

THE “GOSPEL” OF DIVINE ABUSE

Redeeming the Gospel from
Gruesome Popular Preaching of
an Abusive and Violent God

EITAN BAR

IN DEDICATION

To anyone who once identified as a Christian believer but has since left the church. I hope this book can at least change your perspective on God.



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**“For God so hated the world
that he punished, tortured, and
abused his one and only
innocent Son.”**

(John 3:16, according to some popular preachers)

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PROLOGUE

"Mom! Mom! Quickly! There's a monster in my bedroom! It is angry at me and says I need to die because it is perfect and I am not! Mom, Hurry!"

"Oh, don't worry, sweetie, the monster may look furious, but it actually loves you very much. This is why it must kill you. But look, it just unleashed its wrath on its own son instead, crushing, abusing, and killing it, so it doesn't have to devour you."

"You're right, Mom. The monster seems appeased and relaxed. Wow! what amazing love the monster had for me — wicked child that I am — that it would unleash the anger and hate I deserve on its own innocent son instead!"

"Well, honeybee, ponder on it as you fall back asleep. But from now on, try and behave. We don't want the monster to lose its temper again."

Is this the version of the "gospel" that many are hearing today? Is this the message that an increasing number of Christian pastors are conveying through their pulpits, books, and YouTube videos nowadays? Unfortunately, as you will see for yourself, the answer is a resounding yes. Here is one example: "We always say the Cliché, '*God Hates the sin, but he loves the sinner.*' That's nonsense! The Bible speaks of Him abhorring us, and that we're loathsome in His sight, and He can't stand to even look at us..." (R.C. Sproul, reformed pastor)⁵⁰⁰

The version of the gospel that you, or anyone else for that matter, believe and teach, depends on how you answer the following questions: **'Who killed Jesus, and why did he have to die?'** This is not just another theological question, but one that will directly influence how you perceive and live your life.

Christ faced violent wrath, hatred, abuse, and death, but caused by whom? Who exactly tortured and killed Jesus? If you were to ask five Christian friends this question, you would be surprised by how varied their answers would be. However, aside from friends, you would expect a well-established answer to this crucial question from those who preach from the pulpit. So, let us ask some of them:

"Who killed Jesus? God. God killed Jesus!" declares John MacArthur.⁵⁰¹ **"Men did not kill Jesus – God did!"** confirms David Shackelford.⁵⁰² **"Yeah, God killed Jesus!"** concluded Voddie Baucham,⁵⁰³ who was also amazed by the fact that **"God would crush and kill His own Son"** in his place.⁵⁰⁴ Likewise, C. J. Mahaney preached to his followers how God **"Crushed his son for you! He crushed Him! He bruised him! He punished him! He disfigured him! He crushed him! With all of the righteous wrath!"**⁵⁰⁵ And Paul Washer also says that **"God was going to be hurled upon Him and crush Him to pieces...His own Father crushed Him!"**⁵⁰⁶ And David Platt concluded that **"All God's holy wrath and hatred toward sin and sinners... poured out on Him."**⁵⁰⁷

PREFACE

Some may recognize me as the Israeli-Jewish guy behind the online evangelistic videos produced with ONE FOR ISRAEL, a ministry on whose founding team I served some years ago before leaving in 2022. Others may know me from the viral testimonial videos of Jews on Jacobsen's iconic gray egg chair, an idea I first came up with in cooperation with Chosen People Ministries' president. If you are Jewish, you may recognize me from my debates with Orthodox Jewish rabbis. However, evangelism and apologetics are merely expressions of my true passion, which is knowing and understanding everything I can about God, also known as "theology." This is why I spent the better part of my life earning my bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees in this field.

Over the past twenty years, I have had thousands upon thousands of discussions about the gospel, both in real life and online, mainly with Jewish people. A few months ago, an Orthodox rabbi said that he considered me the biggest threat to rabbinic Judaism since the time of Paul. He did not mean it as such, but I took it as a huge compliment. I have dialogued with all fragments of Judaism, from ultra-Orthodox rabbis to militant Israeli atheists. As a Christian-Jewish follower of Jesus myself, my interactions with Jews have challenged me, theologically speaking, to dare and reconsider religious conventions and traditions that others accept without question. In fact, as Israeli Jewish believers in Jesus who speak Hebrew natively, we often hear that we see and understand Scriptures differently than the average non-Jewish Christian. If that is true, it is probably due to our Jewish heritage and our native language being Hebrew, the language of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Unfortunately, since the death of the apostles, not many Jews were allowed to participate and have a theological voice within

Christianity. The side effects of this are evident. But it is time to turn the wheels back and join the conversation. I humbly believe that we, Israeli Jewish believers in Jesus, have a unique voice and perspective to offer Christianity, one that may otherwise be overlooked. In fact, that is precisely why I wrote this book. My intention is not for it to be another theology book to help you fall asleep at night. Instead, this is a down-to-earth book that does not require you to have a degree in the Bible to understand things. It is not a technical book for theology nerds, but one for anyone who cares enough about the latest — and perhaps most important — trends in contemporary Christian theology and wants to get a glimpse of some of the most heated debates of today that affect every Christian and many non-Christians.

At the same time, I wrote this book assuming that the reader had heard at least some basics about Christianity and the Christian gospel before (although different views exist among Christians regarding what the gospel even is). While written for the average person, this book's core discussion includes several theological doctrines such as atonement, salvation, election, sin, free will, hell, love, hate, wrath, and more. These comprise the heart and soul of current discussions and debates within Christianity, but I will present them in plain language.

Disclaimer:

Israeli-born people are often described as "Sabra" (a prickly cactus). While we are very sweet on the inside, we are quite direct and do not beat around the bush. Additionally, you have to remember that I am a Jew, and sarcasm is part of our DNA. Those who are not Israeli or Jewish may find us offensive or cynical at times, but it is not usually our intention. So, if you find my writing style a bit coarse later on, please know that my aim is not to offend anyone. In fact, some of the figures I will quote and challenge in this book are people I know personally and have the utmost respect for. Even those I will strongly disagree with on some topics are people who, without a doubt, love Christianity and are zealous for God.

Also, please keep in mind that English is not my native language, so my writing level may reflect that.

About the footnotes and endnotes:

The footnotes in this book are meant to further enrich your reading experience, don't skip them. However, for a smoother reading experience, footnotes that are plain references to sources (like books, articles, videos or URLs) were converted to endnotes and are available at the very end of the book. Therefore, subscripts numbering 1-199 are footnotes at the bottom of the page, while subscripts numbering 500-699 are endnotes that were moved to the end of the book (and you can feel free to ignore them).

I hope you enjoy the ride, but know we might sometimes experience turbulence!

INTRODUCTION

Indeed, we "preach Christ crucified,"¹ as Paul the Apostle reminds the Corinthians. But crucified by whom? With much respect to the honorable reformed² gentlemen quoted above, the very disciples of Jesus, time and again, preached the exact opposite. Not God, but men who abused, poured out their violent wrath and hatred on Christ, ultimately killing Him:

***You**, with the help of wicked men,
put him to death by nailing him to the cross.
(Acts 2:23)*

*Jesus whom **you** crucified.
(Acts 2:36)*

*Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom **you** crucified.
(Acts 4:10)*

*Jesus, whom **you** had put to death
by hanging Him on a cross.
(Acts 5:30)*

¹ 1st Corinthians 1:23

² The terms "Reformed" and "Calvinist" are often used interchangeably.

*The Righteous One,
whom **you** have now betrayed and murdered.
(Acts 7:52)*

***They** [rulers of this age] have
crucified the Lord of glory.
(1st Cor 2:8)*

Well, this is it. Case closed! God did not kill Jesus; men did. Right? I mean, all over the New Testament, mankind is blamed for murdering Christ.³ Never God.

And yet, what about Isaiah 53:10, “**It was the Lord’s will to crush him,**” or Jesus’s cry in Matthew 27:46, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” And what about when Jesus prayed for God to take away the **cup of wrath** from him in Matthew 26:39? Didn’t God — as some pastors claim — need to unleash his hate and anger on us, and he poured that cup on Jesus instead?

Well, perhaps things are a bit more complicated than they seem. The question of who killed Jesus is so crucial that, to no surprise, it turned into a heated topic of dispute, a hot potato, if you will. Lately, it has even sparked some exciting debates.⁵⁰⁸

Don't be fooled into thinking that this is a secondary or tedious theological argument. The answers to the questions "Who killed Jesus?" and "Why did Jesus have to die?" will ultimately affect the very essence of your faith and your perception of God — assuming you believe in one — and His character. It will determine what message you believe and teach others, and shape the lens through which you perceive people, life, and yourself.

There is no way around it — how you understand what happened on the cross will directly affect your belief in who God is:

³ More examples: Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 24:20; 1st Corinthians 2:8; Acts 10:39; 13:28; 1st Thess. 2:15.

a loving and compassionate Father or an angry, hateful moral monster who is out there to get you. Subsequently, this will affect how you live your life. You might not see the connection now, but I promise you will by the end of the book.

As I previously mentioned, my perspective is a unique one. I am a Jew among Jews in the Jewish state of Israel, yet I am also a believer in Yeshua.⁴ Throughout my many years of publicly evangelizing the people of Israel, I've realized that the objections to Christianity from the Jewish community⁵ can often shed much-needed light on some Christian doctrines. This challenges me to reconsider whether these are indeed biblical, a tradition, or perhaps just someone's distorted interpretation.

This book is dedicated to dealing with some doctrines that I, as a Jewish follower of Christ, find very disturbing and unsettling, to say the least. More specifically, a particular doctrine is trending strong and has established itself as formal in some Christian denominations. According to this doctrine, God himself poured out his divine violent wrath and hate on Jesus by abusing, crushing, torturing, and punishing Him. Through this process, God the Father temporarily cut off God the Son out of the Trinity. What a mess. I decided to label this view under the name "Divine Abuse," hence the name of the book.

Soon, I will let some quotes speak for themselves, but know that I am not the first to notice that something wrong is developing in Christianity - a gospel whereby God, as angry as they come, is the executioner of his own Son. For example, consider the words of Roger E. Olson, a Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at Baylor University:

⁴ Yeshua is the Hebrew name for Jesus. Yeshua means "Salvation".

⁵ I have published a book about it in 2019: "Refuting Rabbinic Objections to Christianity."

Recently a leading evangelical pastor and author has declared publicly that “God killed Jesus”—meaning, I suppose, the Father killed Jesus. That’s his way (I assume) of emphasizing the penal substitution theory of the atonement. Personally, I think some “friends of penal substitution” are its worst enemies. In the immortal words of Pogo, they should confess, “We have met the enemy and he are us.” ...they pit the Father against the Son, thus messing with the Trinity.⁵⁰⁹

Likewise, the well-known British New-Testament Scholar, Thomas Wright, shares some of the same feelings:

This is how many, many people, particularly young people, hear it: The idea being that there is this big bullying, angry God who's very cross with us all, and he's got a big stick, and he's about to lash out, and fortunately somebody gets in the way, happens to be his own son (so that somehow makes it alright), and here we get off

I had a public discussion on this with some colleagues in America, and one angry theologian gone up from the floor and said: "Nobody believes that! Nobody teaches that these days!" One of the colleagues on the panel stood up, answered it for me, he said:

"I teach first-year undergrads at a certain college. What Tom has said is precisely what they all think the gospel is, and they're struggling to know whether to believe it or not."

So now, if that is what people have heard and are hearing, then we've got some serious work to do because we have taken John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son," and what

*people have heard is "God so hated the world that he killed his only Son." And then when you say that in a world where there is child abuse and domestic violence and so on, people think:
"I know that bully of a God - and I hate him."⁵¹⁰*

“But Eitan,” you may wonder, “Aren’t you in Israel evangelizing the Jews? So what business is it of yours? Why on earth would you write a book on such theological argument?”

Well, thank you for asking. There are several reasons why I decided to write this book. Firstly, as a follower of Jesus, I have a deep connection with Christianity, no matter where it is practiced. Secondly, I believe that Divine Abuse is a dreadful misrepresentation of God (also through evangelism) that needs to be addressed, even if it is from the other side of the world. Thirdly, many of the concepts that Divine Abuse is based upon are due to a misunderstanding and twisting of Hebrew words in the Hebrew Scriptures (my mother tongue). Fourthly, whatever happens in America, sooner or later, affects the rest of the world. Allow me to provide an example from an Israeli Jewish-Atheist who attempts to attack and ridicule what he perceives to be the Christian gospel. I have translated it from Hebrew:

So, you Christians believe God created people who are finite. And then he hates them and is filled with wrath towards them because they are not perfect. At some point, he couldn't hold his anger any longer, so he had to release it. But rather than taking it out on them, he decided instead to abuse and murder his innocent son, who didn't do anything wrong.

And this, to you, is a "God of love"? If this is the Christian gospel, it sounds distorted and unfair. This is not love nor justice, but an angry, wrathful,

*and bloodthirsty monster who's angry with himself
for creating imperfect creatures!*⁶

The internet made the world a much smaller place, a global village filled with endless information widely available to everyone, everywhere. In Israel, only 1.9% are Christians.⁷ For better or for worse, there is very little information available in Hebrew about the Christian faith. As a result, Israelis who are curious about Christianity will likely come across YouTube videos by popular American preachers (whom I will frequently quote in this book). The combined social media following of these pastors is in the millions, making them highly influential, regardless of whether what they teach is true or not. I am confident that the Israeli Atheist who wrote to me watched several of these "Divine Abuse" preachers on YouTube. Like him, many Jews worldwide likely did as well.

"Wait a minute!" you might be saying, "are you not developing a straw man argument⁸ here?" Honestly, I wish that was the case. But unfortunately, it is not. Let me throw you into the deep end with a few juicy quotes. The following staggering collection is a great example of what preachers of Divine Abuse believe.

In his sermon "God Hates the Sin and the Sinner," Reformed Pastor Tim Conway explains how he views the gospel:

*What Scripture tells us is that all of mankind are
children of wrath. We are objects of the hatred of
God by nature. We don't deserve His love... God is*

⁶ A message sent to me by an Israeli atheist.

⁷ That is, Christians of all denominations. Evangelicals are less than 0.3%. And adult Jews who believe in Jesus, like myself, are only 0.05%.

⁸ Straw man argument is "a form of argument and an informal fallacy of having the impression of refuting an argument, whereas the real subject of the argument was not addressed or refuted, but instead replaced with a false one." (Downes, Stephen. "The Logical Fallacies").

*not unjust to hate mankind because mankind is a hateful thing by nature. It ought to be hated.*⁵¹¹

Famous reformed-Baptist pastor John Piper backs this up:

*It is just not true to give the impression that God doesn't hate sinners by saying, "he loves the sinner and hates the sin." He does hate sinners.*⁵¹²

Wyatt Graham, a director of The Gospel Coalition,⁹ defines the gospel in this way:

*Jesus bore divine wrath at the cross for our sake, and so protected us from it. This act implies that God hates humans since he would have poured wrath upon humans...*⁵¹³

Likewise, David Platt, also a famous reformed-Baptist preacher and best-selling author, explains:

*Jesus was pulverized under the weight of God's wrath—as he stood in our place...How can God show both holy hatred and holy love toward sinners at the same time? This is the climactic question of the Bible, and the answer is the cross. At the cross, God showed the full expression of his wrath.*⁵¹⁴

Founder of Mars Hill Church, reformed pastor Mark Driscoll, also explained:

*God's anger at sin and hatred of sinners causes him to pour out his wrath [on Jesus].*⁵¹⁵

⁹ TGC is considered by many as the online hub of Calvinism.

