

**The Sanctuary as a Meta Model for New Testament**

**Atonement Imagery**

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Purpose and Foundational Questions**

Throughout Christian History, scholars have sought to provide an explanation of the mystery of the gospel story. For centuries, Christians have shared the same text of the New Testament. The gospels give the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and record His teachings on the Kingdom of God. The book of Acts, together with the epistles and the book of Revelation, dig deep into the theological and soteriological meaning of the gospel events, and yet still theologians are divided over some of the deepest and most fundamental questions surrounding the gospel.

In what way does Christ's death on the cross provide salvation for humankind? How do we reconcile the facts of his death with the fundamental truths that we understand about God's character—His love, His justice, His sovereignty and His grace? Or perhaps to ask the question differently: how does our understanding of Christ's atonement *shape* our view of God's character? These questions have given rise to a plurality of interconnected yet distinct theories of atonement which have been advocated by Catholic and Protestant Christians, and debated between liberal and conservative theologians. It is the purpose of this paper to explore a possible meta-model which could bridge multiple atonement theories and metaphors using sanctuary imagery found in the Old Testament.

### **Research Goals**

After exploring the historical background of the various views of atonement within Christianity, we will document connections or echoes of the atonement theories within the Old Testament. We will construct a model of Hebrew terms used to describe various aspects of the atonement in order to

ground our study within the Biblical meaning. We will then walk through the Levitical sanctuary service with an eye for connections to atonement imagery. Given these connections within the ancient prophetic model of Christ's atonement, we will attempt to construct a Biblical meta-model of the atonement that captures positive elements of multiple historical atonement theories.

## BACKGROUND

### Background of Atonement Theories

Since the beginning, the Christian Church has taught that Jesus' death on the cross is central to the doctrine of the atonement. Yet scholars have sought deeper answers to the question, "Why is this so?" Why was this God's chosen method of bringing salvation to humankind? Building on the revelation of Scripture as well as cultural traditions and perspectives, many theories have been developed to systematize the Christian understanding of atonement.

One of the earliest atonement theories is known as the *Ransom Theory*. This theory pictures atonement in terms of Christ's "redemption" or "ransom" of the saved from the forces of sin and evil.<sup>1</sup> The New Testament asserts that Christ has "redeemed" or "ransomed" humanity through the death of Christ. Jesus says "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a *ransom* for many."<sup>2</sup> Paul writes that "You have been bought for a price."<sup>3</sup> Early church fathers, such as Origen in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, used these texts to argue that, since Christ "ransomed" or "purchased" the saved, then Christ's death must have been a ransom price that had been demanded by Satan and

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<sup>1</sup>Fortin, Denis. (2018). Historical and Theological Background of the Doctrine of Atonement. In *Salvation: Contours of Adventist Soteriology*. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press), 175-188.

<sup>2</sup>Mark 10:45

<sup>3</sup>1 Corinthians 6:20 (NASB 2020)

paid in exchange for humankind.<sup>4</sup> Origen argued that God “tricked” the devil, because although Christ died, Satan could not keep his soul (the so-called “fish-hook theory”).<sup>5</sup>

A related theory, articulated even earlier by Irenaeus during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, is the *recapitulation* theory. Paul writes “that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him.”<sup>6</sup> The recapitulation theory emphasizes the idea that Christ, through His life, restores to humanity everything that Adam lost. It shows how, in Christ, humanity ultimately is restored into perfect union with the Divine.<sup>7</sup>

Both theories emphasize Christ’s victory over Satan, and provide answers to some of the foundational questions surrounding the story of Jesus. Even at this early stage, however, a distinction is noticeable, in that Origen emphasizes God’s work in defeating Satan, while Irenaeus focuses on what Christ does *through* His restoration of the believer. These twin emphases continue to be reflected and debated in subsequent generations, with the various atonement theories tending to lean towards one or the other side. (Figure 1) Pelagius, in the late fourth and early the fifth century, is notably condemned for teaching that mankind has the power to change himself, to avoid sinning and to choose to obey God’s commandments.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Boaheng, Isaac. (2022). A Theological Appraisal of the Recapitulation and Ransom Theories of Atonement. *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 8(4): 98-108

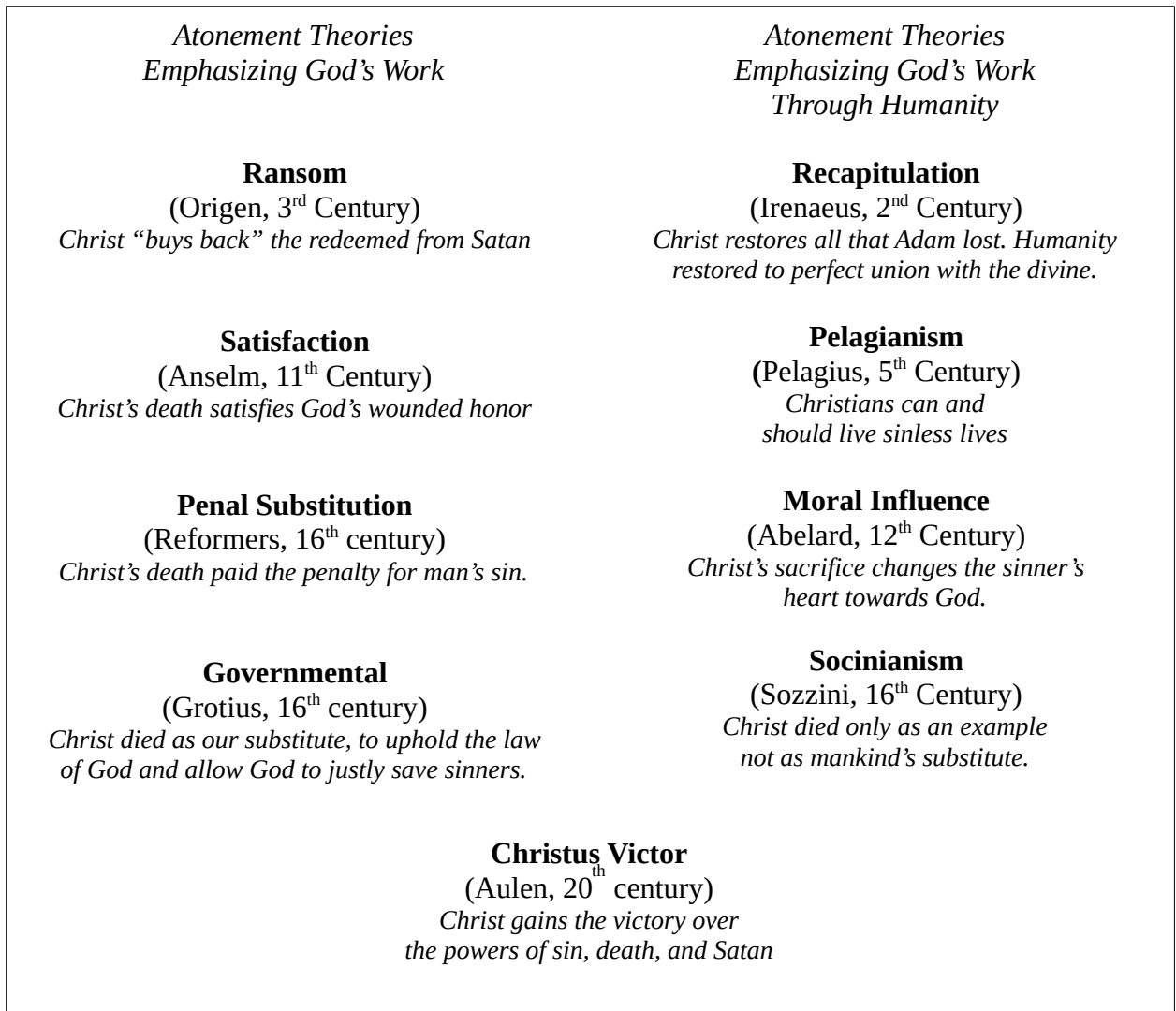
<sup>5</sup> Ludlow, Morwenna. (2008). Chapter 6: Salvation. *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford, 2007; online edn, Oxford Academic).

