreement is reached on the ransom to be paid for the release of the hostages.

Situation 5: If the Birmingham 6 are innocent, nothing can absolve British justice. Their punishment is nothing other than a gross miscarriage of justice.

I do not propose to comment on these 'illustrations'. They are intended to show that the language used in discussion of the doctrine of atonement does relate to social realities in our culture, in situations both individual and corporate. The discerning reader will undoubtedly make significant connections, pointers to which have been incorporated in the material, and not simply where the vocabulary used is explicitly reminiscent of the words defined to begin with.

But what about the language of sacrifice? Here we are in greater difficulties. In a culture which does not generally recognise the existence of powers to be propitiated, spirits and ancestors with whom fellowship is important, the language of sacrifice has been debased. African Christians know it is not primarily about 'giving up' but rather 'offering' and 'feasting'. It is still part of the culture within which they live.

But wait: offering gifts is also part of our social interchange. Our culture disapproves of bare-faced bribes, but Heads of State and negotiating industrialists still exchange gifts as marks of mutual interest, and entertain one another to banquets. We celebrate birthdays, with gifts and parties. We say 'thank you' or 'sorry' by offering gifts. We honour someone by holding a dinner, or making a presentation, perhaps to mark retirement.

The social experiences necessary for understanding are there. What is missing is the sense of a divine society or divine being to which similar activities might relate. Hence 'sacrifice' and 'sanctification' no longer create their old associations, and propitiation (or expiation) have acquired purely secular meanings despite their originally religious connotations.

We cannot, therefore, rest content with the narrow vision of the dominant social and cultural world in which we live. The challenge of that 'alien' world of the Bible must be allowed to bear upon our assumptions. For it speaks authoritatively of a people and a culture which grasped things our culture in general no longer understands. The 'two-way' process of hermeneutics, recognising that the world of the Bible is different from ours, and yet a view of the same world to which attention might fruitfully be paid, has to be faced.

If salvation is rescue, what do we need to be rescued from? The answer we think of as traditional is guilt and sin. Since the Reformation, individual guilt has fuelled the evangelical message. Psychologists tell us there is still much guilt around, but we are now encouraged to think a lot of it is inappropriate, and for most 'decent' Church people, it is only artificially put at the centre: we really are 'not so bad' after all. (This is not to suggest that it is not important for some individuals, or appropriate in some contexts, e.g. prison ministry.)

What is emerging in recent scholarship is an appreciation of the fact that individual guilt was not the dominant concern in the Bible. Scholars used to think that Ezekiel was a great advance on earlier ideas, precisely because here the individual is supposed to take responsibility for personal wrong acts. What has become clear is that Ezekiel is really addressing his contemporaries, a generation which claimed that they were suffering exile because of the sins of past generations. As in the rest of the Bible, sin primarily relates to corporate social realities.

But surely that is not true of the New Testament, you may retort, especially Paul with his troubled conscience and his dramatic conversion. But perhaps we have been reading Paul too much in the light of Luther. Such is the challenge of Krister Stendahl[2] and E.P. Sanders.[3] After all Paul claims to have been a Pharisee of the Pharisees, *blameless according to the*

Law (Phil.3:6). Suppose Paul did not move from plight to solution, but from solution to plight. Suppose Paul only realised the impossibility of living a pure life in the light of Christ. And what about Bruce Malina's look at *The New Testament World*[4] through the eyes of a cultural anthropologist? He at least asks us to consider the possibility that ancient culture was not individualist but ancients had 'dyadic personalities' so that identity related to social role, and conscience to the shame of flouting social expectations rather than some psychologically experienced guilt.

The idea of sin, even when not simply equated with sex, has been individualised and moralised in our religious culture, and so has the idea of salvation. We find the notion of corporate (or Original?) sin problematic. Or do we? Consider the following, the outcome of a dream I had one holiday.