And in his sermon, "Jesus sweats blood," Driscoll explained to his church:

See, at the cross of Jesus, there is hatred for Jesus and love for us...on the cross, the wrath of God was poured out on the Son of God. To say it another way, Jesus took the cup on the cross and drank every single drop of the wrath of God, and he endured it. This was physical, emotional, spiritual, mental suffering to a degree that is incomprehensible.⁵¹⁶

Another famous reformed pastor, John MacArthur, said:

We must remember, however, that sin did not kill Jesus; God did. The suffering servant's death was nothing less than a punishment administered by God for sins others had committed.⁵¹⁷

God put his own Son to death? That is precisely what Scripture teaches.⁵¹⁸

In his sermon titled "The Pleasure of God in Bruising the Son," John Piper preached:

Jesus was not swept away by the wrath of uncontrolled men. He was bruised by his Father.⁵¹⁹

And in his book, Piper wrote:

The ultimate answer to the question, "who crucified Jesus?" is: God did. It is a staggering thought. Jesus was his Son. And the suffering was unsurpassed. But the whole message of the Bible leads to this conclusion.⁵²⁰

Wayne Grudem, a reformed scholar at Phoenix seminary, explains his view of the gospel:

*God the Father, the mighty Creator, the Lord of the universe, poured out on Jesus the fury of his wrath: Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.*⁵²¹

Another reformed scholar, Dan Wallace, quotes Grudem and adds:

*At the cross, the fury of all that stored up wrath against sin was unleashed against God's own son.*⁵²²

Trevin Wax of The Gospel Coalition argues:

*God killed Jesus. I know that might sound harsh, and it is, indeed, hard to wrap your mind around. But it's true. God the Father sacrificed his Son. He killed his Son in order to spare us His righteous wrath.*⁵²³

A popular YouTube preacher, reformed-Baptist pastor Paul Washer (John MacArthur's protégé), in his explanation of "how the believer is saved," explains that it is:

*Because of what God did to Him: He crushed Him under the full force of His wrath against us...The Father takes the knife, draws back His arm, and slays His Son...*⁵²⁴

Nick Batzig, a Reformed pastor of The Gospel Coalition, wrote:

*Is it right, in any sense whatsoever, to say that the Father was angry with the Son when He punished the Son in our place and for our sin...He made the Son the object of His just displeasure and anger as the representative who stood in our place to atone for our sin and to propitiate God's wrath.*⁵²⁵

It is only a small logical step to see how God the Father crushing, torturing, and killing God the Son means that the Triune God committed a cosmic suicide. As part of a devotional in a popular magazine for Christian women, it indicates exactly that:

*God tortured His son and Himself to release the bondage and grip of sin on His creation.*⁵²⁶

These quotes above were only a taste of what I will deal with in this book. If you, too, have found these “Divine Abuse” quotes attempting to explain the gospel overwhelming, unsettling, and disturbing, it is for two reasons. First, your intuition tells you something is wrong with how they describe God and the Gospel. You can feel it in your guts. A few theologians from different denominations also started to raise their voices. Some have even called it “cosmic child abuse.”⁵²⁷ But this book will be the first to systematically define, deconstruct and refute Divine Abuse and its doctrines.

The second reason is that in your mind, you try and remember verses supporting these mind-boggling quotations, but you struggle to do so for a reason. Tim Mackie,¹⁰ theologian and creator of “The Bible Project” video series, admits:

*There's never a moment in the gospels or anywhere in the New Testament that says Jesus suffered the wrath of God or bore the wrath of God. There's not one text in the whole New Testament.*⁵²⁸

¹⁰ The Bible Project, whom Dr. Mackie co-founded, received some intense criticism by The Gospel Coalition for not teaching God’s wrath poured on Jesus, as posted in their review of the Bible Project: “What is lacking is any explanation of the cross as a propitiation, that is, a sacrifice that turned away the wrath of God against sinful humanity.” (“Review: The Bible Project – Brilliant but Flawed”, The Gospel Coalition website; 05/06/2018)

However, the preachers of Divine Abuse would disagree with Mackie, citing three particular places in the Bible that they believe support their view. By the time you finish reading this book, you will be able to logically and biblically explain why Divine Abuse arguments are false and a distortion of the gospel.

I also believe that this book will provide a better understanding of concepts such as love, hate, sin, holiness, wrath, hell, sacrifice, and atonement. By 'better,' I mean adjusting some modern views to align with the way ancient Israelites saw them during biblical times. I believe that several misunderstood biblical concepts and verses form the basis of Divine Abuse's heresies, and as we go over them, some may surprise you, but hopefully, they will give you a deeper understanding of the gospel and the true character of God.

Lastly, it is not hard to imagine how a non-Christian visiting a church on a Sunday and hearing the earlier quotes from the pulpit might imagine the God of Christianity to be cruel and abusive - a bloodthirsty moral monster who demands vengeance and death to be appeased. It would not be surprising if this visitor sneaks out of the church and never returns. In fact, I strongly believe that Divine Abuse is one of the primary reasons why churches are getting emptier by the moment, particularly among young people.

The Structure of the Book

I divided the book into five parts:

PART I – The Basics: Love, Blood, and Sacrifice

Here, we will discuss some old terms that often confuse Christians. Ideas that can be challenging for the modern ear to entertain, especially when it comes to ancient Hebrew words or concepts that became foreign to us in the 21st century. Understanding wrong terms like “love,” “blood,” “sin,” “atonement,” and “sacrifice” will directly affect the way one perceives the gospel. In fact, I believe this to be one of the main errors of Divine Abuse. I will not explain these terms through the eyes of the church fathers or the protestant reformers, as many pastors often do. I will, however, approach the terms in subject in light of the original meaning and context at their source - the Hebrew Scriptures. In chapter three, which perhaps will be a bit monotonous to some, I will survey the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

PART II – What happened when Jesus died?

Two billion Christians around the world believe that Jesus died for them because God is love. However, if you were to ask them what that actually means, you would receive vastly different answers depending on the country they live in, their worship denomination, and the century to which your time machine was set to. In this section of the book, I will examine the classic models of atonement - historical theories that attempt to answer questions like: why did Jesus have to die? What was the spiritual mechanism behind his death? What occurred in the spiritual realm when Jesus died on the cross? All of these

questions essentially boil down to the same thing: **what is the gospel?** I will examine the different models while also adding my own unique Israeli-Jewish flavor to the mix. This survey will also provide important context for how Divine Abuse came to be formed.

PART III - Sin: Does God Really Hate us Because of it?

We all acknowledge that we are imperfect (also known as sinners). However, some preachers imply that God hates sinners, which would mean that God hates all of us. You may have heard of this detestable idea before, with a verse or two supposedly supporting it. You might have also heard of the idea that God is so holy that he can't even look at you, a wicked and wretched sinner. And, of course, there's the idea that God is furious with you and must keep away from you; otherwise, he will have to kill you. These ideas, which I will prove false, often arise when modern pastors misunderstand ancient languages.

One of the most significant challenges with any language is that words have more than one meaning depending on the context. They also change and receive additional meanings as time goes by and in accordance with culture. This becomes even more challenging when translating from one language to another. Furthermore, Bible translations from Hebrew to English tend to miss the rich complexity of a Semitic language. It is not always possible for an English word to convey the meaning and depth that Hebrew words hold due to the linguistic structure of the Hebrew language. So, in this section, I will challenge some preconceived ideas religious people sometimes hold about some biblical terms when preaching and teaching the Bible. "Law," "hate," "sin," and "hell" are just a few of them.

PART IV – Refuting Divine Abuse Arguments

This is where we finally meet with the biblical arguments. Here I will first engage with a specific theological-philosophical topic that every person of faith wrestles with: How can God know the future and be in full control without destroying the free will of men? I will also explain the crucial difference between God desiring something and God allowing something (the difference in which the catalyst of Divine Abuse flourishes). This misunderstanding is the philosophical foundation upon which Divine Abuse is built. Then I will unfold and refute the three biblical pillars Divine Abuse preachers use to establish their doctrine:

- ❖ “This Cup” (Matthew 26:39)
- ❖ “Why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)
- ❖ “It was the Lord’s will to crush him” (Isaiah 53:10)

Conclusions & Final Thoughts

Lastly, I will summarize, speak about wrath, revenge and judgment day, and share some last thoughts for consideration.

PART I

THE BASICS: LOVE, BLOOD, AND SACRIFICE

I know, "Love, blood, and sacrifice" might sound like a fusion of Romeo and Juliet and Dracula. However, I believe that it is crucial to understand these terms before fully grasping the message of the Bible.

I love visiting museums and admiring the medieval and renaissance paintings on display. I can stand by one for a long time, examining every single detail. At the same time, as an Israeli Jew, I often feel amused and somewhat frustrated looking at these paintings. In them, Jesus, Paul, King David, and all the other biblical characters are portrayed as anything but Jews living in Israel. Jesus is painted with pale white skin, as if he lives in Siberia and had never seen the light of day. David is depicted as a redheaded Irishman, and Mary Magdalene looks like a Swedish girl with blonde braids. Paul is a grumpy old Greek man who never smiles, and other biblical figures look like European aristocrats. Yet, Middle Easterners have dark skin, dark eyes, and dark hair, not to mention the distinctive look of a typical Jewish nose. None of these features are prevalent in the paintings.

The fact is that we tend to see and understand the Bible through the lenses of our own culture. By doing so, we risk stripping away some of the original meaning and replacing it with foreign ideas. Tim Mackie, who's a professor of biblical studies at Western Seminary (but mainly known for being the theological mind behind the famous 'Bible Project' videos), did a great job explaining what I mean:

Many of us have inherited a story about animal sacrifice, and it goes something like this:

"The gods are angry with me and are going to kill me. But maybe if I kill this animal and make sure the gods get their pound of flesh, they'll be appeased and happy. Maybe they won't kill me or send a plague on my family."

Sure, it's barbaric, but so are the gods...Much of popular Christian belief has simply imported a pagan storyline — --reminiscent of the Greek and Babylonian cultural texts referenced above --- into Leviticus and the stories about Jesus' death on the cross. The result is a tragic irony. What the Bible is portraying as an expression of God's love gets twisted into something dark. Our version goes like this:

"God is holy and perfect. You are not. Therefore, God is angry at you, and hates you even, so he has to kill you. But because he's merciful, he'll let you bring this animal to him and will have the animal killed instead of you. Thankfully, Jesus came to be the one who gets killed by God instead of me. Jesus rescues us from God, so now we can go forever to the happy place after we die and not the bad place."

Is this story recognizable to you? If so, you're not alone. The main problem with this story, to be a bit snarky, is the Bible. More specifically, the problem is that this story has enough biblical language in it that it can pass for what the Bible actually says about animal sacrifice and Jesus' death. However, when you step back and allow Leviticus and the New Testament to speak for themselves, you can recognize this story as an imposter.⁵²⁹

It is often heard from those who claim to speak in God's name that He hates us and is angry with us. Anyone with a spiritual title seems to think they are ordained to speak on behalf of God. But why do so many teach things that are vastly different from one another?

The truth is that we face significant challenges in understanding the Holy Bible. It was written in foreign languages (mostly Hebrew and Greek), comes from unfamiliar cultures (primarily Jewish and Greek), and was written in foreign settings (mainly Israel and the Ancient Near East) and surrounded by extinct civilizations. Experts spend a lifetime in research and study preparing before daring to interpret ancient texts. These experts are known as philologists, linguists, and paleographers. When they approach the text, they carefully and intensively study it before sharing their ideas. They do this because they respect and appreciate ancient texts. In fact, the word 'Philology' comes from Greek and means "love of words." Philology is where textual and literary criticism, history, and linguistics meet.

If experts handle ancient texts with care, how much more should Christians be careful with the book of books, the Bible? Yet nowadays, Christians are often quick to preach and speak in God's name about anything that comes to their mind. This results in an abundance of nonsensical ideas being widely spread. Of course, I am generalizing (and I am sure I have also contributed my fair share of foolishness to the pile).

The fact remains that many pastors preach doctrines and theories without necessarily understanding the context or true meaning of the words and terms they preach about. Sadly, they don't know that they don't know, and there's no one to stop them. Teaching false ideas about fictional characters such as Superman, Captain Spock, or Frodo Baggins is one thing. However, teaching false ideas about God and preaching them in His name is a different story altogether. Unfortunately, some people do so as long as they have their seminary degree and stand on a high platform by a pulpit with colorful lights behind them. Freely preaching any idea that comes to mind is how false doctrines grow wings and spread like wildfire. This is probably why there are roughly 45,000 Christian denominations in the world today.⁵³⁰

In the field of hermeneutics,¹¹ the study of interpreting texts, one of the first steps is to identify the genre of the text. The Bible contains various genres such as genealogies, parables, poetry, laments, confessions, psalms of praise, divine utterances, beatitudes, discourse, narratives, government documents, decrees, fables, and more. However, this is not exclusive to the Bible, as we use different genres in our daily language, sometimes even in the same sentence. For example, during the 90s, I had a friend who was a Chicago Bulls fan, and we would watch NBA games together. One day, he exclaimed with excitement, "The bulls and the black cat were unstoppable last night!" My mind was able to understand that "last night" referred to a basketball game, but also that "unstoppable" meant the team scored many points. Without context, I wouldn't have known that "the black cat" referred to Michael Jordan, the basketball player, and not an actual feline. Context is crucial in understanding the genre and meaning of a text, whether it's the Bible or our daily conversations. Without context, misunderstandings and misinterpretations can occur, leading to confusion and incorrect conclusions, such as that "bulls" means cattle can play basketball.

We can identify a text's genre by examining its context. Ignoring the context can lead to misunderstandings of words and ideas. For example, consider the word "bubble." In one context, it could refer to the bubbles in a bathtub. In another, it could refer to an economic bubble that is about to burst. The meaning of a word is heavily influenced by the context in which it is used. Culture also plays a role in shaping the meaning of words. For instance, in some cultures, people might use the expression "live in a bubble" as an idiom to describe someone who is disconnected from reality.

To further complicate matters, words can also change their meaning over time. For instance, in modern Hebrew, someone who

¹¹ The methodology of interpretation of the biblical texts.

did a great job is called a "super canon." However, if I had used that phrase fifty years ago and said, "My friend Moti is a super canon!" people would have been confused. The use of figures of speech, slang, and informal language, which are abundant in the Bible, can also vary between different cultural groups. For example, among Americans, the phrase "digging" has a positive connotation. But among Israelis, using the same phrase would imply that someone is talking too much, rendering it nonsensical. Therefore, the relationship between words, their genre, culture, and context is critical in ascertaining their correct meaning.

Likewise, in the Bible. For example, depending on the context, the word "stone" can mean a gift (Revelation 2:17), a compliment (1st Peter 2:4-5), or an insult (Luke 19:40). Stone can even speak of Jesus himself (Acts 4:11). Of course, stone can also mean a literal piece of rock (Luke 21:6). Now, just for fun, imagine you live in a future period and culture whereby the word 'stone' means 'chocolate.' In your Bible study, you read out loud:

*I will remove from them their heart of stone.
(Ezekiel 11:19)*

The Bible is a complex collection of books, written by many authors over a long period of time, with various genres and literary devices. Understanding it requires knowledge of the historical and cultural context, language, and literary style. It's not enough to read a verse or two and then apply our own interpretation to it. It takes effort and dedication to study and learn about the Bible, but the reward is a deeper understanding of God and His message. We should approach the Bible with humility, acknowledging that we may not have all the answers and that our understanding may change over time as we continue to learn and grow.

1. What is Love?

In the seventh episode of Netflix's "You," the main character, Joe Goldberg, explains to his new psychologist why he came to see him:

"I don't understand it. That's why I am here."

"What don't you understand?" the psychologist replied.

"Love," Joe answered.

"You and seven billion other people on this planet. If we understood love, I would be out of a job." Said the psychologist laughing.

Throughout history, humanity has expressed various ideas about love through stories, poetry, songs, and films. In contemporary times, many people perceive love as a fluffy, pink, marshmallow-like emotion that only a fortunate few get to experience. Teenagers often swoon over this idea while watching Hollywood's chick flick movies. However, most of these scenes depict a fleeting expression of chemicals in the brain, commonly referred to as "being in love," associated with the production of dopamine that can last anywhere from several months to a few years.

With great respect to Hollywood and the fictional psychologists of Netflix, I believe that a better, more developed definition of love already exists within our innate understanding. However, to reach it, we must first challenge our own thinking. Although love is a fundamental aspect of the human experience and is extensively utilized in the Bible, the average person rarely grasps its true meaning. In reality, without a genuine understanding of what love entails, we cannot fully comprehend the gospel or the nature of God.