<sup>6</sup>Ephesian 1:10 (NASB 2020)

<sup>7</sup>Boaheng, Isaac. (2022). A Theological Appraisal of the Recapitulation and Ransom Theories of Atonement. *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)* 8 (4): 98-108.

Gonzalez, Justo L. (2010). *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Reformation, Revised and Updated*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers. 86.

<sup>8</sup>Rackett, Michael. (2002). What’s Wrong with Pelagianism? Augustine and Jerome on the Dangers of Pelagius and his Followers. *Augustinian Studies* 33(2): 223-237.



**Figure 1**

In the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, Anselm of Canterbury proposed another atonement theory, the *satisfaction theory*, to address what he felt were shortcomings in the older ransom theory of atonement. The ransom theory of atonement has a glaring logical fallacy: why would God be obligated to “pay” a ransom to the devil? Anselm addresses this shortcoming in his seminal work *Cur Deus Homo* (Why was God a man?). Anselm seeks to shift the focus of the atonement away from the idea of God paying a ransom to the devil, and instead argues that mankind’s sin has offended God’s honor. God’s justice

requires satisfaction, and only the sacrifice of Christ could provide that satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Christ, who did not deserve death, voluntarily offered himself, satisfying God's honor and providing a superabundance of merit through which God can save the guilty. This theory explains Jesus' death in terms of the Catholic teaching of supererogatory merit which compensates God for His wounded honor.

Anselm's view, though, makes God appear to be a bloodthirsty tyrant, bent on avenging his wounded honor. In the early 12<sup>th</sup> century the French theologian Peter Abelard articulated the *moral influence theory* of the atonement.<sup>10</sup> In Abelard's view, Christ's sacrifice was not a payment to satisfy the wounded honor of God. Rather, it was a demonstration of God's infinite love for humankind. Rather than changing God's relation to the sinner, Abelard argues that Christ's sacrifice is primarily a demonstration that works a change in the heart of the sinner towards God, thus influencing mankind to change their relation to God. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Faustus Socinus further revised Abelard's moral influence theory, emphasizing the role of human will and further negating the role of Christ in redemption (*Socinianism*).<sup>11</sup>

Abelard's *moral influence* theory, however, fails to account for the deep human problems of sin and guilt. It seems to suggest that, with a sufficiently profound demonstration of love, the human heart would naturally melt and turn towards God. It fails to address questions of God's justice in saving the sinner, or the removal of guilt, nor the intrinsic sinful nature of the fallen human heart. Socinianism further amplifies these deficiencies and moves Christianity beyond Pelagianism and towards outright humanism.

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<sup>9</sup>Nguyen, Thu. (2018). Anselm on the Atonement in *Cur Deus Homo: Salvation as a Gratuitous Grace. LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations*. 518.

<sup>10</sup>Fortin, Denis. (2018). Historical and Theological Background of the Doctrine of Atonement. In *Salvation: Contours of Adventist Soteriology*. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press), 175-188.

<sup>11</sup>Mortimer, Sarah. (2009). Human Liberty and Human Nature in the Works of Faustus Socinus and His Readers. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70(2), 191–211. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40208100>

The Protestant Reformation naturally brought another transition in the Christian understanding of the atonement. Martin Luther and John Calvin advocated the *penal substitution* theory of atonement, focusing on these core problems of human guilt and sinfulness. Penal Substitution builds upon Anselm's satisfaction theory,<sup>12</sup> but shifts the focus away from balancing the scales of merit, and towards an understanding of the vicarious nature of Christ's death. Penal Substitution posits that Christ took the penalty of sin, suffering God's wrath in the place of the redeemed sinner. It brings in the concept of a legal transaction which satisfies the demands of justice, allowing God to save the sinner.<sup>13</sup>

These theories do not come close to describing all the theological variation in Christian understandings of the purpose and extent of the atonement. For instance, Calvin held that Christ's atonement was limited to only the elect (*limited atonement, unconditional election*). Jacobus Arminius strongly rejected Calvin's view of limited atonement, instead arguing that atonement was *universal* or *unlimited*, but that election was *conditional* based on human choice and free will. This dispute over the role of human will in salvation harks back to the works of Irenaeus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, was manifested in the heresy of Pelagius, was central to Abelard's moral influence view, and continued to be discussed after Arminius by John and Charles Wesley in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> However, both Calvin<sup>15</sup> and

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<sup>12</sup>MacGregor, Kirk. (2012). Beyond Anselm: A Biblical and Evangelical Case for Nonviolent Atonement. In *The Activist Impulse: Essays on the Intersection of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, ed. Jared S. Burkholder and David C. Cramer (Eugene, OR: Pickwick), 346-374

<sup>13</sup>Farris, Joshua R. & Hamilton, S. Mark. (2021). Craig on Penal Substitution: A Critique. *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 2021; 63(2): 237-269.

