

# A Sacrifice Conceptualization of “Jesus saves” Based on Alison and Barker

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After reflecting on class discussion regarding the Alison and Barker accounts of the ancient Jewish rites on the Day of Atonement, I thought it would be good to summarize the main points for class reference. This is an account of how Jesus saves people that fits under the heading of Jesus as engaged in sacrifice and thereby atoning for sin.

1. Contrary to what many people today think of when they think of atoning for sin, the Jewish rites of atonement do *not* signify an attempt to give up things to God in order to make it up to God for having been less than fully faithful. It is not about making payment for sin. What is referred to as sacrificing on the Day of Atonement is not to be confused with trying to pay off a debt to God or appease God so as to turn away His wrath. While animals do get killed as part of the rites, they are not being killed in order to show the cost of evil or to appease God.

Instead, the rites are about *restoring* whatever has been broken in the *relationship* between God and man, where it is understood that the breakdown is due to man’s lack of faithfulness, not to God’s. So, as Markham says, this is about atonement that means at-one-ment. In Jewish terms, it is about renewing or restoring the covenant relationship<sup>1</sup> between God and the people.

2. One way in which Christians in the early days thought of Jesus as savior was to see Jesus as playing a role analogous to that of the High Priest making “sacrifices” on the Day of Atonement during the years of the First Temple.<sup>2</sup> So, if we understand the role of the High Priest, and we think of Jesus as his analog, we generate a conception of how Jesus sacrifices to atone for sin, that is, how Jesus can be seen as one who sacrifices so that the broken relationship between God and man may be restored.

3. The High Priest in the Temple ritual bears the name of God on his body, and apparently for purposes of the ritual can even be referred to as the Son of God, where this presumably means that he symbolizes God’s presence on earth. One might say he plays the role of an incarnation of God. So,

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<sup>1</sup>The basics of the covenant relationship: God says, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

<sup>2</sup>The First Temple was built, according to the Hebrew Bible, by King Solomon. It was destroyed when the Jewish people were defeated and their leaders carried off into exile by the Babylonians. This is one of the great periods of exile in the cycle of exile and return that dominate Jewish theological interpretation of history. At the time of Jesus, the Temple in Jerusalem was the Second Temple, generally viewed by the Jews of the day as only a dim copy of the original First Temple. The main thing missing in the Second Temple was the Ark of the Covenant, the primary symbol of the presence of God. It was supposed to be in the Holy of Holies, the point of contact between earth and heaven, and so its absence indicated at least a partial absence of God – a sign that exile had not ended.

his actions during the rite are to be seen as being God's actions. Christian theology conceives Jesus in the same terms, as God in the flesh, (but not just symbolically divine).

4. The High Priest, representing God, responds to the people's pledge of their lives to God by spreading blood – blood that is symbolically his own blood, that is, symbolically, God's blood in the Temple. Blood represents life in such rituals. So, the High Priest is spreading God's life around the Temple, first in the Holy of Holies, and then among the people. The actions of the people in pledging their lives to God and God's response by spreading His life among them is a renewal of the covenant, an atonement (at-one-ment). The people complete the renewal by symbolically driving evil out of the city, never to return. (That's the point of the scapegoat.)

5. Drawing the analogy between Jesus and the High Priest in the ritual, Jesus is seen as spreading God's life among the people, thereby creating at-one-ment between God and man for those who have pledged their lives to God. And, just as in the case of the ritual, the whole thing is meaningful only for those people who personally participate. This is not a transaction between God and man that took place long ago, but an ongoing activity in which people can participate today. Without participation, there is no at-one-ment.

6. What elements of the story of Jesus' life count as his spreading God's life among the people? I suggest that the most reasonable Christian answer would be to say "everything". His manner of birth, his teaching about love and compassion, his miracles of assisting those in trouble, his execution (given the reasons for it), and his resurrection. These, it could be said, when understood for their proper meaning, all contribute to the spreading of God's life among us. The resurrection element in the story not only signifies that God's life-force wins out over evil, but also signifies that Jesus in some very real sense still continues to spread God's life among us.

How the death by execution counts as spreading God's life among us requires some serious talk about how to understand the death. The penal substitution theory, for example, would say that the death pays the price of sin to God, and so makes it possible for God to forgive sin. That could count as spreading God's life among people. However, that approach seems at odds with the rest of the sacrifice account being developed here, because it requires the High Priest to be punished in place of the people. (There is nothing in the Day of Atonement ritual that involves punishing the High Priest for the sins of the people.) See the Borg essay for one different way to understand the death as spreading God's life on earth that would fit with the other elements of the sacrifice theory presented here.

7. Why call this view of Jesus as savior a story about "sacrifice"? Jesus, in this interpretation, is not sacrificed by anyone. Jesus is not sacrificed by God's killing him. Jesus is not sacrificed by himself, if that means killing. Sacrificing in ancient religions didn't necessarily mean killing or giving up something of value to a divinity. For example, in the Day of Atonement ritual another act of the High Priest was to take incense into the Holy of Holies in order to symbolize purification of the room. That could be referred to as a sacrifice of incense, but not because it was so costly. Markham's remark about the concept of sacrifice may be helpful here. He says that the notion of sacrifice is linked to the notion of a sacred act. So, maybe think of a sacrifice in a religious ritual as the use of some concrete object in a sacred act of religious symbolism.

8. If one insists that a sacrifice has to involve somebody's giving something up, then one might say that the Jesus story, interpreted as above, involves sacrifice on God's part. God gives up holding their sins against people, or God gives up the divine prerogative of maintaining a distance between divinity and people who have sinned. This is what Christian theology refers to as forgiveness or grace.

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Is this way of representing the sacrifice conception of Jesus' way of offering "salvation" through "atonement" the way that an ancient Jewish Christian might have seen it? Might this kind of thinking be behind the New Testament remarks about Jesus' sacrifice? Those are historical questions that lead away from the philosophical analysis of the relevant concepts.

The account offered above appears to me to be internally consistent and coherent, and in accord with traditional Christian conceptions of the nature of Jesus and God. Of course, that does not make it true.

Mandy asked in class about why the Jesus story isn't set up to have him die on the Day of Atonement, if he's supposed to be an analog of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. (Instead, Jesus dies at the time of Passover.) Did the Christian story tellers screw up the symbolism here? In class I had no answer. A couple of days later, I was talking with Dr. Dale Beck<sup>3</sup> about this, and he gave me the obvious answer: the Passover rituals signified for the Jewish people God's arranging for their freedom from bondage, and the beginning of a return from exile, both politically and religiously. So, to tie this into the sacrifice account given above, Christians would see Jesus' spreading of God's life among people as a way of freeing them from "bondage" to sin (i.e., alienation from God) and a restoring the presence of God in people's lives, returning people from the exile of being distant from God to their proper homeland of living in the presence of God, or at-one-ment.

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<sup>3</sup>Senior pastor at First United Methodist Church in Normal.