Tough decision

Christ commanded us to love our enemies, and when I was once debating with a rabbi, he argued that Jesus' commandment was impossible because people cannot force themselves to feel emotions they do not genuinely experience. This is a classic example of interpreting an ancient word through modern language. Love is not a feeling; in fact, loving your enemy goes against your emotions. You might feel towards your worst enemy that you hope they drop dead, but Jesus says that despite these feelings, you must choose to love them. Love, therefore, is not a feeling but a choice, a decision made regardless of one's emotions. But a decision to do what?

The word "love" appears close to 400 times in this book. Perhaps this is because the Bible places such great emphasis on love. John's first epistle is a good example. It was written at the end of the first century when the theology of the New Testament was already well-established. Take a look at how the Gospel is explained in John's epistle:

*Whoever does not **love** does not know God, because God is **love**. This is how God showed his **love** among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is **love**: not that we **loved** God, but that he **loved** us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so **loved** us, we also ought to **love** one another. (1st John 4:8-11)¹²*

The word "love" appears eight times in this short passage, emphasizing what the gospel is all about. John does so by highlighting three key components:

¹² Here and throughout the book, bold text in biblical texts and quotes were added by me.

- The Son of God took on human form.¹³
- The Son of God came down to earth.¹⁴
- The Son of God atoned for our sins.¹⁵

For John, the three components he presented (which involve proximity and sacrifice) meant that "God is love." John didn't write "God is loving," but that He is love itself. Love is not merely an attribute that God possesses (like the famous list Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 13); it's an integral part of God's very nature. Love is not just a theological concept; it's also a philosophical one. I believe that the definition or concept of love was ingrained into our minds and souls as human beings. Therefore, anyone can understand love, even if they have never opened a Bible. I would like to offer a logical breakdown or definition of what LOVE is,¹⁶ which I believe is composed of the following three key elements:

The first element of love: Intimacy. Proximity. Closeness.

Having a relationship with someone means being close to them in one way or another.¹⁷ This doesn't necessarily refer to physical proximity, but rather to knowing the other person and being there for them. For instance, a parent who loves their child won't be satisfied with just sending letters; they'll want to be

¹³ A God who limited himself in becoming like us is a God who wants us to be able to relate to him.

¹⁴ Instead of us needing to find a way to God, he came down to us. He showed us he's not distant nor alienated from us.

¹⁵ In the Hebrew Scriptures, there were different ways in which a sacrifice atoned for sin, whereby the concept of avoiding punishment is only one of them. I will develop this topic further in the coming chapter.

¹⁶ There is no scientific definition to love, and I am sure others might describe it differently than I do, but this is the best condensed logical explanation of love I was able to come up with.

¹⁷ In Hebrew, the word we use for "sacrifice" (QORBAN) comes from the word "to be close by" (QAROB). When you sacrifice for the sake of someone, you draw near them.

emotionally present for their child, particularly during a crisis. As an ancient proverb puts it, "knowledge without practice is useless."¹⁸ A God who is love won't merely claim to be loving in writing; rather, he'll seek to reveal himself and demonstrate that love in real life. This is evident from the very beginning of the Bible. In the creation story, God wasn't passive, distant, or alienated from his creation. On the contrary, he was close and personal,¹⁹ and remained so even after Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden.

We have all heard stories of neglected children who are unwanted by their parents because of some perceived defect. However, our heavenly Father is different. He is love. God does not shy away from us because we are imperfect; on the contrary, He desires to be close to those He loves, especially those who are often considered unlovable. After creation, God chose to dwell among the Israelites and later fully revealed Himself through the physical manifestation of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God not only sympathizes with us, but He also empathizes with us (Hebrews 4:15). Being love, God desires intimacy, proximity, and closeness with us.

The second element of love: A decision of Free Will.

There is no love without free will. You cannot force someone to love you. This is basic ancient human logic.²⁰ Biblically, love must be a free choice as well.²¹ Forcing love only leads to

¹⁸ Confucius, Chinese philosopher (551-479 BC)

¹⁹ If people are created needing of relationship, and are made in the image of God, this supports the idea of a God who is triune.

²⁰ Even apparent in legends, folklore, and mythologies of different people groups. For example, the Genie, which is a fictional character with magical powers that can grant wishes, known to be unable to force someone to love someone else.

²¹ With the risk of upsetting some Calvinists here, I do not believe that God forces himself on anyone by "electing" them regardless of their will. A cornerstone in

antagonism. In life, we tend to love those who are good, caring, compassionate, forgiving, generous, friendly, and courteous. Unfortunately, in many churches, God is often portrayed as an angry moral monster who will punish you if you don't wake up early enough to pray or memorize enough verses.²²

Much like Christians who believe they have no free will, secular people often accuse God of forcing himself by using crusades, pogroms, or suicide bombers. No person in their right mind would want to believe in this twisted version of a god driven by hate and anger, forcing them to "believe" in him merely out of fear of punishment. This distorted view of a God who forces himself on people is quite prevalent nowadays. However, the Bible's foundation is the integration between God's love and the free will of humans, as argued by the great C.S. Lewis:

God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong, but I can't. If a thing is free to be good, it's also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata — of creatures that worked like machines — would

scriptures, and especially in the Hebrew Bible, is that people were and are called to make their own decision to believe, love and follow God (Deuteronomy 6:5; Deuteronomy 30:19; Isaiah 55:6; Jeremiah 29:12; Joshua 24:15; Mark 8:34; Acts 17:26-27; Romans 10:9).

²² I'm not at all joking. Once, serving with a well-known ministry, our leader proclaimed that you cannot know God unless you memorize by heart verses. Poor me, I could barely remember what I had for breakfast.

hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that, they've got to be free.⁵³¹

If your pet trusts you, it will draw near to you and eventually relax by sitting on your lap. Why? Because they feel safe. They trust that you won't hurt them and believe that you will offer them protection if they are at risk. However, trust requires free will. You cannot force someone to trust you. Similarly, God is not forcing you to trust or love him. God wants you to choose him for yourself and for the right reasons - because you believe he is good, kind, loving, generous, etc. God always allows men free will whether to believe in him or not.

The third element of love: Sacrifice.

Helen Fisher (Ph.D. in biological anthropologist) researched how the brain reacts when we think and speak of someone we love. Fisher shared how she would end every interview with the question: "Would you die for him or her?" According to Fisher, "These people would say 'Yes!' as if I had asked them to pass the salt."⁵³² Fisher proved what we all know. When we are close to someone, care for them and love them, we are willing to sacrifice and suffer - die even — for their sake.

Heat symbolizes life, while cold symbolizes death. When a loved one is cold, we offer our body heat to keep them warm, as stated in Ecclesiastes 4:11. On the other hand, when we hate someone, we distance ourselves from them because we are no longer interested in sacrificing for them. Sacrifice can take many forms, such as our time, comfort, energy, and resources. The more we care about someone, the more likely we are to suffer

for their sake. Therefore, we are even willing to lay down our lives for the sake of our children.

When I walk my dog, and it senses a threat along the way, it immediately stands between me and the perceived danger, willing to sacrifice its life for my sake. This is no different from human relationships. We are willing to sacrifice our lives for people we love, and even for causes we believe in. Sometimes as parents, we wish we could take our children's sicknesses upon ourselves in their place.

If it is true that the more we love someone, the more we are willing to sacrifice for them, then the ultimate love is sacrificing our lives for the sake of those we love. This is the very heart of the gospel; a God who is ready to lay down his life for our sake to demonstrate his love for us.

Many great expressions of sacrifice exist in the human experience. For example, humans eat the living. We can't eat stones, plastic, or glass. We eat animals and everything that grows. For us to eat them, they must die. They die so we can live. If an animal voluntarily allowed its predator to devour it, it's only because the prey cared for and loved its predator, agreeing to be eaten out of its own free will. And as a result, the predator can live at the prey's expense.²³

When Jesus spoke the words, "eat my flesh," he was expressing the idea of sacrificial love, that he was willing to die so that we may live. This concept of sacrificial love is also evident in God the Father's love for us, as he gave up his Son so

²³ An amazing example of self-sacrifice exists in nature. According to Discover Wildlife Magazine, newborn baby octopuses eat their own mother: "In a gloriously tragic act of self-sacrifice, she [mother octopus] stops eating and dies of starvation before the young hatch. She might even hasten her demise by actively ripping off parts of her own body." (Blackman, "Why do female octopuses die after reproducing?" October 8th, 2020)

that we could "eat him" and have eternal life. As parents or grandparents, we also understand the importance of sacrifice for our children and loved ones. Sacrifice is the essence of the human experience and reflects the gospel's message of extreme love and sacrifice, as God feeds us, also spiritually, as his children.

*Greater love has no one than this:
to lay down one's life for one's friends.
(John 15:13)*

To summarize, God is love. His love means seeking to be close, but not in the way of forcing himself against one's free will. A love that is willing to suffer and give up everything, including its own life. Love is not just a feeling but a verb, an action, a choice, and a commitment. It is a decision to sometimes place another individual's needs and interests above our own. Love is sacrificial, selfless, and unconditional. This kind of love is exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who loved so much that he willingly gave up his life "to feed" mankind.

Love and Redemption

Based on the definition of love discussed just now, Christian redemption²⁴ becomes more relatable. In fact, Christianity is all about sacrifice, and sacrifice is all about the relationship between life and death.

Redemption simply means to be bought back, set free, or liberated. To save someone from something, we must give up something else in exchange for their redemption. It can be something small, like our time, comfort, or energy. Or it can be something big, like our

²⁴ Theologically, the terms redemption (to buy back), salvation (saved, rescued) and justification (clearing of guilt) are not one and same. But as this is not a book on systematic theology, these terms will be used interchangeably as referring to spending eternity with God.

wealth or a kidney. For example, if my friend has taken a loan and cannot repay it, and I love that friend, I can redeem them by paying off their debt. This requires me to sacrifice my resources to free them from their distress. When we redeem someone, it will always come at a cost. In this respect, the proverb “nothing comes for free” is appropriate.

However, sacrifice is not only about saving someone’s life. Jesus taught us to make sacrifice a natural part of our daily lives, even in small or seemingly insignificant matters. When Jesus taught us to continue walking an extra mile (Matthew 5:41), he was asking us to not just do the bare minimum but to sacrifice our time and energy to go above and beyond for others. For instance, if you work at a local supermarket and your job is to pack groceries, carrying them to an elderly lady's car would be walking an extra mile. Nobody is forcing you to do it, but you choose to sacrifice your time and energy to show love. If it's the end of your shift at the supermarket and the elderly lady’s car won’t start, you could redeem her by offering her a lift home.

Therefore, love is intrinsically linked to sacrifice, which often involves pain and suffering. We are willing to endure greater pain for those we love, but we may be less willing to suffer for a stranger.

In human culture, people who are willing to suffer—even die—for the sake of others are seen as heroes. Heroes are those who deliver us by sacrificing something. In most classic stories, the protagonist gives up something, even their life, to save others. This act crowns them as the story's hero. In Narnia, Aslan asks to die instead of Edmund. In *The Avengers*, Tony Stark sacrifices his life to save the entire universe. Superman gives up his life against Doomsday to save mankind. The examples of heroes sacrificing for others are endless.

Not only does sacrifice bring about redemption, but it also sets an example to live by and can even soften enemies' hearts.

Sometimes it's about an emotional sacrifice. If your feelings were hurt because you had a fight with a friend, you can redeem that relationship by sacrificing your pride. You forgive for free, meaning it's free for the other party, but not for you. Far from it, it costs you your ego, your honor, and sometimes your reputation.

The Christian redemption

The endless illustrations found in poems, stories, and films prove that the knowledge of what love is exists in all people. It's because we are created in the image of Love. But it's not just in fiction stories that we find self-sacrificial love. Every culture has stories about sacrificial love, which sets an example for society.

If God is love, and to love is to be willing to give up your life for the sake of others, then it's only logical to expect our heavenly Father, the greatest hero of all, to do just that—sacrifice himself for us. Therefore, the gospel is about a loving God who self-sacrifices for all, even his enemies! Jesus came to this earth and demonstrated to mankind that God is not like all the other gods. He is not so upset that he hates them and wants nothing to do with them. He is Yahweh, a God who loves us and, in contrast to all other gods, is willing to even die for us. No other god was ready to die to save the souls of those they created. This is something unique to Christianity. It's an act of love we only find in Christ, and he did it for free. It was free for us, but not for him. In my opinion, that makes the God of the Bible the only one worthy of our love and worship.

If I were to give up my life for my son's sake and die for him, what would be my motivation if not love? By dying, my death may accomplish different things. Maybe I'd release my son from a lifetime in the enemy's prison, substituting my life for his release. Perhaps the story of my death would go viral, setting an example for others. Whatever the results were, they wouldn't be my motivation for dying. The motivation would be love. In the same way, Jesus died on the cross because God loves us. Many

implications came from the cross (the forgiveness of sins being just one), but these are outcomes, not the initiating power generating the action, which was love.

Redemption happens due to a sacrificial act of love. You will suffer for someone you love and even give up your life for them. Perfect love would be to die even for your enemies. This was only a theoretical concept until it had put on flesh so we could touch, see, witness, experience, and truly comprehend it. That's the gospel, in essence.

*This is how we know what love is:
Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.
(1st John 3:16)*

2. Life is in the Blood

We live in an age saturated with action movies, violent computer games, and endless news reports about violent acts. So, it's no surprise that we associate 'blood' with negative ideas such as violence, terrorism, war, suffering, and wrath. This is perhaps why Divine Abuse theology emphasizes the torture and suffering of Christ above all and connects it to God's wrath.²⁵ The Bible, however, speaks of blood in a very different way. For ancient Israel, blood was what purifies, atones, and cures. But above all, blood represented LIFE:

*For the **life** of a creature is in the **blood**, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the **blood** that makes atonement for one's **life**. (Leviticus 17:11)*

This verse is the very foundation for understanding blood in the Bible. Nowadays, we know this to be true scientifically – our life is indeed in our blood. The point of the sacrifices was the blood, as blood represented life. The animal's death was a side-effect of obtaining its blood, which is why 'death' and 'blood' can be used interchangeably when speaking of Christ's atonement. 'Christ died for us' equals 'Christ's blood was shed for us.' Both terms attempt to convey the same thing because Christ's death alludes to Christ's blood.

²⁵ For example, for David Platt, the climax of the Bible is God punishing Jesus: "How can God show both holy hatred and holy love toward sinners at the same time? This is the climactic question of the Bible, and the answer is the cross. At the cross, God showed the full expression of his wrath." (Desiring God, 2011 National Conference).

The sacrifices were less about death and more about blood; life. Death does not atone for sins; blood does. Death was an inseparable and imperative side-effect—a penalty—of making a sacrifice. If an animal was to give all its blood (life), it had to die. Its death was a fine that was paid for its blood. So, if someone owed their life or the animal's life, it meant they owed their blood.

This is how we get to the real climax of the Bible—not the death-by-anger of Christ by his Father, but the blood of Christ. Saying 'Christ's blood was shed for us' is the same as saying 'Christ gave us life.' That is why New Testament authors repeat, time and again, that it is the blood of Christ that covers our sins, redeems us, and justifies us. The value is not in his death but in the blood of Christ:

*...we have redemption through his **blood**, the forgiveness of sins... (Ephesians 1:7)*

*...to make the people holy through his own **blood**... (Hebrews 13:12)*

*...him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his **blood**..." (Revelation 1:5)*

*...we have now been justified by his **blood**... (Romans 5:9)*

*...we have redemption through his **blood**... (Ephesians 1:7)*

*...have been brought near by the **blood** of Christ... (Ephesians 2:13)*

*...making peace through his **blood**, shed on the cross... (Colossians 1:20)*

*...you were redeemed...with the precious **blood** of Christ... (1st Peter 1:18-19)*

*...the **blood** of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all
sin... (1st John 1:7)*

Because life is in the blood, it holds the power of purification, sanctification, justification, and atonement. Blood, being life, is why it was said about Jesus that unless you 'drink his blood, you have no life in you' (John 6:53). It is through Jesus' life that we receive eternal life, and his life was in his blood. The gospel is not about death, but about life. It is not about Jesus dying because God was angry—it is about Jesus giving us life because God is love.