<sup>14</sup>Snyder, Howard A. (2018). John Wesley, Irenaeus, and Christian Mission: Rethinking Western Christian Theology. *The Asbury Journal* 73(1): 138-159. <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/asburyjournal/vol73/iss1/8/>

<sup>15</sup>Cha, Jaeseung. (2013). Calvin's Concept of Penal Substitution: Acknowledgement and Challenge. In *Restoration through Redemption: John Calvin Revisited*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004244672\\_009](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004244672_009)

Arminius,<sup>16</sup> as well as the later John Wesley,<sup>17</sup> framed their view of the purpose of Christ's atonement within the penal substitution motif.

Despite its developments beyond Anselm, the penal substitution model of atonement still paints a picture of God that was troubling to many Christians. Some interpreted the necessity of Christ's sacrifice as a God requiring "violence" in order to forgive sin.<sup>18</sup> The *governmental theory* of the atonement, developed by Hugo Grotius during the reformation period, addresses this shortcoming by re-framing the discussion in terms of a loving God as ruler of a just universe. Grotius was a follower of Jacobus Arminius, and developed his theory in reaction to Socinianism and towards a further development beyond penal substitution. According to governmental theory, God has established His government based upon unchanging law. God can offer forgiveness (mercy) out of His love, but to do so also undermines the law (justice) which is the foundation of His government. Hence, the death of Christ establishes the authority of His law while also providing the means for God to offer grace.<sup>19</sup> The governmental theory of atonement strongly influenced the thinking of philosophers such as John Locke<sup>20</sup> as well as later theologians in the Methodist/Arminian tradition during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was influential in framing the theology of many leaders during the Second Great Awakening.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Pinson, J Matthew. (2010). The Nature of the Atonement in the Theology of Jacobus Arminius. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53(4): 773-785. [https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/53/53-4/JETS\\_53-4\\_773-785\\_Pinson.pdf](https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/53/53-4/JETS_53-4_773-785_Pinson.pdf)

<sup>17</sup>Wood, Darren Cushman. (2007). John Wesley's Use of the Atonement. *The Asbury Journal* 62(2): 55-70. <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/asburyjournal/vol62/iss2/4/>

<sup>18</sup>Holmes, Stephen R. (2017). "Penal Substitution" in Johnson, Adam J. (ed) *The T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*: 295-314.

<sup>19</sup>Fortin, Denis. (2018). Historical and Theological Background of the Doctrine of Atonement. In *Salvation: Contours of Adventist Soteriology*. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press), 175-188.

<sup>20</sup>Tuckness, A. (2010). Retribution and Restitution in Locke's Theory of Punishment. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(3), 720–732. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381610000125>

<sup>21</sup>Miller, Nicholas. (2015). Alongside Foundationalism: Adventism's Alternative Protestant Philosophical Path. *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 53(1), 37-54. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/vol53/iss1/3/>



Countless other viewpoints have been put forward over the centuries, often reflecting some nuance on these major frameworks of atonement. One well-known viewpoint that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Gustaf Aulen’s *Christus Victor*<sup>22</sup> theory of the atonement. In his seminal book, Aulen gives an excellent historical survey of atonement theories. Then, he artfully packages the ancient ransom and recapitulation theories of atonement in a way that emphasizes the broader redemption narrative of Christ’s ultimate triumph over sin and Satan within the framework of protestant thought. The apostle Paul himself articulates this *Christus Victor* motif when he writes of Christ, “When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.”<sup>23</sup>

It is my belief that no single theory has fully captured the meaning of the atonement. These various atonement theories, while apparently contradictory and sometimes rooted in flawed theological presuppositions, each contribute a unique perspective and can be helpful in understanding the Biblical doctrine of atonement. However, the shortcomings of these viewpoints have also contributed to widespread misconceptions of God’s character and purpose, which in turn have led to gross abuses of human power and passion within the institutions of God’s church.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Aulen, Gustaf. (1931). *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*. (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

<sup>23</sup>Colossians 2:15. New American Standard Bible, 2020. The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>24</sup>Blosser, Andrew. (2015). “Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Ann Parker, and Governmental Atonement Theology.” *Master’s Theses*, 70. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/theses/70/>

## SURVEY OF BIBLICAL IMAGERY

### Brief Survey of New Testament Atonement Imagery

The New Testament has no shortage of metaphors to describe Christ's atonement, and its relevance and purpose for the believer. The ransom metaphor, as demonstrated above, is deeply rooted in New Testament imagery.<sup>25</sup> The concepts of "ransom" and "redemption" involve a price paid to "buy back" the individual who was lost. These same New Testament concepts also echo the "substitution" motif present in reformation theology.<sup>26</sup> This concept of substitution is articulated clearly in the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah, quoted by Peter.<sup>27</sup> Jesus is referred to as the "Lamb of God,"<sup>28</sup> as our "High Priest,"<sup>29</sup> as well as our Older Brother and the example of our faithful walk.<sup>30</sup> There is no shortage of studies on each of these New Testament concepts, but from even a brief survey it becomes clear that many of these New Testament metaphors have their roots in the system of worship outlined in the Levitical laws of the Old Testament.

### Early Old Testament Atonement Imagery

Throughout the Old Testament, we find passages and stories that reflect or give credence to nearly all of the atonement theories outlined above.

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<sup>25</sup>Mark 10:45, Matthew 20:28, John 15:13, 1 Timothy 2:6, 1 Peter 1:19

<sup>26</sup>Hasel, Frank. (2010). Christ's Substitutionary Death. *Perspective Digest* 15(3)  
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol15/iss3/3>

<sup>27</sup>1 Peter 2:24, Isaiah 53:5

<sup>28</sup>John 1:29

<sup>29</sup>Hebrews 9:11-12

<sup>30</sup>Romans 8:29

We find the very first recorded atonement image in the Old Testament in the curse to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. “And I will make enemies of you and the woman, and of your offspring and her Descendant; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise Him on the heel.”<sup>31</sup> In this image, we find the atonement pictured as an epic battle between Christ (the Descendant of the woman) and the serpent, with Christ ultimately crushing the head of the serpent. This serpent metaphor takes on a new level of meaning during the wilderness wanderings of Israel. When fiery serpents began biting the people, God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and raise it up on a pole. Those who looked at the serpent would live.<sup>32</sup>

A serpent is a symbol of sin and Satan.<sup>33</sup> How could the serpent also bring salvation? I believe God wanted the Israelites to recognize the cause of their pain and misery: that it resulted from their rebellion and the subsequent judgment of God. The first step to physical healing is to identify the nature and cause of a disease. So the first step in spiritual healing is to recognize the cause of our spiritual malady. Beyond that, the serpent on the pole—a symbol of death—took away the reality of death in those who looked in faith. In the provision of God, a substitution was made—the serpent (cause) was put in place of the sufferer.