Gadara 1945

Over the crest of the hill, the thunder of trotters
The thunder of trotters pursued by a cloud of dust,
The thunder of thousands stampeding down and down.

Over the edge of the crag, the thunder of waters,
The thunder of waters, deep in abysmal depths,
The thunder of bodies, cascading down to drown.

If only the thunder would drown the demons of war,
Of pogroms, oppression and concentration camps,
Apartheid, the Gulag and famine and greed and fear.

But among the tombs humanity sits and cries,
Indulging in self-abuse, cutting its flesh,
Cutting its flesh with stones till blood appear.

Among the tombs insanity sits, released
From every restraint — frustration has fractured the chains,
The fetters are frayed by friction and violence — we're free,

Yet demon-possessed can't enjoy our liberty.
Among the tombs we sit cutting our flesh,
Disturbed in our insecure security.

'Don't disturb us, leave us alone,' we cry distraught,
Distraught we cry out, 'Have you come to torment? Don't disturb!
We're free, we've broken our chains; so leave us in peace.'

The dread demand's already come: 'Your name?'
'We're the army of occupation,' is our reply.
'We're the Legion detailed to act as security police

To ensure that the truth never gets out and here
Humanity sits tormented and crying out:
We're free, we've broken our chains; so leave us alone.'

Demonic delusion like this cannot be suppressed
Or sublimated, controlled or banished or solved
By denial, self-knowledge or human will on its own.

Could transference to innocent victims — indeed
Their sacrifice in the boiling abyss of hell —
Ever free humanity's mind from Legion's power?

Permission was given — and over the crest of the hill
The thunder of horrors, pursued by a mushroom cloud,
The thunder of thousands meeting destiny's hour.

To come to its senses, humanity must see
That only the chains of love can set us free,
That divine grace is essential for liberty.

Where's the 'rub' if it is not individual guilt? It is the desperate anxiety produced by the 'gonewrongness' of the world, the power of human aggression and oppression, the sense of helplessness to do anything about it, even in a democracy, the feeling of being trapped by one's social or ethnic position, the problem of suffering on a scale almost unimaginable, the approach of nuclear or ecological disaster . . . Corporate sin is a reality.

The dynamic for Paul, I suggest, was a transformation beginning with the revelation of the exalted Christ (see Segal)[5], understood through a fresh reading of the scriptures, especially Jeremiah. His vocation to the Gentiles (nations) was perceived in terms of Jeremiah's call-vision (Jer.1:4-10; cf. Gal.1:15-16, 1 Cor.1:27,31, 2:6,10, 2 Cor.10:8-18, etc.); his message in terms of the new covenant of Jer.31:31ff. (2 Cor.3 *et al.loc.*).[6] Atonement was the process whereby the corporate human failure (Romans 1-3) was transformed into new creation (2 Cor.5:17). The new humanity in Christ revealed the corruptness of the old. Paul moved, not from personal guilt to individual salvation, but from a vision of Christ the new creation to discernment of humanity's tragedy — from solution to plight.

Atonement embraces the whole creation, and therefore certainly includes the individual. The traditional post-Reformation 'simple Gospel', and indeed the traditional post-mediaeval 'theories' of atonement all express part of what it is about. It is impossible to explore here the many facets which years of research and thinking have uncovered for me. Let me outline some principles and insights in these concluding paragraphs.

Principle 1. Sin and suffering are not two separate issues, but are linked with one another, often not in terms of individual responsibility — it is not right to blame someone for their illness — but in terms of corporate human

responsibility, e.g. the Ethiopian earthquake, the slaughter on the roads, etc.

Principle 2. There must be coherence between the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of atonement. (Different traditions tend to give one or the other priority, and this results in very different stances towards the world.)

Principle 3. The Cross is about God taking responsibility for the 'gone-wrongness' of God's world — even if you believe in a devil, God remains ultimately responsible (unless you think the devil is eternal rather than a fallen creature of the one God, in which case you are not within the monotheistic Judaeo-Christian tradition). In other words, in Christian theology the only proper theodicy is the act of atonement revealed in Christ.