Some things in life are inseparable. You can't make soup without liquid, build a log cabin without trees, or make a bonfire without flames. The same goes for sacrifice. Sacrifices are where life meets death—they are two sides of the same coin.²⁶ Without a sacrifice being killed, there would be no blood. The two are necessarily tied to each other because you cannot have the animal's blood without killing it. This is also true in our physical world—we cannot live unless something else dies, as we must eat to survive. Eating means something else—either an animal or a plant—dies. Life and death are strongly intertwined.

However, in the book of sacrifices (Leviticus), the animal substitute is not offered by Israelites hoping to appease a volatile and angry God. That is why the pagan nations around Israel would sacrifice to their gods. For Israel, it was a different story...

The red magical potion

Two common words can best describe the functions of blood in the Bible. If you were to ask modern-day Christians what they are, some would probably answer with something like 'wrath and

²⁶ Rashi (11th century famous Jewish commentator): “For the life of the flesh of every creature, not only of animals brought as sacrifices, is dependent on its blood, and it is for this reason that I have placed it [on the altar] to make expiation for the life of man: let life come and expiate for life!” (Commentary on Leviticus 17:11)

punishment.' However, for the Israelites living in the days of the Hebrew Scriptures, it would probably be 'covering and cleansing.'

Do you remember greeting someone with a handshake during Covid-19 and wanting to instantly sanitize your hands? The sanitizer liquid you used is a great way to understand the role of blood in the biblical ritual of purification and sanctification. For the Israelites, the blood of the sacrifices was something like iodine, bleach, or detergent—a 'magical potion' used to keep and protect life.

Blood and Covenants

In Hebrew, when we say “to make a covenant,” the word used for “made a” (covenant) is the same word that means “excision” or “amputation.” In Hebrew, we don’t make covenants, we excision them. (This is where “to cut a deal”, in English, comes from!). When you “excision” or “cut” a covenant, this implies blood is involved. Because life is in the blood, the blood is there to say, “I swear my life in this.”

Abraham

When God called Abraham to leave his home and walk into the unknown, He first gave Abraham some blessings (heirs, land, and authority—a mirror of the blessings in Genesis 1:28). Genesis chapter 15 reiterates the covenant God had made with Abraham but adds a visual aspect that Abraham was already familiar with. First, Abraham was to find and kill a heifer, a ram, a goat, a dove, and a pigeon. Then, Abraham was to dissect the wild beasts in half and lay the pieces in two rows with a clear path through the center. To the ancient Near Easterners, this meant the making of a covenant deal. The parties involved would walk the path between the slaughtered animals, declaring, 'I am willing to bet my life on it!' It was a vow of the highest kind.

But the covenant in Genesis 15 is most special because when evening came and as Abraham fell asleep, God appeared and passed between the pieces of the dead animals on His own. This was a one-sided covenant where nothing depended on Abraham. It was only up to God, who was betting His life on the promises He gave to Abraham. There could be no greater encouragement since God is eternal and can no more break an oath than He can die.

But why would a King make a covenant with a peasant? When God makes a covenant with us, it's not because He needs us or something from us. The gods cut deals because they wanted things, but Yahweh doesn't need us, and He can make a billion more just like us. When God makes a covenant with us, He chooses to take care of us despite the fact we have nothing to offer Him back. In making a covenant, God is essentially telling us that no matter what we do, He will always keep His side and love us. All Abraham had to do was believe.

This was also a shadow of the covenant to be made through Jesus. Just like Abraham, it was us who killed the sacrifice, and it was God who made the promise. We just need to believe it. But in Christ's blood covenant, we have a promise sealed with eternal blood, an everlasting promise for our eternal salvation that we can always count on. That makes the New Covenant better than all previous covenants. Like Abraham, we just have to believe that God will live up to His promise of salvation to those who choose to believe (John 3:16). Like Abraham, this guarantee can grant the believer great confidence regarding the single most important thing—our eternal future. I often fail, and I wouldn't trust myself with some things, let alone my own eternal destiny. But with God, I can count on Him, and my soul may rest because it's not up to me, an imperfect being, to deliver.

Exodus

In the book of Exodus, the shedding of blood becomes a major theme. On the eve of Israel’s exit from Egypt, the blood of the Passover lamb sacrificed and painted on the house doorposts served as a sign for the destroyer (Ex. 12:13, 21-23). In the first Passover, the blood of the sacrificial lamb separated the living from the dead. The destroyer came to take life. Either it was the life of your firstborn, or it was the life of the sacrificed animal.

Then, the Mosaic Covenant was also made-cut with blood. The blood was sprinkled on the people of Israel and the tabernacle:

Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.” Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said: “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. (Exodus 24:6-8)

This was not a salvific covenant but a covenant that was national in scope. Regardless, the point of all these sacrifices was not how they died but why — blood. Blood means life, and God wanted Moses to splash life on the people of Israel and the altar, cleansing them and betting his life on the promises he gave.

Consider the symbolic circle of life: Life is in the blood. Blood covers sin. So, life covers sin. Sin is death. So, we cover death with life. But for us to be able to cover sin (death) with blood (life), we first need blood (death). This was the vicious circularity of life that in Christ was finally put to rest (Hebrews 10:1-18).

Now that we hopefully have a clearer picture of the biblical concept of blood, we may discuss sacrifices.

3. Sacrifice

I have fond memories of school field trips as a child in Israel. Our tiny country meant that most destinations were just a couple of hours away by bus, and during those journeys, we would often pass the time by eating snacks. If a classmate offered you some of their own, it was a great act of sacrifice, as snacks were a valuable commodity. In return, it was expected that you would offer kindness in return, preferably in the form of one of your own cherished snacks. In life, we often buy each other's affection through gifts, and the popular kids would receive much more as everyone sought to curry favor with them. This ritual of snack offerings also served as a way to make amends and seek forgiveness when we hurt our friends. And when night came, we would gather together for a "Hafla," a festive meal comprised of everyone's snacks, a celebration that often led to a bellyache the next morning! You see, we used snack offerings for multiple reasons. Once, I even saw how a piece of gum was used to cover and protect a wound from infection. So gross!

As 'the kids of Israel', so was the logic of 'the children of Israel' thousands of years ago. Primarily, the belief that if we sacrifice something for someone, they will show us favor in return. However, when it came to God, people considered their earthly futures and eternal destiny. They especially wanted to find themselves on God's good side coming judgment day. So, we sacrifice wealth, time, and energy, either because we love someone or want them — and our father in heaven — to remember us fondly. Some sacrifices were indeed offered due to past events, such as covering for sin or asking for forgiveness. However, offering sacrifices served the children of Israel — just like the modern-day kids of Israel — in various ways.

William K. Gilders is a professor of religious studies who specialized in "Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible."⁵³³ He explains:

One way to think about ancient sacrifices is as "gifts" given to God. When they performed sacrifices, ancient Israelites gave to God some of what they believed God had given them, expressing their close relationship with God and seeking to deepen that bond.⁵³⁴

Likewise, in Jewish thought:

The sacrifices have a lofty purpose, to personify the feeling of gratitude towards the source of good himself, the good and blessed Lord of the world.⁵³⁵

Humans have the uncanny ability to plan far into the future.²⁷ We dream about the future no less than we cry over the past. People's thoughts in ancient times were often occupied by how others, especially their gods, will remember them. They, just like us, worried about their reputation, both in the eyes of their gods and in their friends' minds.

So, naturally, we strive to be on everyone's "good side" and much rather do it in advance. Therefore, people living in ancient times would sacrifice to their gods to ensure they stayed on their good side. They believed their future would be secured by giving up something of value in the present. This is why some Bible scholars say the best way to describe sacrifices is with the word gift.⁵³⁶

This is still the same logic we use today. We tell our loved ones they have value in our eyes when we bestow gifts upon them. A gift

²⁷ Research shows that only few animals are able to think about the future, yet only in a limited, basic, and primal way that is nothing like the human ability to plan the future. (Clayton, Bussey, Dickinson, "Can animals recall the past and plan for the future?" in Nat Rev Neurosci, 2003).

is always a sacrifice. Smaller gifts mean we sacrificed a little (like buying someone lunch or a flower bokeh). Bigger gifts mean we sacrificed a lot (like a diamond ring or a car). It can even be something major that requires a significant sacrifice, like the donation of an organ. A sacrifice can also come in the form of something non-tangible, like time, energy, privileges, pride or rights. We sacrifice when we want others to know we care for them — either in advance or after we screw up. We show them we love them when we give or do something for their betterment. However, if the person can sense that we didn't really sacrifice anything, for example, if we gave them an orange we simply plucked from the neighbor's tree, they would probably get less excited about the gesture.

Worship

In ancient times, when people from various nations approached their gods to worship and pray, they would always bring a gift with them. That was called a sacrifice. This offering could be in the form of an animal or agricultural produce. They never came empty-handed, believing that by giving something to the divine, they could invite blessings and favor in return. These prayers and offerings were often made before important events such as harvests, births, or weddings as a way to seek divine protection and blessings. The underlying principle was that if you wanted to ask something of your gods, you needed to give something in return. The God of Israel was no different in this respect. You wish to meet and ask Him of something? Great! But lunch is on you, so don't forget to prepare and bring a nice meal with you when you come to the altar.

Worship of God always involved sacrificing something, which taught the people of Israel an important lesson: if you want something, be prepared to give in return. In biblical times, the terms "worship" and "prayer" had a broader meaning than they do today. Most types of prayer and worship were not solely about communicating words to God; they also involved actions. However,

our modern understanding of the words "worship" and "pray" has evolved to mean "talking and singing to God."

The New Testament brought about a significant change, teaching a new group of Jewish believers in Jesus that when worshiping him, they no longer needed to bring the sacrifice to God. Instead, He desired for them to bring the sacrifice to the poor and needy, the sick and broken, the widows and orphans, the imprisoned, and the sinners. In this way, they worshiped Him.

But then, with the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews who did not believe in Jesus could no longer offer sacrifices. The Jewish Pharisees, who opposed the corrupt priesthood, seized this opportunity to finally take over by reshaping Israel's religious practices. They introduced a revolutionary "new" idea, teaching the children of Israel that since they could not bring a sacrifice to God because the temple was gone, they could now bring it to the Pharisees in the form of coins of gold and simply repeat a couple of prayers out loud.

As a result, Christians observed Jews worshiping with words alone, mistakenly thinking that no actions were ever involved (coins of gold do not "moo" or "baa" loudly on the streets). Gradually, Christianity also began to adopt this comfortable idea that worship is about words and is entirely disconnected from actions. This is why, in modern times, we associate "revival" and "worship" with music and songs. But a "worship night" should not just be about Christians going to an amplified concert with cool spotlights, whereby the crowd joins in singing words of praise. Instead, a worship night should be an evening whereby Christians go out to the streets to feed the hungry and cover the poor with a blanket.

An error of modern-day Christianity is to think that in Christ, believers are exempt from making sacrifices. We don't; we just redirect the sacrifices to offer them to society's outcasts instead. When we pray before a meal, giving thanks to God, we should also

ask ourselves if there is someone, perhaps even in our own neighborhood, who could benefit from more than just our prayers. This is how we truly worship God.

There is nothing wrong with words and music (Psalm 150); it's called "praise." But worship is all about sacrificing. This is what Jesus did by sacrificing Himself, the perfect gift of all, and in return asking God to forgive us (Luke 23:34) and interceding for us ever since (Romans 8:34). If this is what Jesus did for us sinners, it means that we too should worship God by blessing sinners.

Animal Sacrifice

To sacrifice is to let go of something costly and dear to your heart. But for the Israelites, an animal sacrifice contained a precious "potion" — blood. It wasn't like today when I could easily and quickly stop at the local pet store to buy an animal, like a small bird, for example, on my way driving up to Jerusalem. It is cheap and quick, and I have not yet connected emotionally with it. However, in ancient times, an animal was precious, not only from a financial standpoint. Usually, you would raise your animals, and they would often become a family member to you.²⁸ This is why sometimes I must be reminded that my dog is not my actual child.

In ancient times, animal sacrifice was a ritual that included death. You gave up something of great value — life — to the gods. However, abuse, torture, or intense violence were never part of the biblical ritual of sacrificing to the God of Israel. Neither the person offering the sacrifice nor the priest ever "punished" the animal by abusing or torturing it. In fact, the one who sacrificed had to avoid cruelty at all costs. Slaughtering the animal from its neck meant a swift death with minimum pain. There are very meticulous decrees in ancient Judaism, valid in modern Judaism as well, as to how slaughtering is to be done. A great emphasis was given to killing the

²⁸ See for example the parable of the Poor Man's Lamb in 2nd Samuel chapter 12.

animal as quickly and painlessly as possible (Leviticus 1:15; 3:8; 5:8). Maimonides, a famous Middle Ages Jewish Bible commentator, explained that commandments related to slaughtering "were given to ensure an easy death for the animal." Other Jewish sages commented likewise. All that is to say that biblical Israel brought sacrifices before God, not for God's wrath to be appeased by punishing the sacrifice. The killing was a means to an end — the animals' blood. The blood (life) had the power to purify, atone, and sanctify.

An Israelite offering to God after sinning, metaphorically, is like a husband who brings his wife flowers and chocolate after he offended and hurt her feelings. He sacrificed time, energy, and resources to show her he was sorry. However, the husband did not buy the flowers, thinking his wife, instead of beating him up, would tear them up to pieces to satisfy her wrath. Ridiculous as this sounds, many Christians still see God as a bloodthirsty entity needing a kill to satisfy its anger. Unfortunately, this view has already been integrated into modern Christian culture. For example, in 2006, Keith Getty wrote a popular song called “In Christ Alone,” whereby a specific line caused a stir in American Christianity:

*On the cross, when Jesus died,
the wrath of God was satisfied.*

As for the song, the death of Jesus allegedly satisfied a cosmic wrath, a colossal amount of rage that God had to release by torturing and killing his own Son. After the song's release, demands were made for the line to be removed, and when it did not happen, some movements removed the song altogether.²⁹ Some Christians felt that the song portrayed God in a distorted way, as an angry God who must satisfy his wrath and thirst for vengeance against us but substituted it with killing his own righteous Son. Obviously, the

²⁹ For example, the Presbyterian movement decided in 2013 to completely negate the song.

songwriters did not come up with this idea themselves; they must have encountered it previously in books and preaching. Or if to be blunt, they were brainwashed.

We live in an age where worship songs, composers, and popular YouTube preachers wearing skinny jeans or extravagant suits and ties have just as much (if not more) influence on shaping theology and faith culture as theologians. For most Christians, reading theology books is akin to taking sleeping pills. I have read many of them, and I get it. They tend to be technical, boring, and use words I don't even think I know how to pronounce in English.³⁰ But developing your system of beliefs solely on Facebook/Instagram stories and YouTube videos might not be the wisest approach either.

Obviously, theologians are not perfect, either. Truth be told, most books I read about the atonement of Christ extracted opinions mainly from the church fathers while mostly ignoring the Hebrew Scriptures. Church fathers had much to contribute to the conversation, and for that, we should be thankful for them. However, many did not have the highest regard for the Old Testament.³¹ Unfortunately, many Christians today study theology only through the lens of the church fathers and the reformers, thus missing much of what the Old Testament had to say. While considering what the church fathers had to say is not a bad thing, I believe that any doctrine in the New Testament has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. Therefore, to fully understand a doctrine, we must trace it back to the Old Testament first and allow it to be the leading voice. Doctrines about atonement, sin, election, hell, and salvation are no exception. Otherwise, jumping over the Hebrew Scriptures would be like watching a movie starting from the third

³⁰ Words like Transubstantiation, Consubstantiation and Sublapsarianism.