It’s interesting that Jesus, in speaking with Nicodemus, applied this “serpent” metaphor to himself: “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes will have eternal life in Him.”<sup>34</sup> The death of Christ on the cross demonstrated the enormity of sin, and painted a clear picture of the death that is the inevitable result of sin. It also showed the lengths that Satan would go to in his war against God—to even destroy the Son

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<sup>31</sup>Genesis 3:15 (NASB 2020)

<sup>32</sup>Numbers 21:8

<sup>33</sup>Genesis 3, Revelation 12:9, Revelation 20:2

<sup>34</sup>John 3:14-15, NASB

of God Himself! The apostle Paul affirms that “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin in our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”<sup>35</sup> Hence this Old Testament serpent metaphor encompasses both a *Christus Victor* motif as well as a *substitutionary* motif.

The bronze serpent metaphor also speaks to the concepts of universal atonement and conditional election: The healing provided by God to the Israelites was *available* to all but *effective* only for those who looked in faith. So the redemption that Christ provided was for “everyone” but only effective for those “who believe.”<sup>36</sup>

We find a reference to animal sacrifice early in Genesis. Abel's sacrifice was pleasing to God, while his brother Cain's offering of the fruit of the ground was not.<sup>37</sup> Noah built an altar and offered a burnt offering of every clean animal after the flood. God's promise and covenant to Noah come as God smells the soothing aroma of the sacrifice.<sup>38</sup> These pictures have echos of Anselm's *satisfaction* perspective, in which God is please or even appeased by a sacrifice; however Anselm misunderstands the purpose of the sacrifice. The *penal substitution* even more accurately explains these Old Testament sacrifices: that it is sin and the claims of God's justice, rather than wounded honor, that require a sacrifice. This sacrifice principle is reflected clearly in the New Testament, in that “without the shedding of blood there is no *forgiveness*.”<sup>39</sup>

When God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac on Mount Moriah, Abraham's faith and God's provision paint a compelling picture of Christ's atonement.<sup>40</sup> The ram which God provided in place of Isaac is an even clearer metaphor for the *substitutionary* atonement of Christ, while Abraham's (and

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<sup>35</sup>1 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>36</sup>John 3:16, NASB

<sup>37</sup>Genesis 4:3-5

<sup>38</sup>Genesis 8:20-21

<sup>39</sup>Hebrews 9:22 (NASB 2020)

<sup>40</sup>Genesis 22

Isaac's) faith, like that of Christ, is held as an example for all believers to follow,<sup>41</sup> in line with Abelard's *moral influence* motif.

The Exodus story is rich with metaphors of Christ and of the atonement. Perhaps the greatest of these is the Passover night, in which a lamb was slain and its blood sprinkled on the doorpost.<sup>42</sup> The story, and its interpretation through the subsequent Levitical laws, have clear portentions of the *ransom* that was paid through Christ's death to redeem humankind, as well as of the *substitutionary* nature of the atonement.

### Sanctuary Imagery

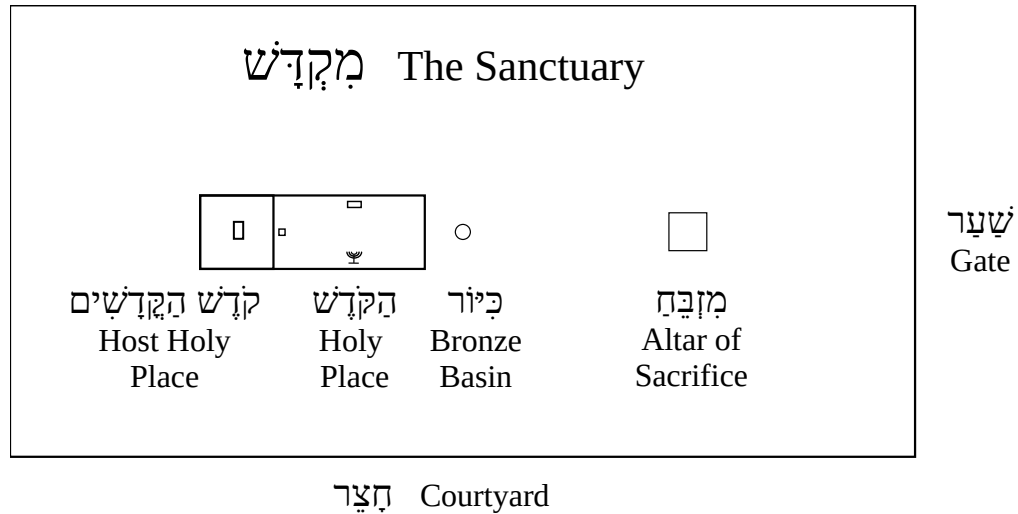
No doubt the largest and most complex Old Testament metaphor of the atonement is found in the symbols and ceremonies surrounding the wilderness tabernacle.<sup>43</sup> This sanctuary, along with the more permanent temples built by Solomon and again by the returned exiles, became the centerpiece of the true worship of God. It consisted of an outer courtyard with a large altar for animal sacrifice, as well as a bronze basin for water. The inner sanctuary was divided into two rooms: a "holy place" and a "most holy place." The holy place contained three articles of furniture: a table for unleavened bread, a seven-branched lamp stand, and a smaller altar where incense was burned before the curtain separating the two rooms of the sanctuary. Behind that curtain, the most holy place contained a sacred chest covered with gold, known as the Ark of the Covenant. Inside this chest were the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, while above the lid (known as the atoning cover or "mercy seat") two angels stretched their wings. The glory of God's presence was manifested continually above this mercy seat. The ark itself was so holy that even the priests were not allowed to touch it, on pain of death. (See Figure 2)

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<sup>41</sup>Hebrews 11:17-19, 12:1

<sup>42</sup>Exodus 12:1-13

<sup>43</sup>Exodus 25-30



**Figure 2**

The worship in the sanctuary began at the entrance to the courtyard, when the worshiper and priest alike entered through the gate on the eastern side of the courtyard and progressed westward toward the most holy place. The daily service would begin with the sacrifice at the large altar. The worshiper would bring the animal to the tabernacle, where he would place his hand on the head of the victim, before it was slain. This indicated that the offering would “be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf.”<sup>44</sup> As the sacrificial victim was slain, its blood would be collected. Portions of the sacrifice would be burned on the altar, while some of the blood would be carried into the tabernacle to be sprinkled before the veil separating the holy and most holy place.

