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The Atonement I—The Revealed Fact of the Atonement

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Note: I must ask at the outset of this treatise on the Atonement—comprising six chapters—that there be a suspension of judgment on the respective parts of the theme until all shall have been read; as knowledge of the whole, I am sure, will be necessary to the complete understanding of the parts.

Introductory. ~~The Revealed Fact of It.~~ It is fitting that the Atonement should receive doctrinal exposition when considering the dispensation of the gospel in which the sacrifice comprising it was made. What has already been set forth in this work as to the plan of man's redemption from spiritual and physical death, together with the knowledge of what took place in the heavenly council among preexistent spirits before man's earth life in the dispensation of Adam began, relieves us of the necessity of a full statement and a long discussion in the introduction of the Atonement. Under our plan we have been able from the very first to proceed with the consciousness of the purpose of man's earth life and redemption all the while present. It still remains, however, to consider the Atonement from the scriptural and philosophical side of it, and deal with the necessity for it, and the nature of it; and first of all to be convinced as to the revealed fact of it. Upon the established fact of it by revelation is where we begin our discussion; and first by noting briefly the testimony of prophecy for the promise of it.

Prophecy of the Atonement. St. Paul says:

When Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats, with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book, and all the people, saying, This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you. Moreover he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle,

and all the vessels of the ministry. And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without \langle the \rangle shedding of blood is no remission. (Heb. 9:19-22; cited from Ex. 24:8)

It is very generally conceded that the sacrifices and oblations of the Mosaic ritual have a direct relationship to the great atoning sacrifice to be made by the Christ. From the ninth and tenth chapters of the Epistle to the Hebrews it is evident that “the law” was “a shadow of good things to come” (Heb. 10:1). The law’s sacrifices for sin, and reconciliation with God but figured forth the greater and more efficient sacrifice to be made by the Son of God; nay, whatever of virtue there was in the sacrifices of the law was dependent upon the greater sacrifice to follow. Of themselves, the sacrifices of the law had no virtue at all unconnected with the sacrifice to be made by the Christ; they were but symbols showing forth that sacrifice in which the virtue was, the sacrifice of the Christ himself.

The Paschal sacrifice. In some respects the Paschal sacrifice more perfectly than any other, perhaps, foreshadowed the future sacrifice of the Son of God for the deliverance of his people—those who would trust the sign of deliverance in his blood. The institution of the sacrifice and the accompanying feast were as follows: When all other judgments upon Pharaoh failed to persuade him to let God’s people go, then said the Lord to Moses:

All the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. . . . But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast; that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptian[s] and Israel. (Ex. 11:5-7)

When this terrible judgment was about to be executed the Lord provided the following means of deliverance for his people: Each family in Israel was commanded at a given time to take a lamb without blemish, a male of the first year, for a “passover offering,” and it was to be killed in the evening.

And they shall take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it. And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. . . . And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord

throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever. (Ex. 12:7-8, 13-14)

Of course it cannot be doubted that this festival of the Passover was instituted as a great memorial of the deliverance from Egyptian bondage, and the birth of the nation of Israel; and there are not wanting those who maintain that this was its primary and only significance. But the leading feature in the festival, the paschal lamb, “a male without blemish” (Lev. 1:3; see also Ex. 12:5); the killing of it; the blood sprinkled upon the door post, the sign of safety to God’s people; the eating of the lamb in preparation of the journey; the subsequent honoring of this feast by the Christ with his disciples; the substitution of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for the Passover festival at the very time and on the very occasion of celebrating the feast of the Passover among the Jews; together with the subsequent inspired reference to Christ as the “Paschal Lamb” of the Christians, are circumstances too numerous and too nearly related to doubt of the significance of the Passover festival having reference to the great sacrifice to be made by the Son of God through the shedding of his blood in atonement for and the deliverance of his people.

The sin offering. Other sacrifices of the Mosaic law which shadowed forth the future atonement to be made by the Son of God was the “sin offering.” Of Mosaic sacrifices in general and of this sacrifice in particular, the author of the article on “Sacrifices” in Dr. Wm. Smith’s *Dictionary of the Bible* (this is Rev. Alfred Barry, Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge) says:

All {sacrifices} had relation, under different aspects, to a *Covenant* between God and man. The “Sin Offering” {described in detail in Leviticus chapter 4} represented that Covenant as broken by man, and as knit together again, by God’s appointment, through the “shedding of blood.” . . . The shedding of the blood, the symbol of life, signified that the death of the offender was deserved for sin, but that the death of the victim was accepted for his death by the ordinance of God’s mercy.¹

To the same effect our author sets forth the ceremonial of the “Day of Atonement” (detail of which is given in Lev. 16:7-10). A number of the early and later “Christian Fathers” take the same view.²

The fact of the Atonement in history. The first intimation of an atonement in the earth-history of man was doubtless the statement in

¹Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “sacrifices” 4:2774; italics in original.

²See Roberts, *Seventy’s Course in Theology* 4:53-54.

Genesis that the serpent—standing for and symbolizing in the narrative Lucifer—would bruise the heel of the woman’s seed; while the seed of the woman, meaning the Christ would bruise the serpent’s, or Lucifer’s, head (see Gen. 3:15). This and the institution of sacrifice, early in Adam’s and his sons’ lives, with the explanation which some time afterwards was given of the significance of the sacrificial offering—all taken together—is our earliest historical data on the Atonement. It will perhaps be remembered that the revealed purpose of the sacrifice was (see chapter 35 above):

This thing is a similitude [of the sacrifice] of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth. Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son . . . forevermore. And in that day the Holy Ghost fell upon Adam, which beareth record of the Father and the Son, saying: I am the Only Begotten of the Father from the beginning, henceforth and forever, that as thou hast fallen thou mayest be redeemed, and all mankind, even as many as will. (Moses 5:7-9)

Witness of the New Testament. We turn next to the testimony of the New Testament writers on the fact of the Atonement.