³¹ And some early age Christian theologians, such as Marcion (85-160 AD) even went as extreme as voiding the Old Testament all together.

act, somewhere toward the end of the movie. By doing so, we might understand some things, but we would also miss a lot and probably misunderstand plenty. To me, there is no point in discussing Christ's atonement on the cross without first exhausting what the Hebrew Scriptures have to say about terms and concepts such as blood, sacrifice, and atonement.

So, let's travel back in time and fully explore this topic...

Genesis and Sacrifices

Offering sacrifices was a universal ritual in the Ancient Near East,⁵³⁷ where people would offer sacrifices to please and appease their gods. Some may view this discussion as primitive and irrelevant to modern and "enlightened" individuals, but it actually reveals a profound aspect of the human soul.

The skies represent the infinite, which is where God was believed to reside. When we look up at the stars at night, we perceive infinity. However, life itself is not infinite. Everyone who has lived before us has died, and so humanity has learned to appreciate the value of life. This is why people in ancient times would offer sacrifices to their gods. Psychologist Jordan Peterson eloquently explains this concept:

*The sacrifices are burnt on an altar. Why? Well, the smoke rises... God is up in the sky, and if the smoke rises up there and he gets a whiff of it, he can tell what the quality of the sacrifice was. You can laugh about that, and you can think about it as primitive, but it's not primitive, it's artistic, and it's beautiful, and it's accurate.*⁵³⁸

God "smelled the pleasing aroma" (Genesis 8:21) of the biblical sacrifices. He enjoyed "smelling" them because they symbolized humbleness, generosity etc. (Ephesians 5:2).

In the Law of Moses, God established guidelines and limitations for these rituals to distinguish the way Israel made sacrifices from how the pagans did. For example, in parallel pagan myths, sacrifices were made to appease the angry and hungry gods. Therefore, the pagans would boil the meat in advance, making it soft and tender for their gods to eat. Also, minor gods would offer to their superior gods. In the Ancient Near East, the gods needed to eat. If they didn't, just like humans, they would become hungry and angry. By providing their gods with offerings, the pagans believed they would relax their hunger and appease their wrath.

The nation of Israel, however, did not boil the sacrificed meat in advance. This was a statement that, in contrast to other gods, Yahweh was not eating Israel's sacrifices. Therefore, the God of Israel does not need food. Israel did not spill the sacrifices' blood for the sake of God's appetite but for their own sake. Yet today, thousands of years later, we have somehow reverted to hearing about a God who allegedly devoured his own Son for his wrath to be appeased. And, of course, some have developed a systematic theology to try and prove it.

Not every "conspiracy" theory is false, but individuals who fall for radical conspiracy theories tend to see "proofs" everywhere they look. This phenomenon is known as "confirmation bias."³² The neighbor's child is winking at them? It must be because he is an illuminati. Did he also play with stones in his backyard and leave them standing as a pyramid? There, the illuminati, for a fact. And if there's a funny-looking cloud in the skies, it must be chemtrail by the government for population control. This is the same with some preachers. Suddenly, they find "proofs" for their doctrines throughout the scriptures. This is the case with the theology of

³² Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's prior beliefs or values. (Confirmation bias, Wikipedia)

Divine Abuse. For them, the Bible is all about sin, wrath, and punishment. But is it really? Let the investigation begin...

Adam and Eve (Genesis 3)

As a Jew, I knew little about Christian denominations when I first came to know Christ as my Lord and Savior. I remember trying to figure out why so many in my faith community dislike traditional churches so much, and once I asked what the differences were between us and the Catholic Church. I was told that, in contrast with them, we hold to "Sola Scriptura." Scriptures alone! No traditions! As time passed, I realized every denomination has its fair share of traditions. For example, evangelicals like to pray before each meal: "Lord, bless this food to our bodies!" This prayer never made sense to me, and it wasn't just because the Torah only commanded the Israelites to pray after the meal.³³ It was for another reason. I didn't understand the blessing. "Bless this food to our bodies"? Is God about to supernaturally turn our junk food into nutritious food full of vitamins and minerals just because we prayed? This is great news! Now I can eat as many Big Macs and doughnuts as I want, and God will bless them into my body!

So, I slowly realized that traditions are common in all aspects of faith, but we are not always aware of them. Traditions are not necessarily bad (who doesn't like it when people buy them gifts every year for their birthday?), but sometimes traditions directly influence our theology. When they do, it becomes an issue. A good example, relevant to our discussion on sacrifices and atonement, is found in the third chapter of Genesis.

The Genesis of Fashion

³³ "When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God..." (Deuteronomy 8:10).

In Seinfeld's second season, Jerry Seinfeld buys an outrageously expensive jacket before his dinner meeting with Elaine's father, a war veteran and a famous writer. Before leaving the house, Jerry explains to his friend George:

*When I leave the house in this jacket, it's with a
whole different confidence.
Like tonight, I might have been a little nervous.
But inside this jacket, I am composed, grounded,
secure that I can meet any social challenge!*

Something about how we dress tells others who we are and how we feel. For instance, consider two brothers. One is a teenager dressed in all black, while the other is in his twenties and wearing an army uniform. The way they dress gives us different impressions of them, their level of maturity, who they are, and what they represent.

"Clothes are a kind of uniform." Says Victor LaValle, "A nun's habit, a surgeon's scrubs, a cop's uniform. People often say that when they put on a certain uniform, they actually think of themselves differently."⁵³⁹ Have you ever wondered what fashion was like in the Garden of Eden? You are about to find out!

*God made tunics of skin for Adam and Eve.
(Genesis 3:21)*

In Genesis 3:21, after Adam and Eve sinned, God dresses them in garments (or tunics, depending on your translation). Some Christian traditions teach this to be the first time in the Bible that an animal was killed as a sacrifice. And it was done by God himself, so they say. The argument is that since the tunics were made of skin, God allegedly offered a sacrifice (to himself?) by slaughtering an animal in front of their very eyes, teaching them to do so themselves. In a Church sermon titled "The First Sacrifice," reformed pastor John MacArthur preached:

The sacrificial system was to picture the necessity of a substitute to take the place of sinners, to be killed, and to bear the wrath of God. And, of course, none of the sacrifices ever given in the past could do that, they just pictured the One that was to come, who was Christ. So here, for the first time in Genesis 3:21, we have a picture of the substitutionary atonement of Christ to come in the future, by which sinner's shame and guilt will be covered. The gospel is there embedded in that very statement that God will — listen to this — provide the sacrifice.⁵⁴⁰

As we will soon see, the sacrificial system was not about the wrath of God killing sinners. But MacArthur reads Genesis 3:21, and he sees "killing," "wrath of God," "sinners," and "substitutionary atonement." None of these words appear in Genesis chapter three, yet for MacArthur, this verse is about God providing the sacrifice and then sacrificing it to himself.

Frankly, this is an awful lot to read into a single verse that says nothing other than the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. The death of an animal is never mentioned. Substitutionary atonement is not even inferred. There is also nothing about death, blood, killing, or wrath. The words "sacrifice" or "atonement" are also not mentioned in the text. MacArthur assumes a dead animal was involved. But was it?

Just as MacArthur speculated a dead animal was involved, others speculated that God made the tunics from the slough of an animal (molting). For example, an ancient Jewish commentary, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, explains that in Genesis 3:21, God made garments for Adam and Eve from the sloughing off of the serpent. Perhaps in the way of mocking him, as if saying, "I will use you to cover for them."

So, just as MacArthur speculated, many other ideas can be speculated. It is easy to do so once we detach from the text and allow our imagination to fly. But there is a reason the text doesn't say how the tunics were made, and it is because it wasn't a relevant fact to the author of Genesis. And if it wasn't relevant for the author, then who are we to build a doctrine on top of what the text doesn't say? So, if not animal sacrifice, then what is Genesis 3:21 all about? Let's allow the text to speak for itself.

Brent A. Strawn, a professor of the Old Testament at Duke Divinity School, points to the context of the creation story. Strawn argues that just as God made everything else out of thin air, so he made the tunics. And that it has nothing to do with atonement and sacrifices but with God being a provider. Just as God provided for mankind by creating, so he provided Adam and Eve by creating tunics for them:

Yhwh-God's provision of clothing for the first humans in Gen 3:21 is often understood as a gracious act that nevertheless involves animal slaughter so as to produce the "garments of skin." The present essay uncouples these two elements—the beneficence of the divine provision of clothing and the possible death of animals that may be implied—reexamining the latter in light of a neglected parallel found in Enūma Eliš, which demonstrates (perhaps with a cognate to the Hebrew verb used in Genesis) that the gods can summon things into existence, especially by speech. The power of divine creation, especially through utterance, is well attested in other ancient Near Eastern texts, and so Yhwh-God's making (עשה) clothes need not indicate the destruction of animals. In the end, therefore, if Gen 3:21 is used in wider theological-ethical discussions, its significance lies

*with a theology of creation, not one of sacrifice or atonement.*⁵⁴¹

Strawn is correct in pointing out that Genesis 3:21 uses the same Hebrew word, **ASAH** (made), that the text previously used to describe God's creation. When we read the text carefully, we can see how it emphasizes time and again that God ASAH (made). For example, in Genesis 1:7, "God ASAH the vault." In verse 16, "God ASAH two great lights." In verse 25, "God ASAH the wild animals." In the following chapter, we read again in verse 4, "the Lord God ASAH the earth and the heavens." Verse 9, "The Lord God ASAH all kinds of trees." In verse 22, "the Lord God ASAH a woman." And in Genesis 3:21, "The Lord God ASAH garments of skin." So, the Hebrew word, ASAH, is used throughout the creation story to describe how God creates things. This is great textual support for Strawn's argument. In light of this, the point of Genesis 3:21 is that God creates things for mankind. The tunics, as suggested by the text, were gifts God provided to Adam and Eve.

Consider the interesting parallelism between God dressing Adam and Eve and their attempt to dress themselves. Only a few verses earlier, Adam and Eve covered themselves with something basic, delicate, and temporary - fig leaves. People often relate this to their sin, being ashamed because of their sin. But the text says something else. They were ashamed because "they were naked." They had realized their nakedness due to their eyes being opened. Eyes being open symbolizes understanding and maturity. It's like saying, "they woke up to reality." Animals don't mind being naked, but humans do. Their nakedness was not a sin, and definitely not nakedness between the Garden's majestic couple. So, it was something else they had realized.

Strawn said that Genesis 3:21 is about "Yhwh-God's provision of clothing for the first humans." But God did not only provide them with covering. Adam and Eve's simple fig leaves could also do the job of hiding their nakedness. Yet God did more - he made

tunics of skin. The people of Israel, reading this story knew that kings and priests wear tunics of skins. Even modern-day clothing made of leather is considered more extravagant, fancy, and luxurious.

Clothes are important as they reflect who we are, what we do, our titles, and what we believe ourselves to be. This is why the authority of doctors, soldiers, judges, conductors, kings, and priests is recognizable by the uniforms they wear. Animals don't dress up, but people do, with much creativity to reflect various situations and roles. Humans were also given the role of subduing animals. We are superior to them. This is why we are the ones who visit them at the zoo, and we do it dressed. Just like judges and kings wear a gown, the priests of Israel wear a tunic, as explained by one scholar:

The phrase “to clothe with tunics” (לבשׁ) hiph'al + כְּתוּנָה) in Genesis 3:21 is only used elsewhere in the Pentateuch to describe garments for the priests (Exod 29:5, 8; 40:14; 8:13; Lev. 8:7, 13; 16:4).⁵⁴²

An Israelite reading Genesis would have known that tunics were the uniforms of the priests. So, when they heard or read Genesis chapter three, they knew that God symbolically ordained Adam and Eve as priests over creation by dressing them in tunics. This role goes hand in hand with God's commandment for Adam and Eve to “rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28). They were anointed to rule as priests over creation.

Just as no one would honor a judge if they removed their robe and put on denim shorts, nor would they respect a police officer wearing a rainbow t-shirt and flip-flops, or trust a doctor wearing snug shiny latex pants and a red clown nose. For the same principle, God replaced the perishable fig leaves with permanent and majestic tunics. Fig leaves failed to represent who they were as priests over God's creation. Even though Adam and Eve had just rebelled

against God, He still declared them CEOs over His creation. Their sin did not change His mind. That is a beautiful reminder, not of God’s wrath, but of God’s grace. Later, in the book of Revelation, we see this motif of tunics/garments appear again. This time, it is believers in Christ who wear the garments:

*The one who overcomes will be clothed the same way, in white **garments**; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.*
(Revelation 3:5)

If my interpretation did not resonate with you, then more interpretations (and speculations) are available. Still, the fact is that the text of Genesis 3 says nothing about God killing an animal, about blood, wrath, or sacrifice and atonement. Therefore, one treads on dangerous ground if they claim that Genesis 3:21 contains the first sacrifice in scripture, as this is simply not even implied by the text.

Only if one forcefully injects into the text (a practice known as “eisegesis”³⁴) that sacrifice and atonement can be found in Genesis 3:21. Otherwise, it is hard to imagine how mentioning garments (or tunics) was the author’s attempt to develop a doctrine about atonement. If that was indeed the author’s point, they would mention an animal and use terms like ‘sacrifice’ and ‘atonement.’ Or at least mention ‘death’ and ‘blood.’

In addition, the New Testament, which speaks volumes about sacrifice and atonement by quoting the Old Testament, not once refers to Genesis 3:21 in the context of sacrifices and atonement.

One last thing to ponder before moving to Genesis chapter four: animals don’t understand grace, but we do. However, how else

³⁴ Eisegesis is interpretation of text by reading into it one’s own ideas.

would it be possible for Adam and Eve to understand and experience the full depth and extension of God's love, grace, and forgiveness if it weren't for their sinning in rebellion?

Cain and Abel (Genesis 4)

The story of Cain and Abel is where we actually first meet sacrifices in the Bible. These brothers did not have any "Law" that they were following. Like many others in the Ancient Near East, they offered sacrifices to "stay on the good side" of God. These were the "snacks" they offered to God. Just like in Chapter 3, you have probably heard various traditions about why God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's. The most prominent tradition is that Abel's offering was accepted because it involved the death of an animal, while Cain's was rejected because no blood was shed. Allow me to pick on John MacArthur once again, as he's a great example:

We see that Abel did what God required...He brought the right sacrifice that was required by God...It was better because it was blood, and it was better because it was required as a sacrifice for sin.⁵⁴³

The first problem with MacArthur's interpretation is the anachronism fallacy.³⁵ God did not require blood as a sacrifice for sin until thousands of years later, in the time of Moses. Moreover, the text offers no such explanation. But in any case, this sacrifice had nothing to do with forgiving sins. The second problem is that later in Leviticus chapter two, we see that God does, in fact, accept bloodless (non-animal) sacrifices without a problem. If the children of Israel were allowed to offer agricultural produce, why would God

³⁵ An anachronism is a chronological inconsistency of misplacing people, events, objects, language terms, and customs in the wrong periods. The common types of anachronism in theology are verbal expressions or philosophical ideas placed outside their proper temporal domain/time.

be so upset when Cain did so? The third problem is that the New Testament's mention of the infamous story never suggested that bloodless sacrifice was the reason for God's rejection of Cain's offering.³⁶

According to the text, the difference is that while Cain "brought some fruit," Abel, on the other hand, brought his very best, "fat portions from some of the firstborns." Fat firstborns? This is the "grade five Wagyu beef" of ancient times. These were the pampered cattle that enjoyed back rubs and played golf. The difference the text points out to the reader is not in the type of offering (blood vs. bloodless) but in the quality of it ("fat" and "firstborn" vs. just "some"). The quality of the sacrifice is also something God will later emphasize in the Law to Israel.³⁷ So, in contrast with Cain, Abel brought his very best. At the same time, Cain probably saw some bananas starting to blacken and decided they shouldn't go to waste. (If only he knew how to make banana bread..)

So, while Genesis chapter four introduces the first sacrifice, it had nothing to do with wrath, sin offering, and blood. Notice verse two: "Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil." Cain brought fruit because he was a farmer. It is no sin to be a farmer. But as a farmer, he, too, could pick the better portion of his fruits. But he didn't. Therefore, God's issue was not with blood but with the quality of the offering he was gifted with. So don't bring your leftovers, bring your best!