Unpacking the meaning of every part of the sanctuary service would require an immense volume of work which is outside the scope of this paper. Dr. Richard Davidson and his renown colleagues recently put together an excellent work on this subject in Davidson’s book, “A Song for the

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<sup>44</sup>Leviticus 1:4 (NASB 2020)

Sanctuary.”<sup>45</sup> It will be sufficient here to outline a few major images from the sanctuary that reflect on our understanding of the atonement.

The core atonement image from the sanctuary service, as outlined above, is the image of the sacrificial victim, whose life is laid down on behalf of the sinner. The priest is a significant atonement image, in mediating between the worshiper in the courtyard and God whose presence is manifested in the Most Holy Place. The water is significant in its power to cleanse, and to wash away impurity. The bread is a symbol of the transforming power of the atonement, the lampstand to the enlightenment of the believer. The altar of incense, where the sacrificial blood is sprinkled before the veil, represents the worship and prayers of the believer ascending to God through the mediating grace of Christ. Even the Ark of the Covenant pictures the beautiful relationship between the law (justice) of God and his mercy and forgiveness. Is it possible that in this complex and intricate system of worship, designed by God Himself, we can find the most complete metaphor—a Meta-Model—for New Testament concepts of Christ’s atonement?

## THE SANCTUARY AS A META-MODEL

### **Atonement: a Multi-Faceted Concept**

So far we have focused on atonement theory as answering the questions of “Why did Christ die?” or “What was accomplished by His death on the cross?” The wilderness sanctuary service certainly touches this question, but much of its message moves beyond the immediate question of sacrifice to answer a broader question—one which we can find if we broaden our understanding of “atonement.”

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<sup>45</sup>Davidson, Richard M. (2022). *A Song for the Sanctuary*. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press)

The English word “atonement” can be defined as “the reconciliation of God and humankind through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.”<sup>46</sup> The Biblical terms, however, are much more specific, although as we will see, they ultimately encompass this concept of reconciliation in a way that can help us to unify the diverse theories of “atonement” that we wrestle with.

The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament which is frequently translated as “atonement” is כָּפַר (kāpār), which literally means to “cover over,” in the sense of pacifying the wrath of one offended, or to cover over (“atone”) for sin.<sup>47</sup> However, in the Old Testament, “atonement” does not work in isolation.

A closely related concept is the idea of “cleansing.” This is the scriptural purpose of the “day of atonement” ceremony described in Leviticus 16: “For it is on this day that *atonement* (כָּפַר) shall be made for you to *cleanse* (טָהַר - ṭāhēr) you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD.” The verb טָהַר (ṭāhēr) means to “be clean” or “pure” or to make ceremonially clean or pure, often in conjunction with washing oneself with water.<sup>48</sup> While related, there is a clear distinction between atonement (covering sin) and cleansing (purification or washing)

Consecration and holiness is a key concept closely connected to the Old Testament “atonement” and “cleansing.” The Hebrew verb קָדַשׁ (qāḏaš) means to be consecrated, or set apart as holy, while the related noun קָדוֹשׁ (qāḏōš) refers to the one who is “holy,” “sacred” or “set apart.”<sup>49</sup> God says to the children of Israel, “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate (קָדַשׁ) yourselves therefore, and be holy (קָדוֹשׁ), because I am holy.”<sup>50</sup> This term is often translated as “sanctified,” but that translation shouldn’t

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<sup>46</sup>Atonement. 2023. in *Merriam-Webster.com*.

<sup>47</sup>Brown, Francis. 1849-1916. *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon : with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic : Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Peabody, Mass, entry H3722 כָּפַר (hereafter cited as BDB)

<sup>48</sup>BDB, entry H2891 טָהַר

<sup>49</sup>BDB, entry H6942 קָדַשׁ , entry H6918 קָדוֹשׁ

<sup>50</sup>Leviticus 11:44



be confused with the theological meaning attached to the English word “sanctification.” The Sabbath was sanctified (שׁוֹרֵק) at creation, the firstborn of Israel were שׁוֹרֵק or set apart as holy, and the children of Israel were שׁוֹרֵק or consecrated at Mount Sinai before the Lord spoke the words of the covenant, and even the mountain itself was שׁוֹרֵק by a boundary that separated it from the people.<sup>51</sup> Sometimes, when a person or object was consecrated, the consecration was symbolized by the application of oil in a processes known as “anointing” (מָשַׁח māšah).<sup>52</sup>

In the Old Testament, holiness (שׁוֹרֵק) stands in contrast (“set apart”) from the concept of sin: חַטָּאת (ḥaṭṭā’āṭ) and it’s related verb חָטָא (ḥāṭā), as well as it’s resulting guilt and punishment: עוֹן (‘āôn). חָטָא means to do wrong, to commit a mistake or error, or to miss the mark.<sup>53</sup> The noun חַטָּאת refers either to sin, or to the offering made on behalf of sin (sin-offering).<sup>54</sup> The interplay of these concepts is clearly illustrated in the command for the ceremonial consecration of the priests and the sanctuary: “Each day you shall offer a bull as a sin offering (חַטָּאת ḥaṭṭā’āṭ) for atonement (כִּפּוּרִים kipur), and you shall purify (חָטָאתָּ ḥāṭāṭā) the altar when you make atonement (כִּפּוּרֶיךָ kāpār) for it, and you shall anoint (מָשַׁח māšah) it to consecrate (שׁוֹרֵק לָּ qādaš) it.”<sup>55</sup>

The antidote for sin (חַטָּאת - ḥaṭṭā’āṭ) is described in the sin-offering (also חַטָּאת - ḥaṭṭā’āṭ), the atonement (כִּפּוּר - kāpār), the cleansing (תְּהַרֵּךְ - ṭāhēr) , and the “setting apart” or consecration (שׁוֹרֵק - qādaš). Ultimately, however, it is the gift of God, through the will of God, to pardon or forgive (סָלַח –

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<sup>51</sup>Genesis 2:3, Exodus 13:2, Exodus 19:10-23

<sup>52</sup>See Leviticus 8:10-12, etc.