(a) *Testimony of the angel Gabriel.* In Matthew we read what the angel said to Joseph, when warning him not to put away Mary, his betrothed wife, because of her being found with child: “Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife. . . . She shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:20-21; cf. Luke 1:26-35). Such the testimony of an angel of God as to the mission of the Christ.

(b) *Testimony of John the Baptist.* John the Baptist said to his own disciples as Jesus passed, “Behold the Lamb of God, ⟨that⟩ [which] taketh away the sin of the world. . . . And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God” (John 1:29, 34).

(c) *Testimony of the Christ.* The Christ’s own testimony is recorded as follows:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: . . . that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:14-17)

And again the Christ, “When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he ⟨i.e., the one that taketh away the sins of the world⟩” (John 8:28). And again the Christ at the Paschal supper, preceding his betrayal,

Jesus having blessed the bread brake it, and gave it to his disciples and said, take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup and gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, drink ye all of it, for this is my blood which is the new testament which is *shed* for *many* for the remission of sins. (cf. Matt. 26:26–28)³

After the resurrection, Jesus overtaking two of the disciples on their way to Emmaus engaged them in conversation respecting the crucifixion of Jesus, and in the course of their narrative about the crucifixion and the missing body of the Christ, the risen Lord said unto them:

⟨Ye⟩ [O] fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning ⟨with⟩ [at] Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

Subsequently, appearing to the twelve, he opened their understanding that they might understand the scriptures and said unto them: “Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead on the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name in all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46–48).

(d) Testimony of St. Peter. St. Peter, chief of the apostles, bears witness of this same truth when he says: “Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18). Again:

Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: . . . Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. (1 Pet. 2:21–24)

Again:

Elect . . . through ⟨the⟩ sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. . . . Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you. (1 Pet. 1:2, 18–20)

³Luke and Mark practically give the same account of the incident; and St. Paul in his account of the resurrection states, “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3).

(e) Testimony of St. Paul.

All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the *re*mission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. (Rom. 3:23-25)

When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. . . . And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement. (Rom. 5:6-11)

(f) Testimony of St. John. So St. John, in his epistles: “And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:1-2).

In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. . . . Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 Jn. 4:9-10)

And so throughout the New Testament, in an unbroken harmony the witnesses testify to the fact of the Atonement and the “propitiation” for man’s sins through that Atonement.

The same is true also as to the Book of Mormon witnesses both when speaking through the voice of prophecy and the voice of history.

Book of Mormon prophecies of the Atonement. Before the birth of Christ, early in the fifth century B.C., in the small colony Lehi led from Jerusalem to the promised land of America, it was declared:

The Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil. . . . Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil. (2 Ne. 2:26-27)^a

Passing over many such prophecies, *we come to* one written near the close of the second century B.C. [that] is peculiarly emphatic: speaking

^aThe edition of the Book of Mormon used by Roberts read “mediation.” The 1981 edition has corrected this to read “Mediator.”

of children who die in childhood before the years of accountability for sin, the Nephite prophet Benjamin says:

I say unto you they are blessed; for behold, as in Adam, or by nature, they fall, even so the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins. . . . But men ⟨who have come to an age to understand⟩ drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent. (Mosiah 3:16-18)

There are many more such prophetic passages in the Book of Mormon.

Book of Mormon historical utterances on the Atonement. The most important utterances that can come to man on any subject would be what the Lord Jesus Christ himself would say upon those subjects. For that reason I am limiting the historical statements of the Book of Mormon on the Atonement, to such words as are alleged to have been spoken by the risen Lord Jesus:

Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. . . . I was with the Father from the beginning. . . . And in me hath the Father glorified his name. . . . The scriptures concerning my coming are fulfilled. And as many as have received me, to them have I given to become the sons of God; and even so will I to as many as shall believe on my name, for behold, by me redemption cometh, and in me is the law of Moses fulfilled. I am the light and the life of the world. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. . . . Behold, I have come unto the world to bring redemption unto the world, to save the world from sin. . . . Therefore repent, and come unto me ye ends of the earth, and be saved. (3 Ne. 9:15-18, 21-22)

Again he said to a multitude of Nephites, when appearing to them as the resurrected Christ:

Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning. (3 Ne. 11:10-11)

Centuries later, a Nephite teacher said to his people: “Ye shall have hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his ⟨the Christ’s⟩ resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal, and this because of your faith in him according to the promise” (Moro. 7:41).

Testimony of the Prophet of the New Dispensation on the Atonement of Christ. The revelations to the Prophet of the New

Dispensation of the gospel as they are published in the Doctrine and Covenants are all founded upon the Atonement of the Christ as a fact, as a reality. One passage *being* as of special emphasis and particularization is quoted in proof of the above. It occurs in a revelation reproving one of the early disciples for his unbelief and disposition to swerve from the faith. And now the word of the Lord to him through the Prophet:

I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink— Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men. (D&C 19:15-19)

After the consideration of these scriptures, we shall regard the fact of the Atonement as a reality established by the revelations of God.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: four Gospels; Acts; Epistles; Mosiah 3-5; 3 Ne. entire book, esp. chs. 9 and 11; Book of Mormon references to the Atonement from the index; D&C 19. For a discussion about Roberts's conception of the Atonement, see pages 663-69 below.