Noah (Genesis 8)

When Noah came down from the ark, he was the first to be mentioned building an altar, offering clean animals to God (Genesis 8:20-22). It seems that the author's use of an "altar" and "clean" animals, which brought a "pleasing aroma" to God, is also to

³⁶ Matthew 23:35; Hebrews 12:24.

³⁷ Leviticus 1:3; 2:1; 3:1; 22:21-22.

parallel Noah's office with that of the high priests (and possibly Moses.⁵⁴⁴) Noah had unbelievable faith. He trusted God in ways that people considered him crazy. The Hebrew text has a beautiful play on words with the name NOAH.³⁸ Unfortunately, it gets lost in translation with other languages. NOAH offered sacrifices which to God were a "NIHOAH" (Hebrew for pleasing aroma). Perhaps the thanksgiving offered by faithful Noah in the name of mankind (whatever was left of it³⁹) pleased God.

Then the chapter ends with a promise never again to bring such an immense disaster. If you remember, the opening of this chapter starts with "God remembered Noah" and ends with God giving a promise never to forget. If Noah is indeed portrayed as a priest over creation, then it is probably due to his obedience that God saves the world. Noah's life is a beautiful shadow for the faithful one who in the future will also save people through his obedience, even until death, creating an aroma for God: "...Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2).

The aroma that God "smells" and receives pleasure from comes from the faith of people who go out, take the risk of trusting, and sacrifice - sometimes everything - for the sake of others. Noah serves as an excellent reminder to those who prefer to lock themselves away, far from the evils of this world, that they can hide with everything they have so they may outlive everyone else, but this will not produce the pleasing aroma God seeks after.

Here as well, there was nothing about wrath or punishment.

³⁸ NOAH vs. NIHOAH (an aroma, in Hebrew)

³⁹ There is an ongoing discussion (theological and scientific) whether the flood was universal or local, yet it is not one relevant to our discussion.

Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)

History fans are well familiar with the ancient accounts of pagans sacrificing their children to appease their angry gods. The ancient Persians are a good example:

*Embarus, a native of the island Pyraeum, offered his daughter in sacrifice to appease the wrath of the gods.*⁵⁴⁵

It was the pagan gods who demanded human blood for their wrath to be satisfied, and it was the Canaanites who practiced sacrificing their children to their gods, a practice that God forbade in the Law of Moses:

You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. (Deuteronomy 12:31)

But Deuteronomy did not convince Donald Macleod, a member of The Gospel Coalition, as he explained that God offered his Son to Himself as a sacrifice:

*[God the Father] is engaged in the most solemn business that earth can witness. He is offering a sacrifice. The cross is his altar, and his own Son the sacrifice.*⁵⁴⁶

According to Macleod, God did exactly what he forbade Israel from doing. But in light of this, how should we read the binding of Isaac story in Genesis chapter 22, if not Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac to God?

In his book and sermon, John Piper shares a story about a pastor friend who preached to a group of men:

At one point in his message, he paused and asked the men if they knew who killed Jesus. Some said, "the soldiers did." Some said, "The Jews did." Some said, "Pilate." But my friend waited a moment and then simply said, "His Father killed him."⁵⁴⁷

Piper then continues, pointing our attention to Genesis 22:

...Just as Abraham lifted the knife over the chest of his son Isaac, but then spared his son because there was a ram in the thicket, so God the Father lifted the knife over the chest of his own Son, Jesus—but did not spare him...⁵⁴⁸

Piper parallels Father Abraham (almost) killing his son Isaac with Father God (allegedly) killing his Son Jesus. Somehow, Piper considers both to be blood sacrifices for sin. But if this parallel is correct, and Abraham did offer his son Isaac to God, then who did God offer his son Jesus to? However, the point of Genesis 22 is not at all about wrath, punishment, or forgiveness of sins. It is not insignificant that the ancient readers of Genesis 22 knew child sacrifice was forbidden by the Law (Deut 12:31; 18:10; Lev 18:21; 20:2–5). But surely you do not need me to quote Bible verses to know that murder - especially of your own child - is wrong and evil. In any event, God did not desire Abraham to sacrifice his son because God intervened to stop him. God called out to Abraham, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him" (Genesis 22:12). God provided a substitute, a ram caught in the thicket (Genesis 22:13). God did not kill the ram. Abraham did. There is no allegory here suggesting that God would wield the knife over his own Son parallelly. Instead, there seems to be a stress test of Abraham's faith. The New Testament refers to the story of the Binding of Isaac yet never uses it to suggest — as Piper did — that God killed Jesus. In the New Testament, the Binding of Isaac is

mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11, among a list of other acts of great faith recorded in the Old Testament.

Regarding Isaac, we must remember that Abraham was not yet familiar with the sacrificial system, which will only be given hundreds of years later. During Genesis, and as we saw previously, sacrifices were mainly about giving something as a gift to God. This is also what we see in Genesis 22. God asks for Abraham’s son. He never said, “I need your son to be killed so I can forgive your sins.” In Genesis 22, we witness the strength of Abraham’s faith willing to give up his son. But Abraham also knew God promised to bless his seed through his son Isaac. Therefore, God tested him to see if he really believed what He promised him:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. (Hebrews 11:17-19)

In Romans 8:32, although not a quote, an obvious allusion is made to the Binding of Isaac. In that verse, Paul did not see the sacrifice of Jesus as God pouring his wrath on Jesus, but in relation to God giving good gifts. According to Paul, God “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.” (Romans 8:32). Just as Abraham was willing to let go of his son, so did the Father. In Genesis, God did not kill the ram (so he could spare Isaac’s life). God only supplied the ram as Abraham killed it. In the New Testament, God did not kill Jesus but supplied him so mankind may offer him. We killed Jesus, not God.

Jesus’s faithfulness meant he could be sacrificed as the innocent lamb of God who is without blemish (Exodus 12:5). Just like God

provided Abraham with a ram, so God provided us with the Lamb we ought to sacrifice:

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. (Romans 3:25).

Even before the New Testament, the binding of Isaac was a very famous story in Judaism. Yet, it was never seen as one about atonement:

Jewish interpreters show no sign of understanding Isaac's sacrifice as atonement for sin...Paul merely wanted to express here the depth of God's commitment to his people and did so in language that probably presented itself readily to mind both because of his familiarity with Genesis 22:1–18 and because of the use he had just made in Romans 8:12–30 of the common Christian conviction that Jesus was God's Son (8:17, 29; cf. 5:10).⁵⁴⁹

So, Genesis 22 is yet another example of a Bible story taken out of context to promote Divine Abuse's false doctrines.

The Law and Sacrifice

As I was reading Christian literature on atonement, I found a great emphasis on the Church father's models of atonement (and we'll later visit them), yet hardly any discussion on sacrifices in the Pentateuch. As before, I will argue that if we want to better understand the sacrifice of Jesus, we must first study the sacrificial system of the Hebrew Scriptures. Now, just to give you an idea, in the Anchor Yale Bible Commentary, Jacob Milgrom, a Jewish Bible scholar, spent 1200 pages just on chapters 1-16 of Leviticus. Plus, many other sacrifice-related issues, such as covenants, can also be discussed in-depth. All that is to say — a lot can be said on the topic.

To make things worse, Leviticus's discussion on sacrifices is very technical and sounds like legal language. So admittedly, this coming chapter might be somewhat technical for some, but it's informative, so don't be discouraged. Either way, as we are about to see, none of the sacrifices in Leviticus — animal and agricultural — involved violent punishment and abuse of the sacrifice.

In the Law of Moses, the offerings were animals of the flock or herd, certain birds, and grains or grain products. Blood sacrifices were the primary form of atonement. This is because blood represents life which is, therefore, vital, fundamental, and irreplaceable. Since blood sacrifices are the heart and soul of the Old Testament, the New Testament declares that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Hebrews 9:22) Even the Jewish Talmud teaches regarding the sacrifices that “there is no atonement without blood.”⁵⁵⁰

The word for sacrifice/offering in Hebrew is QORBAN, which comes from the word QAROB, meaning “closeness” or “nearby.”⁵⁵¹ That Hebrew word also reflects “to let go of something for the sake of others.”⁵⁵² For the Israelites, this meant that sacrifice/offering was about giving away something to someone else to draw near to them. When we sacrifice something for someone else, we emotionally draw near them. This is evident in cases where an organ donor feels emotionally closer to the recipient, and vice versa. This is also true with God. We draw near him when we sacrifice for him. In the Law, you needed to sacrifice to God to draw near him. But Jesus took it one step further — you now draw near God not by sacrificing for him directly but for others. By “offering” others, especially those who are in need, you can now offer to God. When you do that, God considers it as if you are sacrificing to him:

*Do not forget to do good and to share with
others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.
(Hebrews 13:16)*

So, if Israel gifted God by offering to him on the altar, today we offer to God by sacrificing for others. Think about it, impressing God is not about religiously waking up every morning at five in the morning to pray and read scriptures for an hour (not that there's anything wrong with that). Instead, we "put a smile on God's face" or "earn points" in the kingdom of heaven, so to speak, when we sacrifice for others. When you bless (aka sacrifice for) people, God blesses you in return. New agers may call it "karma." I call him God: "Adversity pursues sinners, But the righteous will be rewarded with prosperity."⁴⁰ (Proverbs 13:21)

If you are wealthy but fail to share your wealth with those in need, then praying and memorizing Bible verses may impress your Christian peers, but it won't impress God. Sacrificing your own comfort to feed your hungry enemy is much more challenging than simply memorizing Bible verses by the fireplace. Although studying the Bible is valuable, it mostly stimulates the brain. If you want to touch God's heart, provide for the needs of others. This is the true essence of sacrifice.

The disciples of Jesus, Jews living in Israel two thousand years ago, did not have the guidance of the Church Fathers. Their understanding of atonement came solely from the Hebrew Scriptures, and they learned about the deeper meaning of Passover and the Day of Atonement while celebrating the high holidays with Jesus in Jerusalem. For them, sacrifice had different aspects, and they also understood that Jesus's atonement was meant to cover the debt that mankind owed God for contributing to all the evil and death in His world. When they later wrote about Jesus's atonement, there was no mention of an angry God who killed Jesus to appease His wrath. On the contrary, Jesus's disciples described His atonement with the word LOVE (1 John 4:10-11).

⁴⁰ Not to be confused with "Prosperity Gospel."

God is holy

Before we explore how the Levitical sacrifices point to Christ, it is important to discuss God's holiness. You may have heard the concept that God is too holy to look upon or be in the presence of sinners. For instance, Philip Ryken, a council member of The Gospel Coalition, provides an explanation:

*God the Father could not bear to look at the sin or at his Son. He had to avert his gaze. He had to shield his eyes.*⁵⁵³

However, what does it mean when we say that God is holy? How should we understand the concept of God's holiness in our discussion? The word "holy" is sometimes seen as the opposite of sin. In modern language, when we describe someone as holy, we tend to think of them as good. In modern Hebrew, when we refer to someone as holy, we often mean they are pure and innocent. However, in biblical Hebrew, the word "holy" means "to be set apart." It is about being distinct and different. But being unique and different doesn't necessarily mean others are bad. For example, God declared the seventh day to be holy, not because the other days were evil or bad, but because it was set apart for a unique purpose.

In the Pentateuch, God is set apart from all other gods because He is the Creator and they are not. Peter Gentry examined the usage of the word "holy" in the Hebrew Scriptures and concluded that:

*The basic meaning of the word is 'consecrated' or 'devoted.' In the Scripture, it operates within the context of covenant relationships and expresses commitment.*⁵⁵⁴

Our God is also different in his ways. Other gods hate; Our God is love. Other gods seek revenge; Our God desires to forgive. If God's holiness meant he "could not bear to look at sin", and we all sin, then it follows that God cannot be in the presence of sinners.

But this view is clearly contradicted by the different manifestations of God throughout the scriptures, the promises of the scriptures, and the very manifestation of the Son of God who came to live amidst sinners. Further, if God is omnipresent, he is always present in the fallen world. The universe continues to exist; it is preserved by the Creator's presence. Finally, there is the famous story of Job, where Satan comes before God and negotiates with him. He did not need to "avert his gaze" or "shield his eyes."

Since God is holy (unique, different), the space where he dwells must be holy. So, when Israel defiled the camp, it became unclean and no longer holy. This is the same principle as with an operating room in hospitals. If you defile it, you may not do surgery until it is again cleansed. Likewise, the holy place of Israel had to be cleansed, purified, and sanctified with the bible's version of antiseptics – the blood of the offerings. Christ was holy too, but Jesus didn't tell sinners to keep away from him as he's holy and they are not. Jesus touched sinners, loved them, and cared for them. The point is that the holiness of God never prevented him from coming near sinners. In fact, they are the very reason why he came. Jesus was holy because he was different from others — he loved even sinners. More on how God allegedly hates sinners and can't look at them later in part III of the book.

Leviticus

You don't often hear sermons about Leviticus, the third book of the Pentateuch. Leviticus is a book dedicated to offerings and sacrifices. Atonement is mentioned about fifty times, almost always in connection to blood. The very opening of Leviticus starts in this way:

*The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from
the tent of meeting. (Leviticus 1:1)*

The book of Leviticus, dedicated to sacrifices in the Old Testament, begins with a call from God, who dwells within a sinful

nation, summoning its sinful leader to come and fellowship with Him. In the center of the book lies the Day of Atonement, which unites the entire book. The book explores the three primary ways in which God helps Israel, a sinful nation, live in his presence. It describes the rituals Israel had to practice and the seven annual feasts, with priests serving as guides and mediators between God and Israel. The book emphasizes Israel's purity to avoid defiling the Tabernacle and its surroundings. The most relevant part of the book to our discussion is the one about sacrifices and offerings. These were the primary ways in which Israel thanked God and sought forgiveness. Most importantly, sacrifices purified God's dwelling place, and eight chapters are dedicated to keeping Israel pure,⁴¹ as God demanded his dwelling place among Israel be constantly disinfected. Israelites could become impure and defile the Tabernacle in various ways, including contact with reproductive fluids, skin diseases, mold or fungus, and touching a dead body,⁴² all associated with death and mortality, which plague the entirety of creation yet have no hold on God, who is the opposite of death, he is life!

Metaphorically, Israel was a hospital, the Tabernacle was the operating room, the altar was the operating table, and the priests were the surgeons. The closer a person gets to the altar, the more severe their transgression will be if they do not comply with the rules. For this reason, the "operating table" is called the "holy of holies" because of its uniqueness. Remember, God is holy (unique, different), meaning that the place where he dwells is also sacred. Therefore, if Israel brings impurity and contaminates that site, it is no longer distinct and unique (holy) from any other place.

⁴¹ Chapters 11-15 and 18-20.

⁴² Also, by eating certain animals, but there's a debate as to why they are unclean and what it means.

The sacrifices in the Law can be divided into four to eight categories, depending on who you ask.⁴³ These categories can then be further divided into 20-30 secondary types or kinds. However, the sacrifices dealing specifically with sin were in the minority.

Three main Hebrew words (that sometimes get translated into the same one word in English) form the linguistic basis for the doctrine of atonement in the Hebrew Scriptures: **GAAL**⁴⁴ (redeem, kinsman); **PADAH** (liberate, redeem); **KAPHAR**⁴⁵ (atone, forgive). Again, these words sometimes get mixed up and translated as the same word, even though they can have different meanings depending on context. The Hebrew Scriptures use these words differently, mainly concerning buying something or someone back. A few examples are when someone redeems a commitment of the family to pay a debt; A relative who redeems family property owned by another; Liberating someone (animal, slave) by paying for their freedom; Giving payment as a substitute for your life or someone else's.

From the three, the Hebrew verb KAPHAR (atonement) is perhaps the most relevant to our discussion on atonement. It appears more than a hundred times in the Hebrew Scriptures. KAPHAR is also where YOM KIPPUR (Day of Atonement) comes from. The word means one of two things. And no, neither one is related to wrath. Some scholars believe the verb indicates “to void,” “to wipe away,” or “to remove.” Others believe the meaning is “to cover” or “to hide.”