<sup>53</sup>BDB, entry H2398 חָטָא

<sup>54</sup>BDB, entry H2403 חַטָּאת

<sup>55</sup>Exodus 29:36

sālah). Moses, David, Solomon, and even the prophet Daniel prayed fervently that God would pardon his people,<sup>56</sup> something that God promised to do.<sup>57</sup>

The Old Testament atonement principle describes the process of reconciliation between God and humankind. Isaiah states, “your wrongdoings have caused a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.”<sup>58</sup> The New Covenant relationship that God promises to establish with His people in Jeremiah is based upon the forgiveness (סלח – sālah) of their sins and the reinstating of the תורה (torah) principles upon the heart.<sup>59</sup> In a similar passage in Ezekiel, God promises to “vindicate”<sup>60</sup> (צדק – qādaš) or “make holy” His name by restoring Israel to their land, by “cleansing”<sup>61</sup> (טהר – ṭāhēr) them of their filthiness and idols and giving a new heart and a new Spirit, enabling them to keep God’s law. God concludes His work of internal restoration by promising “Moreover, I will save (צלה – yāša‘) you from all your uncleanness.”<sup>62</sup> Zechariah paints a picture of Joshua the High Priest receiving this New Covenant cleansing as illustrated by filthy garments being taken away and replaced by clean garments. In the vision God says to Joshua, “See, I have taken your guilt (און – ‘āôn) away from you and will clothe you with festive robes.”<sup>63</sup>

Hence, the Old Testament model answers a broader question, specifically “How can sinful mankind approach the presence of the holy and sinless God?” Questions about the death of the sacrifice and subsequent forgiveness and cleansing fit neatly within this broader question of restoration and

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<sup>56</sup>Exodus 34:9, Numbers 14:19, 1 Kings 8:22-53, 2 Chronicles 6:12-42, Psalm 25:11, Daniel 9:19

<sup>57</sup>2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 103:3, Isaiah 55:7, Jeremiah 36:3, Jeremiah 50:20

<sup>58</sup>Isaiah 59:2

<sup>59</sup>Jeremiah 31:31-34

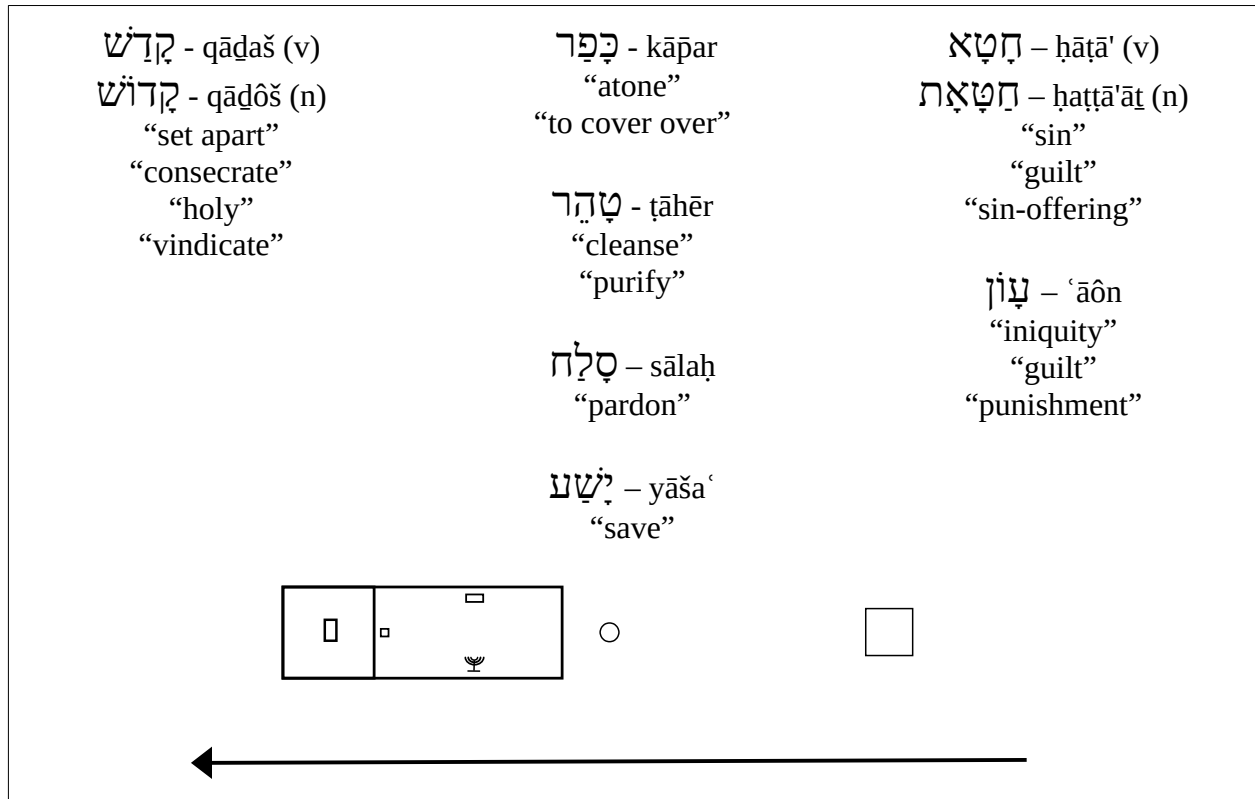
<sup>60</sup>Ezekial 36:23 (NASB 2020)

<sup>61</sup>Ezekial 36:25 (NASB 2020)

<sup>62</sup>Ezekiel 36:29 (NASB 2020)

<sup>63</sup>Zechariah 3:1-4 (NASB 2020)

reconciliation. Figure 3 shows how the Old Testament atonement language could relate together in a linguistic atonement model that moves from sin towards holiness, in which “atonement,” “cleansing,” “purification,” and “pardon” all describe aspects of the process of reconciliation.



**Figure 3**

This principle of God’s salvation and restoration is a theme throughout the Old and New Testaments, and describes the over-arching narrative of this principle of atonement. The angel appearing to Joseph before Jesus’ birth said of Mary: “She will give birth to a Son; and you shall name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”<sup>64</sup> This salvation is brought through Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection, as well as His heavenly ministration and His soon-promised return—events that can be understood in light of the ancient meta-model of atonement communicated by God to Moses in the symbols of the wilderness sanctuary.