Insight 1. Simone Weil suggested that the act of creation is an act of abandonment — the only way that the infinite God could create was by withdrawal, allowing space for something to exist other than God's self. This necessarily involved risk — indeed a kind of alienation or the absence of God. The presence of God in creation is a constant waiting, a struggle to bring order out of chaos without violating the freedom of the 'other' God has permitted to be. The best parable is that of a loving parent with a recalcitrant teenager, though the intention is to speak of the whole created universe, not simply of individual relationships with God, which mirror the cosmic dynamic.[7]

Insight 2. The doctrinal development of the first few centuries of Christian history is the story of people learning to do justice to the reality of the salvation revealed in the scriptures and experienced in the liturgy of the Church. They exploited a vast range of language, symbol and imagery, with the result that scholarly studies of atonement have found in the literature whatever 'theory' they wished to emphasise. Fundamental to patristic thinking, however, was the notion of atonement as re-integration, or as the 'marriage' between God and his creation. This was expressed in many different philosophical and doctrinal forms, but in the end the doctrine of incarnation was integral to this thinking.[8]

Conclusion

This article is not meant to spell out answers but to open doors — it is after all the introduction to a series. But let's return to the initial problematic text. Hearts and blood may seem to have been de-mystified by transplants, but television drama suggests otherwise. There is something instinctive about blood being sacred, for it is the life. The important thing about the Leviticus text is that God is the subject of the sentence, as also in Rom.3:25: the biblical claim is that God has taken action to supply what is necessary for the healing of God's own broken world, and like a responsible parent has undertaken the payment of compensation for the damage of human sin.

Notes

1 Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, SCM 1977.

2 Op.cit.
3 E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, SCM 1977; cf. *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, Fortress 1983, and *Paul*, Past Masters series, OUP, 1991.
4 Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World*, Insights from cultural anthropology, SCM 1983.
5 Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert*, The Apostasy and Apostolate of Saul the Pharisee, YUP 1990.
6 See further 'The Biblical Roots of Paul's Perceptions', in Frances Young and David Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*, SPCK 1987; and 'Understanding Romans in the light of 2 Corinthians', SJT (forthcoming).
7 See further Frances Young, *Can these dry bones live?*, SCM 1982.
8 See further Frances Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, SCM 1991.

Mary: A Two-edged Sword to Pierce our Hearts?

PAULINE WARNER

This paper intends to address the question 'How can Mary, the mother of Jesus, be used in Methodist worship and devotion?' although the much more fundamental question 'Would we want to?' must also be asked. It does not make claims to being erudite scholarship but is a personal reflection on recent trends. It is also acknowledged to be somewhat introspectively Methodist. It just seemed to me that the subject would simply become too lengthy and complex to handle if I engaged in too much ecumenical dialogue although, given the subject matter, a certain amount is inevitable.

I DISCERN three main approaches, all of which mutually criticise the others. Firstly, there is the traditional Protestant which is suspicious of any emphasis on Mary in case she detracts from the uniqueness of Christ. Until recently, this approach probably stood unchallenged in Methodism but now the feminist theologians and those who celebrate 'femininity' or 'the feminine' have argued against this as being excessively 'masculine'.

Before we move to consider these various approaches, it might be a good idea to take a look at what the 'staple diet' (in most places!) of the *Methodist Service Book* and the hymn book *Hymns and Psalms* has to offer. The Service Book is easy. Mary is the focus of attention on the fourth Sunday in Advent. This will have been a new departure for most Methodist churches and only have happened since the more disciplined observation of the lectionary. We also have to be honest and say that, since this is the week which is most likely to be chosen for the Sunday School Nativity Play, this is often not so much a moveable feast as a vanishing one!

Nevertheless the increasing practice of the Advent Candle and its accompanying hymn (88) does make it likely that the Annunciation will get