⁴³ For example, some divide sacrifices/offerings into five main types: The burnt offering (Leviticus 1; 6:8–13; 8:18–21; 16:24), the grain offering (Leviticus 2; 6:14–23), the peace offering (Leviticus 3; 7:11–34), the sin offering (Leviticus 4; 5:1–13; 6:24–30; 8:14–17; 16:3–22), and the trespass offering (Leviticus 5:14–19; 6:1–7; 7:1–6). Others suggest other ways to divide.

⁴⁴ Strong's 1350, not to be confused with the other GAAL (1351).

⁴⁵ Strong's 3722, not to be confused with the other KAPHAR (3723).

Each of the two explanations paints a different picture of the act of atonement. If atonement means remove/void, then it nullifies the existence of sin and returns the sinner to his previous state. On the other hand, if atonement means to cover/hide, the sin still exists, but its concealment allows the sinner to avoid sanctions. Perhaps we are not supposed to choose. The Old Testament sacrifices covered our sins. It is the New Testament sacrifice that removes them altogether.

As previously mentioned, sacrifices in the Hebrew Scriptures are many, yet they all serve as a shadow and point to Christ. For example, the Peace Offering symbolized harmony, communion, peace, and more. The word for peace in Hebrew is SHALOM. For the Hebrew speaker, it means much more than just peace. In Hebrew, SHALOM means "whole," "complete," "perfect," and "payment." They all share the same root/word (depending on punctuation). In Jesus, we find peace. We are whole again. He paid our debt.

A lot can be said about sacrifices in Leviticus, but for the sake of our discussion, we will limit ourselves to those related to sin. There are only two kinds of sacrifices offered concerning sin. They also overlap one another: **HATA'AT** and **ASHAM**. This discussion might sound a bit technical, but once we understand what these two offerings were, we can understand the central errors of Divine Abuse regarding sacrifices and sin.

“Sin” or “Purification” Offering (HATA’AT)

HATA’AT is a category of sacrifices that can be further divided (chicken or beef, personal or communal, internal or external, etc.) The Hebrew word HATA’AT is confusing to scholars because it comes from either of two words that share the same root: ‘HET,’ meaning “sin.” Or ‘HITE,’ meaning to “disinfect, cleanse; purify; sterilize.” In English, HATA’AT is translated both ways; therefore, you sometimes see “Sin Offering” while other times, “Purification Offering.”⁴⁶ However, most Hebrew scholars and Jewish commentators⁴⁷ side with the second option, purification. They would argue that the context⁴⁸ and primary uses of that offering in the Law make a case for purification. I also side with the option of purification. Even when sin was involved, the Purification Offering's blood was used to clean and purify the altar/sanctuary/tent of meeting and instruments. Remember, blood was like a sanitizer or detergent. This is why the HATA’AT was

⁴⁶ For example, the NAB translation translated HATA'AT in Leviticus 4:3 to "purification offering", while most other translations had "sin offering." The NIV added the following footnote to “Sin Offering”: “Or purification offering; here and throughout this chapter.”

⁴⁷ Such as: Saadia Gaon, Samuel David Luzzatto, Jonathan Grossman, Jacob Milgrom, Yehezkel Kaufmann, and more. Samuel David Luzzatto wrote: “it’s called ‘Hat’at’ due to the Hituy [disinfecting] for which it’s used on the corners of the alter, and since the sprinkling which is performed with the sacrifice is called ‘Hituy’, as is written: “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean” (Psalm 51:7), that is why the sacrifice is called ‘Chata’at’, not because it was intended for sin (“Chet”).” (Samuel David Luzzatto’s interpretation to Lev. 4:3). Jewish Bible scholar, Yehezkel Kaufmann, phrased it similarly: “if we check the sin offering (Chata’at), we will see that its main purpose was to purify from defilement or that its connected at its roots to impurity. It disinfects articles and sanctifies them (Lev. 15, 16, 18-20, 33), and not just articles that were used in the past for holy purposes, but articles that weren’t used previously and could not be defiled (Ex. 29, 36-37).” *Toldot Ha-Emuna HaIsraelit*, part 1, p. 567.

⁴⁸ Also, some would argue that as some of these hata'at-offerings would be eaten by the priests (Exodus 29:33), therefore it would make it hard to believe that the animal absorbs the sins of the people, as they would become defiled and not allowed to be eaten.

sprinkled inside the tent and on the instruments. It was just like sanitizing the hospital's operation room and surgical instruments or purifying wounds so they could heal and won't spread. Likewise, the blood of the HATA'AT would act like a sanitizer or detergent, purifying the defilement caused by Israel.⁴⁹ The purification offering was not about God's wrath being poured on the poor animal or a way for God to relax his anger. It was about the blood (life) of the sacrifice being used to clean the sins (death) of Israel. Blood was even able to sanctify people.⁵⁰ Bible scholar Scott Starbuck comments:

The two elements of purification, the cleansing of the sanctuary and the sending away of impurity, can be observed in the ritual purification of a leper by the ritual manipulation of two birds. One bird was sacrificed, and the other was set free after it and the leprous person were sprinkled with the blood of the slaughtered bird (Lev 14:2–8, 49–53).⁵⁵⁵

The point of the HATA'AT is not the animal's death (as punishment due to God's wrath) but about its blood being used to purify.

There is one sacrificial blood in specific which is like a magic potion, so to speak. A kind of blood that can wash bloody robes white and clean (Revelation 7:14). The only way to understand how

⁴⁹ There is a debate whether the defilement (TOMAHA) is an actual condition, either physical or even demonic, or just a figure of speech, an idea meant to illustrate distancing from God.

⁵⁰ Even before Leviticus, at mount Sinai: “Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” (Exodus 24:8). The text does not say what kind of sacrifice it was. Interestingly, In Targum Onkelos (2nd century, the most important translation of the Old Testament to Aramaic), the phrase “to atone” was added to Ex. 24:8, in order to emphasize the blood was given to atone: “and Moses took the blood and threw it on the alter to atone for the people.”

bloody robes can be turned white using more blood is by understanding Jesus's blood to be like the HATA'AT. The blood of Jesus does to our clothes what the blood of the HATA'AT did with Israel. It is a detergent that purifies and makes it new. Christ's blood can clean whiter than snow:

*Our sins are washed away and we are made clean.
(Hebrews 10:10)*

The blood of Christ enables not only the priests to come into God's dwelling place. It's a detergent that cleans anyone who believes and allows them to enter.⁵¹

To summarize, HATA'AT sees sin as causing a stain or defilement and offers a way for it to be cleansed and purified. Wrath, anger, abuse, or torture were never part of this concept. For the Israelites, these would be modern ideas utterly foreign to them.

Guilt Offering (ASHAM)

The Hebrew word ASHAM means guilt. A Guilt Offering was basically compensation given due to sin. Unlike other sacrifices which took care of Israel as a community, the ASHAM was an offering made by an individual only, amending for his sins. Old Testament professor Rabbi Yonatan Grossman explains it in this way:

*In regard to a guilt offering, the Law focuses on the financial aspect: an animal with a certain monetary worth is required.*⁵⁵⁶

Scott Starbuck elaborates further:

*The term can be used to indicate human culpability
(Gen 26:10; Jer 51:5; Psa 68:22).*

⁵¹ 1st Corinthians 3:16; 6:19-20; 2nd Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:22; 1st Peter 2:5.

*It is also a sacrifice of expiation. But an added and essential aspect of this offering is its aim at also making reparations to parties wronged by the guilty.*⁵²⁷

The substitutional value is clear- your sins exact a price that needs to be paid- just as you would have to pay a fine for parking in a no-parking area. Guilt offering saw sin as stealing from God — a breach of trust between God and men — and, therefore, the need to compensate. However, no element of abuse, wrath or violence was included.

One thing worth noting is that there were no offerings that dealt with deliberate or intentional sins in the Old Testament sacrificial system. All the sacrifices and offerings were for unintentional sins. This is why we read in Hebrews 10:4 that it is “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Despite the multitude of sacrifices, no one was ever forgiven or saved through them. It was only through faith that people in the Old Testament were saved (Genesis 15:6; Habakkuk 2:4). I believe that nothing has changed, and this is still true under the New Testament. The object of faith is now Jesus Christ.

Passover

Every year on Passover, Jewish families in Israel and around the world come together to celebrate the Seder meal. We dine for three hours, drink a lot of wine (what else will cause us to sing so much?), and eat weird-sounding foods like gefiltefish, kneidlach, kugel, and tzimmes. My personal favorites are gefiltefish and especially the lamb. For thousands of years, Jewish people have eaten lamb for Passover.⁵² So did the Jewish authors of the New Testament. In fact,

⁵² There are exceptions. Few conservative traditions will not allow lamb meat during Passover (because there is no temple). Others, less strict, will eat lamb, just as long as it doesn't get roasted.

the Passover lamb is precisely what they had in mind when they wrote about Jesus being the Lamb of God. The lamb was a familiar concept to their Jewish audience, as their forefathers were once commanded:

Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. (Exodus 12:3-6)

Israel was to raise the perfect innocent lamb and then slaughter it. Sounds familiar? This is exactly what we did to the Lamb of God.

If you lived during the Exodus or any time afterward, once a year, you had to take a young lamb you had raised (for a few weeks at minimum) and slaughter it. Imagine how your children played around daily with the adorable little creature — until it was time to kill it. The cute lamb was like a family member to you and your household (2nd Samuel 12). It was a moment of great sorrow and sadness for you and your family. You did not kill the lamb out of anger by pouring your wrath on it. Instead, you killed it with great remorse. Old Testament professor Robin Routledge explains:

Passover not only recalls the events of the Exodus but also seeks to involve each generation in that experience as a present reality. It is a reactualization of what God has done for his

*people, during which participants are to think of themselves as if they were there.*⁵⁵⁸

In the original Passover, the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and the lintel provided redemption for those in the house (Exodus 12:21–27). The destroyer is a vague character. According to some he is the devil while others take him to be another kind of angel. Either way, he came to take life, whether it was your firstborn’s life or your lamb’s. You had to choose. The deliverance from death in Egypt points forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. Hebrew scholar Douglas Mangum puts it this way:

*The adoption of this imagery points to an understanding of the sacrifices of the Passover lamb as the remembrance of God’s past act of redemption that foreshadowed the sacrifice of the Lamb of God as God’s ultimate act of redemption.*⁵⁵⁹

Jesus was crucified on Passover (Mark 14:12), being the Passover lamb. Passover was all about Israel being redeemed and rescued from bondage. No longer enslaved under evil. Symbolically speaking, Jesus, our Passover lamb, released us from bondage. He sets us free. Figuratively, his life was taken by the destroyer instead of ours.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul refers to Jesus as our Passover lamb:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1st Cor 5:6–8)

Interestingly, Paul was very troubled by the Corinthians' behavior. However, he did not say to them, "Look at how you behave! This is the fifth time I have warned you already! You are this close to losing your salvation!" Neither did he tell them, "The way you behave is proof you were never saved, to begin with!" Instead, he invites them to celebrate — a reminder they are already redeemed by "our Passover lamb."

It is interesting to note that Jesus didn't die on the Day of Atonement, the day dedicated to dealing with sin, but on Passover, a holiday which is primarily about liberation from oppression and escaping evil. The timing of Jesus' crucifixion during Passover holds significant symbolic meaning within Christian theology. Passover commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, as described in the book of Exodus. It is a celebration of freedom and God's deliverance of his people from oppression.

Thus, the timing of Jesus' death on Passover underscores the themes of liberation, deliverance, and redemption that are central to Christian beliefs. While Jesus did not die on the Day of Atonement, his death and resurrection have fulfilled the deeper meaning of atonement, providing a way for humanity to find forgiveness of sins.

Day of Atonement

The Bible calls Yom Kippur the "Sabbath of Sabbaths," the holiest day and the pinnacle of the High Holy Days. Nowadays, it is a day devoted to fasting, introspection, and prayer, intended to inspire forgiveness of the past year's sins. What makes it unique is that in Israel, regardless of beliefs, virtually nobody drives a motor vehicle (other than emergency services). It's not illegal to drive on Yom Kippur, it's just how Israelis agree to acknowledge the special day. All stores, businesses, schools, tourist sites, public buildings, and restaurants are closed. People use their feet. Religious Jews walk to synagogues, while secular Jews ride bicycles on the country's empty roads, streets, and highways.

But the way the Day of Atonement is observed today is radically different from how it was observed in biblical times. The Day of Atonement served Israel in several ways: ransom (payment of a debt), purification (cleansing of defilement), repentance (turning away from sin), and maintaining God's presence as part of the covenant.

First, the priest was required to offer a sacrifice for his and his household's sins. Only then would he be considered "disinfected" in God's eyes and able to offer for the people of Israel. Next, two goats were chosen: one to be sacrificed and one as a scapegoat to be "exiled" into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:8-22). The priest would lay his hands on the goat's head, symbolically transferring the nation's sin to it a moment before the goat, with their sins, disappeared forever. This was a beautiful image of God removing our sins.

Every year on that day, the high priest was allowed to enter the holy of holies. The high priest was required to sprinkle the blood of the other goat upon the Kaporet (lid of the ark). In a sense, the Day of Atonement was a way to disinfect the dwelling place of God from the sins of Israel, a symbol of restoration. Mankind was exiled from the Garden of Eden. The people of Israel would be expelled from the camp when committing certain transgressions (Leviticus 7:20-27, 17:4). When the nation of Israel followed other gods, they would lose God's protection and be exiled by pagans.

Jesus, too, was "exiled" from his camp, but for a crime he didn't commit. He was a scapegoat. Israel's scapegoats - one carrying our sins away into exile, the other exiled from the land of the living - served as a yearly reminder that one day our sins will be removed once and for all, our relationship with God will be mended, and we will dwell with him once again.

Everything we read about Leviticus can be summarized in the Day of Atonement, a commemoration of hope and anticipation for

a time when God's people would be forgiven and restored. After Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Christians began to see this hope coming to life. Overall, the element of "wrath" is missing from the biblical sacrifices. We do not see the poor sacrificed animals punished with wrath. We also don't read about their suffering. The people sacrificing them did not kill with anger but more likely with tears of sadness.

In light of the New Testament

In modern Christianity, especially among conservative Protestants, it sometimes feels like the only conversation regarding the sacrifice of Jesus concerns sin. This is, of course, a result of the theory of atonement developed by the reformers. However, as we have seen, the sacrificial system served the people of God in various ways. The aspect of sin, which we discussed in length, was only a small part of why Israel would sacrifice and lacked elements of torture and abuse.

In the New Testament, Hebrews chapter 9, for example, the authors claim that the blood of Christ replaces — once and for all — the blood of bulls and goats of the Old Covenant. We now enjoy forgiveness not because God abused and tortured Jesus by pouring his wrath on him, but because the blood of Christ purified us. It's not God who needed his blood, it is us who did. Salvation is free, not something you earn (Ephesians 2:8-9). But it wasn't free for Jesus. He humiliated himself and, just like any other sacrifice, had to give his life up.

However, in contrast to our salvation, which is free, our wage in the next world is costly, as it demands us to make sacrifices now. The more we sacrifice here and now, the more God will show us favor in the world to come. These are what the Scriptures call

“rewards,” “crowns,” “treasures,” etc.⁵³ Rewards are given to recognize one's service, effort, or achievement. While they have nothing to do with one's salvation, they have everything to do with your award, role, and authority in the next world.

This is why how you live your life as a believer should be important to you. However, your motivation is not fear of eternal separation from God and punishment but gratitude to God for making a one-sided deal with you to have your back — forever. Some believers will be given a lot, while others will be found unworthy. Some 'will be called least in the kingdom of heaven,' while others 'will be called great in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:19). This is why works are important. To earn a wage in God's kingdom, you will need to sacrifice a lot in this world:

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:33-34)

In the New Testament, Jesus's sacrifice took care of our salvation. It is now free, and we can do nothing to earn (or lose) it. Our sacrificing, however, is how we gain eternal treasure in heaven. It is through self-sacrificial acts that you truly worship God. Self-sacrificial acts are not about how religiously you behave but about blessing those in need!