<sup>64</sup>Matthew 1:21

## Atonement, Reconciliation & Salvation through the Sanctuary

Origen saw the atonement as a battlefield transaction—a ransom through which Christ defeated the devil and rescued the redeemed. Anselm pictured a transaction through which Christ satisfied the debt of God’s honor, while the reformers imagined a courtroom in which Christ stood as a substitute for guilty mankind. Abelard focused on the impact Christ’s life and death have to change the life of the believer. But when we grasp the broader question, and realize the complexity of the model of atonement, reconciliation, and salvation intrinsic to Scripture itself, we may discover echoes of not one but many of these models in a meta-model predating the atonement of Christ itself.

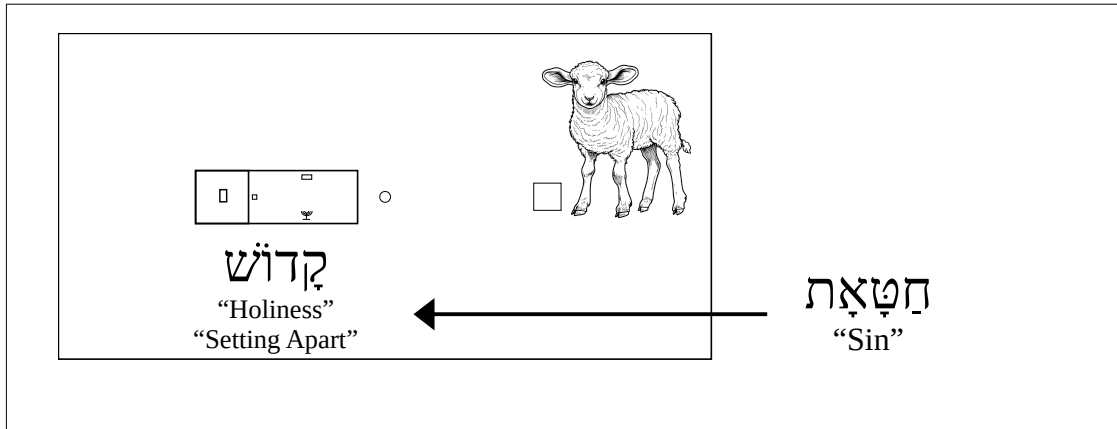
The sanctuary describes, not an event, but a process. This process is set on a backdrop of this world and all humanity, including God’s people, entrenched in and contaminated by sin (תְּחִלָּתָא – ḥattā’āṭ).<sup>65</sup> God is holy (קָדוֹשׁ – qāḏōš), and sin cannot enter His presence, yet because of His love for humanity and His desire for reconciliation, He chooses to dwell in a sanctuary among his people.<sup>66</sup>

The big picture of the sanctuary model is illustrated in (Figure 4), as a process by which sinful human beings are set apart from sin so that they can once again enter the presence of the holy God. It is a process of reconciliation, of which the atonement or covering has a central place. Just past the gate of the courtyard stood the bronze altar of burnt offering, where the sacrifice was slain as the first step to entering the presence of God.

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<sup>65</sup>Isaiah 1:4-6

<sup>66</sup>Exodus 25:8



**Figure 4**

It is in the slaying of this animal sacrifice and its attributed meaning that we find the most direct atonement model. Before the sanctuary was built, in the original Passover service, a lamb was slain and its blood was applied to the doorpost in every Israelite home. When the destroying angel passed through to destroy every first-born, the blood saved the life of the first-born inside every Israelite home—one life given on behalf of another life.<sup>67</sup> Hence it became the law from this time that the firstborn of mankind and of animals was devoted to the Lord, and was to be “redeemed” (פְּדוּתָהּ – pādâ) by a sacrifice. In the laws for the sacrifice in the temple, it was said that the offering “may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf.”<sup>68</sup> The sacrifice symbolized a substitution in which the lamb is slain instead of the son, as well as a “ransom” in which a life devoted to death is ransomed by the death of the sacrifice.<sup>69</sup> The shed blood is directly connected to the “atonement” (כַּפֶּר – kāpār) in Leviticus: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, the harsh justice of

<sup>67</sup>Exodus 12

<sup>68</sup>Leviticus 1:4 (NASB 2020)

<sup>69</sup>Exodus 13:13

<sup>70</sup>Leviticus 17:11 (NASB 2020)

the law<sup>71</sup> is tempered by the atonement in allowing a substitution to be made. God does not require the sacrifice to appease his anger, but as part of a larger principle of satisfying the demands of justice.

The “washing” by water is also crucial in this process of reconciliation in the sanctuary model. The process of “cleansing” or “purification” (טָהַר – ṭāhēr) is accomplished through washing in water, or anointing, or sprinkling of blood. This principle is expanded in New Testament theology through the rite of baptism, in which the believer makes a public confession of their faith and, in symbol, is cleansed from the old life through the waters of baptism.<sup>72</sup> Jesus Himself is anointed by the Holy Spirit when he partakes in the rite of baptism.

The furnishings of the Holy Place in the sanctuary represent the beautiful way in which the holiness of God’s presence both fills and transforms the life of the believer. The bread of the presence as well as the lamps that light the sanctuary both become key symbols of the life and ministry of Jesus, who says both “I am the bread of life” and “I am the light of the world.”<sup>73</sup> Even the flesh of the sacrifice often provided food for the worshiper, who partook of the life of the victim and received sustenance through its death.<sup>74</sup> Thus the atonement becomes a sustaining and transformative influence in the life of the believer, changing his or her life away from sin and towards the way of holiness.

The altar of incense is another picture of the restored connection between the believer and God. Although the veil still separates, yet through the incense the worship is communicated into the Most Holy Place, just as the prayers of God’s people allow a connection to the Holiest One to be restored.

The Ark of the Covenant is, itself, one of the most beautiful images of the character of God that helps to frame this discussion of the atonement. It represented, on earth, the visible manifestation of the

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<sup>71</sup>Genesis 9:6, Leviticus 24:17, Deuteronomy 19:21

<sup>72</sup>Romans 6:4

<sup>73</sup>John 6:35, John 6:48, John 8:12, John 9:5 (NASB 20202)

<sup>74</sup>Leviticus 6:26, Leviticus 7:15

presence of the infinite and holy God of heaven. No human was allowed to touch it, on pain of death. Inside the chest were the tables of stone, on which the law of God was written—a representation of His character of love and justice, and an expression of the principles that govern the universe.