The New Testament uses a few key Greek terms regarding the meaning of the sacrifice of Jesus:

⁵³ Just a few examples: Revelation 22:12; Colossians 3:23-24; James 1:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 6:19-21; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Hebrews 13:16; 1 Peter 5:4; Revelation 2:10; 2 Timothy 4:8.

1. **Agorazō-** This word appears in the New Testament roughly twenty-four times with the meaning of buying (for example, Matt. 13:44; Luke 9:13).⁵⁴ It conveys three basic ideas: [A] In the act of salvation, Christ paid the price to purchase humanity (2nd Peter 2:1); [B] The price itself is the blood of Christ (Rev. 5:9-10); [C] Since we have been bought with this price, we are called to serve God (1st Corinthians 6:19-20; 7:22-23).
2. **Exagorazō-** Galatians 3:13 indicates the substitutional nature of the death of Christ (taking the curse of death upon himself).
3. **Peripoiūmai-** This word appears once, in Acts 20:28, concerning atonement. It means to obtain or procure ownership of someone or something. In other words, God purchased the congregation for himself through the blood of Christ.
4. **Lutroō-** To liberate. This word was used regarding the release of animals or prisoners. The word was usually related to the ransom necessary to pay as a precursor to the release. In other words, release in exchange for a ransom.⁵⁵
5. **Apolutrōsis-** The word appears ten times in the New Testament. Once regarding physical release from prison (Hebrews 11:35). Once in the general meaning of messianic redemption (1st Corinthians 1:30). Three times in the context of the end of days (Luke 21:28; Romans 8:23; Eph. 4:30). And five times concerning the redemption of unbelievers

⁵⁴ In the Septuagint this word is used to describe the basic act of buying, a simple commercial act (for example Gen. 41:57; 42:5,7)

⁵⁵ The infinitive lutroō appears in the gospel of Luke 24:21 (regarding the redemption of Israel); in Titus 2:14; and 1st Peter 1:18-19 (regarding the redemption of the individual). Notice that in the last reference, the price that was paid was the blood of the Lamb. The noun Lutron appears only in the gospel of Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45. The word Lutrōsis is used in context to the redemption of Israel, in Luke 1:68 and 2:38. In Hebrews 9:12, the biblical sacrificial system serves as a background for Messiah's sacrifice once and for all. Again, paying for it in blood.

(Romans 3:24; Eph. 1:7,14; Col. 1:14; Hebrews 9:15). The death of Christ was a substitutional ransom for all.

Hebrews chapters 9 and 10 tell us that the sacrifices of the Old Testament foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ. If God had tortured, crushed, injured, or bruised Jesus, we would expect to see the Old Testament sacrifices enduring the same torture and abuse before being put to death. However, that was never the case. While the New Testament attributes the sacrifice of Christ to guilt offering, sin offering, the Day of Atonement, and Passover, it never portrays God as abusing, torturing, or wrathfully punishing Jesus.

Regifting the gift-giver

In Israel, it was understood that all blessings came from God. As an Israelite, you would select your finest animal to bring before the priest for inspection to ensure its perfection as a sacrifice (Leviticus 22). The priest would ensure the animal, not you, was pure. If you were perfect, you wouldn't need a sacrifice in the first place, as no person is innocent or blameless due to sin. No imperfections were allowed, and the inspection took three days (Exodus 12:3-6).

If we see sacrificing as symbolically giving God a gift, then we would want to give God the finest gift possible, and since we are not perfect, the lamb could, in a sense, represent us. We bring the best gifts to those we love the most, and if God were to give us a lamb as a gift, it would be the Lamb of lambs. This is perhaps why John the Baptist was so excited when he saw Jesus and said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36). Just as the purity of the sacrifices was inspected, so was the perfection of Christ (1st Peter 2:22; Luke 23:4). Once found blameless, he could represent you and me:

Such a high priest truly meets our need--one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. (Hebrews 7:26)

In the Old Testament, the sacrificial system served as a channel through which we connected to God. In the New Testament, Jesus is both a sacrifice (Hebrews 10:1-18) and a “great high priest” (Hebrews 4:14-16). He is the priest who gave himself as a sacrifice, once and for all:

But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. (Hebrews 10:12)

The book of Hebrews convinces us that the New Covenant in Christ is superior to the Old Covenant given by Moses. With a few points, we can see how and why Jesus’ sacrifice is superior to the Levitical sacrifices.

1. The Levitical priests were elected due to their lineage, having nothing to do with their character. They were simply born into the priestly line. Jesus, however, was tested and proven worthy to be our representative priest (Hebrews 7:11–22).
2. The priests would not live forever and therefore had to be replaced. Jesus, however, serves as a priest forever, never to be replaced (Hebrews 7:23–25).
3. The priests had to first offer sacrifices for themselves because they were not perfect. However, Jesus was perfect and needed no sacrifice for Himself (Hebrews 7:26–27).
4. The priests served in an earthly setting, a temporary shadow of that which Jesus ministered in — a heavenly setting (Hebrews 8:1–5).
5. The fact that Jesus is the priest of a New Covenant proves it is superior to the Old Covenant, as a new one would not be needed if the old one was sufficient. (Hebrews 8:6–13).
6. The high priest was able to enter the holy of holies once a year thanks to the blood of an animal sacrificed. Jesus entered the Heavenly sanctuary thanks to his blood and is now sitting at the right of the Father, ministering on our behalf (Hebrews 9:11–24).

7. The quality of the sacrifices in the Old Testament was deficient, as animals had to be sacrificed repeatedly. This demonstrates their inferior value. The quality of Jesus’s sacrifice is superior and perfect like no other because Jesus is not another animal, nor was he created. His sacrifice is eternal because he is eternal. (Hebrews 9:25-10:4).
8. Access to the Holy of Holies was barred. Besides the high priest, who was allowed to enter once a year, no one else was permitted. However, in Christ, we may “Enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body.” (Hebrews 10:19–20, Matthew 27:51).

Picture this biblical setting: (1) God who’s in the heavens; (2) The mediating priest; (3) The sacrifice; (4) The one who brings the sacrifice. Jesus took the place of both the priest and the sacrifice that humanity offered on the cross to God in heaven. Everything has been done on our behalf; "It is finished" (John 19:30). All that the sinner may (and should) do is accept, in faith, the gift of salvation and respond with gratitude by sacrificing for others, just as Christ loved us. In short, the Levitical sacrifices were a shadow of the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Neither the Levitical system nor Jesus ever involved violent abuse by God, pouring His wrath on them in anger.

How Can One Sacrifice Atonement for All?

One of the greatest misunderstandings of Divine Abuse theology is the belief that the power in Jesus’ sacrificial atonement to remove sins was in the amount of cosmic suffering, pain, and abuse he had to endure (by God). The notion is that because mankind’s sin was so great (due to the vast number of us), the suffering of Jesus had to be extreme. David Platt explains:

What happened at the Cross was not primarily about nails being thrust into Jesus' hands and feet but about the wrath due to your sin and my sin being thrust upon his soul. In that holy moment, all the righteous wrath and justice of God due us came down rushing like a torrent on Christ himself.⁵⁶⁰

Wayne Grudem, too, says:

Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.⁵⁶¹

The assumption behind Divine Abuse theology is, I assume, that the death of one animal holds the value of a single person's sin, so the death of Jesus had to somehow equal the deaths of all who ever sinned. To illustrate this, imagine one sin of man equals one nail thrust into an animal. So, one hundred people equal one hundred nails (ouch!). But how many nails are needed for all sins that have been "stored up since the beginning of the world"? Way too many for any Roman soldier to nail. Therefore, something that equals billions of nails hammered, like a cosmic nuclear bomb, had to substitute the nails. The atomic bomb, in this metaphor, is God's wrath. The Divine Abuse argument is that for the death of Christ to be worth the lives of billions of people, Christ had to endure an enormous amount of pain and suffering — "like a torrent," to use Platt's own words. But such great pain and suffering cannot be caused by human soldiers but only by the wrath of God, allegedly.

But saying it's not about "nails being thrust into Jesus' hands and feet" is like saying that the physical suffering (and humiliation) of Jesus was not sufficient. Allegedly, God had to also abuse him in some cosmic manner. However, separating the material from the spiritual, as if they were two distinct and different things disconnected from one another, is called "Gnosticism." Gnosticism differentiates between matter, which is considered inferior, and the

spiritual, which is regarded as superior. The Gnostics believed the flesh and anything material to be worthless, thereby distinguishing it from the spiritual world, which they considered good. Gnosticism often penetrated and influenced Christianity. In fact, fighting Gnosticism was John's reason for writing his first epistle.

Biblically, the spirit is integrated with the flesh. And while worshipping the material as bad, matter in itself, which God created, is not evil. We, humans, are a holistic combination of the physical and spiritual. There is no compartment or space hidden somewhere in our bodies where our spirit lives. We are body-soul integration of one unified essence. This is also why the scriptures tell us to confess Christ as Lord using our physical mouths and be baptized with our physical bodies. These are external public expressions of what is happening deep within our spirit-soul. And this is also why we will get resurrected with our bodies — because we won't be able to live just as spirits without our physical form. The one is joined with the other. So, in principle, if you were to slap Jesus in the face, it would be as if you slapped God in the face.

But here is the main problem with Divine Abuse's argument. In their logic, it's about quantity rather than quality. For them, the endless sins committed by mankind had to equal endless deaths, or in the case of Jesus, an extreme cosmic torture Jesus had to go through by his own Father.

However, this logic is flawed. When many people obey the order of a king, it's not because the king had to repeat himself endlessly, continuously yelling out loud in anger until every single person would finally hear and obey. Rather, it's because a word of a king holds great value. The power is not in quantity (yelling loud enough, long enough) but in quality (the King's authority). Therefore, comparing the value of Christ's atonement to the pain and suffering he had to endure by his Father in heaven is the wrong way to look at the situation.

Instead of valuing the atonement in the amount of pain and suffering the sacrifice had to endure, the value should be weighed in the object of the sacrifice. The difference between all the bulls in the world and Jesus is not in number but in quality. He's eternal, but they're not. Offering a pigeon had greater value than offering bread. Offering a lamb or cattle had greater value than offering a pigeon. A red heifer had more value than a regular cow. This principle is still valid today (which is why Wagyu beef can be up to forty times the price of regular cattle). In the same way, Christ's value is worth way more than all birds, cattle, and any other animal that ever lived combined. Why? Because Christ is infinite and eternal; hence, his value is infinite and eternal. Christ was not a lamb, goat, pigeon, or bull. He also never had an expiration date. Everything with a beginning and an end is limited in its worth. Gold and silver can weigh, value, and negotiate their worth. But Christ, the Son of God who has no beginning nor an end, holds a value that is beyond all measures:

*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, **but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.** (1st Peter 1:18)*

Jesus's obedience in suffering is an expression of his love and an example for us to follow (1 Peter 2:21). But the power of salvation does not come from the enormous extent of abuse he had to suffer. The worth of his atonement is in the value of his blood (life). It is not that Jesus experienced enough pain to substitute for all of us. It is that Jesus is precious enough to pay for all of us.⁵⁶

Therefore, it is not about quantity (of nails or pain and suffering). It is about the quality of the sacrifice that can serve as an

⁵⁶ Romans 3:22; Philippians 3:9

atonement for all — once and for all. If the Son of God is eternal and infinite, so is the worth and value of his atonement, which is eternal and infinite.

Why would God sacrifice his own Son?

When you sacrifice for someone else, you're basically telling them, “You are very important to me. I want to respect and protect you.” If someone told you, “I am willing to give you my kidney,” you would know they really love you. This is what a loving parent does. Furthermore, one will only sacrifice something of great value for somebody they really love and value.

Many, especially non-Christians, struggle to comprehend the logic behind God sacrificing his Son. So, what's the big deal about it? I love my child so much that I would never sacrifice his life for anything. You could offer me ten billion coins of gold in exchange for his life, but I would refuse. Any sane parent knows that sacrificing their child is impossible. It goes against every fiber of our being and is too much to give up. We wouldn't give our children up for anything, but God showed us that he is willing to sacrifice the dearest thing to his heart – his Son! And for whom? For us. For the sake of thieves and murderers. For those who rejected Him. I guess this means God sees a lot of value in sinners. We are valuable enough to God that he was willing to give up his child for us. Only if someone really, really, really, really loves you that they might ever consider giving up their child for you. Therefore, the gospel is not about an angry God releasing his wrath on Jesus. It is about a Father demonstrating the abstract concept of love in the most real and tangible way by giving up his child for our sake. Every parent can emotionally relate to this picture. In Jesus, we finally realize our real value in God's eyes. This is how much God loves you.

But if sacrifice is an outcome of love, and you can't force someone to love, then it is ridiculous to force someone to sacrifice against their will. Sacrifice must always be an act of free will.

PART II

**WHAT HAPPENED
WHEN JESUS DIED?**

In English, the word atonement means reconciliation. It comes from a Middle English word, “onement,” which means “harmony.” So, “at onement” literally means the state of one thing being “at one” with another.⁵⁶² Therefore, “atonement,” referring to Christ, means that something happened in the spiritual realm when Christ died, resulting in God and us becoming one again. We also speak of it as the ability to spend eternity with God (or revert to how things were in the very beginning). Most Christians, if not all denominations, will say that “Jesus died for me.” However, most will hit a wall trying to articulate how and what exactly that means. Perhaps your mind also scrambles to figure out a smooth and easy way to explain the spiritual mechanism that occurred when Jesus died. If so, know that you are not the only one struggling. In fact, if you ask different Christians this allegedly simple question, you will receive very different answers. But that’s okay because Christianity has struggled with that for two thousand years now. Therefore, the answer to the question “Why did Jesus have to die?” or “What happened when Jesus died?” is: “It depends on who you ask.” Nevertheless, this is one of the single most important debates in Christianity.

To no surprise, in the past two millennia, wise and well-meaning Christian theologians have tried to articulate what they understood to be the reason and mechanics behind Jesus’s crucifixion. The challenge is that the default mindset of humans is to try to find the simplest explanation for things. But by doing so, we risk oversimplifying the gospel. Also, God is anything but plain and simple.⁵⁷ His wisdom and work of salvation are “wide and long and high and deep.” Therefore, the Gospel is also deep, complex, and impressive, like a grand mosaic.

As you probably know, theological doctrines do not fall from the sky all at once but are slowly forged by humans. They are not

⁵⁷ Job 26:14; Isaiah 40:28, 55:8–9; Psalm 147:5.

written on a blank page or in a sterile environment. In most cases, theological doctrines develop as a reaction to a previous one they seek to upgrade or challenge. For this reason, several different "Models of Atonement" have been offered in the last two thousand years, trying to explain why Jesus had to die. Each model was developed or explained in several different ways, and each explanation has its strengths and weaknesses.

I hope that by now, we can agree that love - not anger and hate - was the motivation for why Jesus died. Still, what was the mechanism behind it? Spiritually speaking, if the cross is indeed the single most spectacular event in human history, we should only expect the death of Christ to hold multiple layers of meaning. I would even go so far as to say this: God's wisdom unfolding on the cross is supposed to take humankind thousands of years to be fully unveiled. Perhaps even eternity.

You may consider the topic of atonement as a big mansion with many doors and windows. Some big and heavy books have already opened many of the doors. I, however, will only be peeking through some of the keyholes, enough to offer a survey that will give a much-needed context to our topic. Doing so, I will also share some of my insights, spicing things up a little. Remember, each denomination will hold to a different view. In fact, the theories of atonement are what mostly differentiate between denominations in Christianity. And, of course, different denominations love fighting over which theory/model is true.

Let me confess in advance. I'm an odd duck, as I'm part of a tiny minority that believes truths can be found in more than just one model of atonement.

I hope you have enjoyed the free sample!

You can get the book on Amazon by clicking [here](#).