Stephen Hultgren has done insightful research into the covering of the Ark of the Covenant itself. Resting above this law, the “covering” (כַּפֹּרֶת - kapōret) or “place of atonement” becomes the focal point of the entire system of God’s work of atonement.<sup>75</sup> On the day of atonement, the blood of the sacrifice was brought into the most holy place and sprinkled on this “atoning cover” (also known as the “mercy seat”). Paul uses this figure to demonstrate the atoning work of Christ in the book of Romans:

“being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation [ἱλαστήριον or “mercy seat”] in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in God’s merciful restraint He let the sins previously committed go unpunished; for the demonstration, that is, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”<sup>76</sup>

With Jesus as the living “mercy seat” of the ark, the symbol of the ark of the covenant and it’s “atoning cover” or “mercy seat” become as important in the atonement meta-modal as the altar of sacrifice. While the altar depicts the vicarious death of Christ on behalf of the sinner, the mercy seat connects this sacrifice to the attributes of God’s government of love and law, mercy and justice.<sup>77</sup> The atonement at the altar is *substitutionary*; the atonement through the water and the first compartment of the sanctuary is *transformative*, while the atonement in the Most Holy Place is *restorative*—at once

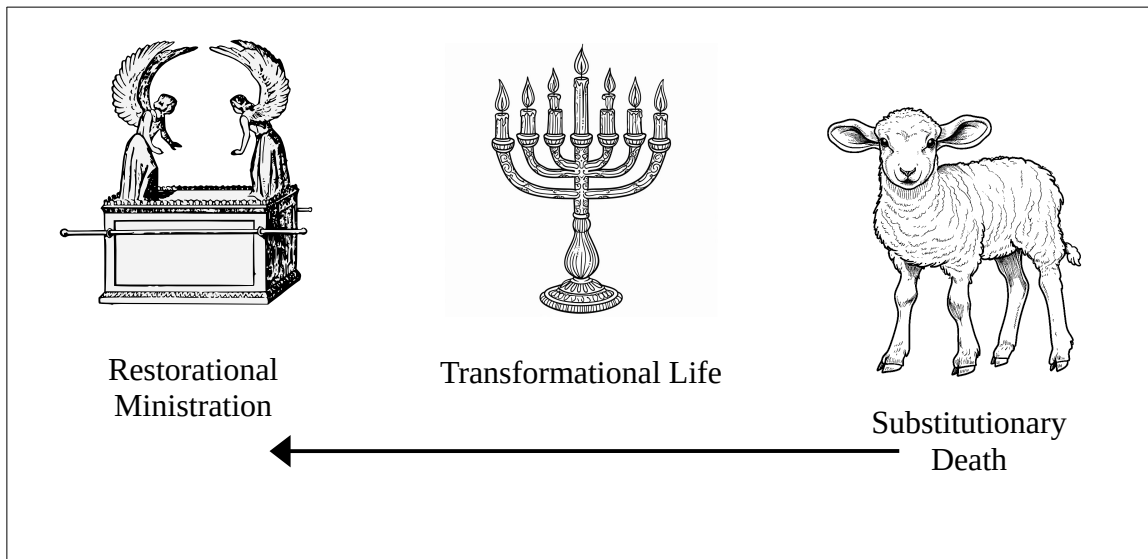
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<sup>75</sup>Hultgren, Stephen. (2019, October). *Hilastērion* (Rom. 3:25) and the Union of Divine Justice And Mercy. Part II: Atonement in the Old Testament and in Romans 1–5, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 70(2): 546–599. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flz082>

<sup>76</sup>Romans 3:24-26 (NASB 2020)

<sup>77</sup>Zywietz, Valentin, "Representing the Government of God: Christ as the Hilasterion in Romans 3:25" (2016). *Master's Theses*. 84. <https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/theses/84/> <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/theses/84>

establishing God's government of the universe on its eternal foundations and at the same time bringing mankind back into fellowship with God (Figure 5).



**Figure 5**

### **Conclusion**

While we have only briefly outlined a few highlights of the Old Testament sanctuary service, we have demonstrated that the broader questions answered through this complex, symbolic prophecy of Christ touch on multiple aspects of the atonement that are broader than any single atonement theory. The early *Ransom* theory of atonement, together with Aulen's recent *Christus Victor*, hark to themes of victory from the Passover and the Exodus stories, which form the roots of the Levitical sacrificial system. While Anselm's *Satisfaction Theory* may poorly represent the character of God, its later refinement through the reformation picture of *Penal Substitution* has been demonstrated to connect tightly with the substitution themes present through much of the language of the Levitical law. We rightly reject the misguided assumptions of *Pelagianism* and *Socinianism*, yet we must admire the bold call to holiness which these theories present. Abelard's *Moral Influence* theory may be a poor



explanation for Christ's sacrifice and may fail to account for the sinful nature of mankind, but his model ties in to many aspects of the sanctuary that focus on the cleansing and transformation that takes place in the believer through beholding and following Christ. Finally, the beautiful picture found in the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat reflect a similar perspective on the universal struggle between right and wrong as Grotius's *Governmental* theory. On a more direct level, the final approach into the Most Holy Place through Christ, restoring the broken union between God and mankind that was lost through sin, harks back to the *Recapitulation* theory of Irenaeus. Hence the sanctuary provides a complete meta-model of atonement, tying together complex concepts in a beautiful prophecy of Christ that could only have been designed by the God of the universe!

### **Further Research**

Both space and time have prevented a thorough investigation into the historical interpretation of the Old Testament sanctuary service in this paper. Further research in particular could document how the Old Testament sanctuary was viewed and understood by the various Christian thought leaders mentioned in the beginning of this paper, and how this understanding shaped and molded their theories of atonement.

In addition, a thorough Biblical and historical study of these atonement theories in light of this proposed meta-model would be enlightening. In particular, I hope to study and write in more depth regarding the ark of the covenant, the mercy seat, and its Biblical connection to Christ's present heavenly ministry. Countless other areas of research are undoubtedly connected to this study, many of which have been written over the centuries and many more which are yet to be proposed. May God bless each of us as we continue to search for a better understanding of the most important topic ever studied by mortals!

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