

THE CONCEPT OF ATONEMENT IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Introduction

The Gospel of John has been the object of scholarly debate because of its distinctive presentation of Jesus, and the significant differences between it and the Synoptic Gospels. One of the three themes that C.H. Dodd finds lacking in the Gospel of John is that of atonement. He writes:

In the Fourth Gospel the death of Christ is first and foremost that by which Christ is 'glorified' or 'exalted' (xii. 23, 32-33, xiii. 31), and by virtue of which He 'draws' all men into the sphere of eternal life (xii. 32, xi. 52). It is the means by which the virtue and power of His own being—His flesh and blood—are released for the sustenance of eternal life in mankind (vi. 51). His death is a sacrifice, on the one hand as being self-dedication (ἀγιάζω ἑμαυτόν xvii. 19), and on the other hand, as an expression of His 'love to the end' for His own (xiii. 1), as a man will lay down his life for a friend (xv. 13), or a shepherd for his flock threatened by the wolf (x. 15). It is not a sacrifice for the expiation of sin.¹

Dodd's view is for the most part closely followed by other scholars.² However, is the idea of Christ's atonement really absent from the sending statements in John? Brooke answers this question in the negative: 'The same is true of the conception of the death of Christ as propitiatory... It is not absent from the gospel. It is to be found both in

1. C.H. Dodd, 'The First Epistle of John and the Fourth Gospel', *BJRL* 21 (1937), pp. 129-56 (144-45).

2. R.B. Edwards, *The Johannine Epistles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 51-53; R. Kysar, 'John, Epistles of', *ABD*, III, pp. 900-912 (909-10); W. Loader, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Epworth Press, 1992), pp. xxi-xxii.

what the Evangelist puts into the mouth of others, and also in his own comments.³ Brooke's comment is significant, but he fails to support it. In this article I intend to fill this gap, presenting the concrete evidence for the theme of atonement in the Gospel of John by examining selected passages.

John 3.16-17

The first passage to consider in this regard is Jn 3.16-17. We will examine the passage in relation to its immediate context and to the Gospel in general with regard to the theme of atonement.

Dodd argues that eternal life (Jn 3.16-17) presupposes the lifting up of the Son of Man:

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up (οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου), that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (Jn 3.13-15).⁴

There is good reason to think that this passage presupposes Christ's atoning death, and there are four lines of evidence that support this view. First of all, forgiveness of sin is presupposed in the two sending statements in the Gospel. The two expressions μὴ ἀπόληται (v. 16) and κρίνη τὸν κόσμον (v. 17) presuppose that the world has to face divine judgment. But the question is, 'Judgment for what?' There are two passages in the Gospel that provide a clue to the answer:

Again he said to them, 'I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.' Then the Jews said, 'Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, "Where I am going, you cannot come"?' He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he' (Jn 8.21-24).

3. A.E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), p. xviii.

4. Unless otherwise specified, Scripture quotations are from the NRSV for English translation, *UBSGNT* fourth edition for the New Testament Greek text, Rahlfs's edition of the Greek Old Testament, Brenton's translation for the English translation of the LXX, and *BHS* for the Hebrew text.

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (Jn 5.24).

Included in Jn 5.24 and 8.21-24 are the concepts of eternal life, faith, judgment and the world, which clearly echo Jn 3.16-17.⁵ These passages not only echo the concepts expressed in Jn 3.16-17, they also make explicit the implicit concepts in the two sending statements. John 5.24 expresses the condition of unbelieving humanity as death, which is identified with judgment. In Jn 8.21, 24, the condition of the world apart from Christ is that of one doomed to death in sin. Thus, eternal life is the same as salvation from sin. From this, we may reasonably conclude that in John eternal life is identified with the forgiveness of sin.

Secondly, evident in the context of Jn 3.16-17 is the necessity of the death of Christ. That the phrase ὑψωθῆναι in v. 14 refers to Jesus' death on the cross seems to be clear from the immediate context (in comparison with the serpent on the pole in v. 14) and the explanation in Jn 12.32-33 (“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die’).⁶ Thus, the gift of eternal life presupposes the death of the Son on the cross. If, as shown above, eternal life is identified in John with the forgiveness of sins, we can say that the death of the Son is directly related to the problem of sin. But how are they related? How does the death of the Son effect the forgiveness of sins? This question brings us to the third point.

In the third place, the impersonal verb δεῖ and the verb ὑψόω in Jn 3.14 imply that the author may have had the theme of atonement in mind when he used the two expressions.⁷ There are two arguments to support this: (1) The use of δεῖ, together with the use of the title ‘Son of Man’ referring to Jesus (Jn 3.4, 5), echoes the passion prediction in Mk 8.31 (cf. Mk 9.12, 31; 10.33-34, 45).⁸ Compare Jn 3.14 with Mk 8.31:

5. In the Gospel of John, the concepts of believing in God who sent the Son and believing in Jesus are used synonymously (Jn 5.23, 24; 6.29, 40).

6. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I–XII* (AB, 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 145; L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 225-26.

7. Brown, *John I–XII*, p. 145.

8. G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC, 36; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 51; Brown, *John I–XII*, p. 145; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*:

Mark 8.31	John 3.14
Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected (δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου πολλὰ παθεῖν καὶ ἀποδοκιμασθῆναι) by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.	And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up (οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου).

We find in John three statements by Jesus concerning the ‘lifting up’ of the Son of Man: Jn 3.14, 8.28, and 12.31. Brown argues:

These statements are the Johannine equivalents of the three predictions of the passion, death, and resurrection found in all the Synoptics (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34 and par.)... There is no reason to think that the fourth evangelist is dependent on the Synoptics for his form of the sayings; indeed, on a comparative basis the Johannine sayings are far less detailed and could be more ancient.⁹

Brown’s statement means that the two sending statements in Jn 3.16-17 presuppose the sufferings and death of the Son as a divine necessity.¹⁰ Then, to which scriptural passage(s) does John refer in his use of the δεῖ statements? The use of the verb ὑψόω provides a clue to answering this question.

(2) Based upon the linguistic features of the verb ὑψόω, such scholars as Brown and Beasley-Murray argue that it may point to Isa. 52.13.¹¹ Behind ὑψόω may lie either the Hebrew שָׁשׁ or Aramaic ܩܩܐ,

Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1–4 (trans. K. Smyth; New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 395.

9. Brown, *John I–XII*, p. 145.

10. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 51; C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 272; R.H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 428; Schnackenburg, *John*, p. 395. The theme of atonement is not explicitly stated in the passion predictions in the Synoptic Gospels. However, the use of δεῖ may imply the scriptural necessity for the suffering and death of the Son of Man (W. Grundmann, ‘δεῖ’, *TDNT*, II, pp. 21-25 [25]).

11. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 51; P. Borgen, *Philo, John and Paul: New Perspective on Judaism and Early Christianity* (BJS, 131; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 110; Brown, *John I–XII*, p. 145; B. Lindars, ‘Discourse and Tradition in

which can cover the ideas of both death and glorification, as in Gen. 40.13 and 19. The Aramaic ܦܠܓܝܢ means both ‘to lift up on a cross, crucify, hang’ and ‘to raise up’.¹² Such scholars as Brown and Beasley-Murray argue that the Evangelist had both meanings in mind when he used the verb ὑψόω.¹³ Both meanings are evident in Isa. 52.13: ‘See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high (ἰδοὺ συνήσει ὁ παῖς μου καὶ ὑψωθήσεται καὶ δοξασθήσεται σφόδρα).’ Provided that Brown’s observation is correct, the statement that the Son of Man must be lifted up reflects the theme that the crucifixion of Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Servant of YHWH in Isa. 52.13–53.12.

Brown’s argument makes sense when we consider that the two themes (the death of Jesus and his glorification) are often correlated in John (7.39; 12.16, 23).¹⁴ The fact that Jn 3.14 reflects the thought that the death of Jesus is the fulfillment of the Servant prophecy may imply that the concept of atoning sacrifice is assumed in the two sending statements in Jn 3.16–17. But the question still remains, does the connection with Isa. 52.13 automatically lead to the concept of atoning sacrifice?

Lindars answers this question affirmatively. Referring to the use of the title ‘Son of Man’ in John, Lindars argues,

It establishes his intention to use this reference in order to bring in the notion of the sacrifice of Christ... As far as John is concerned, this is not a title of honor, but a self-designation used by Jesus in speaking of his sacrificial death.¹⁵

To buttress Lindars’s argument, we will need to examine the fourth line of evidence for the atonement theme in John: other passages in John in which the theme of atoning sacrifice is implied.

John’, in S.E. Porter and C.A. Evans (eds.), *The Johannine Writings* (Biblical Seminar, 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 13–30 (17).

12. G. Bertram, ‘ὑψόω’, *TDNT*, VIII, pp. 602–20 (610); M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica, 1971), p. 408.

13. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 51; Bertram, ‘ὑψόω’, p. 610; Brown, *John I–XII*, p. 145; Lindars, ‘Discourse and Tradition in John’, p. 17.

14. Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 51; Bertram, ‘ὑψόω’, p. 610; Lindars, ‘Discourse and Tradition in John’, p. 17; Morris, *John*, p. 226; V. Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (London: Epworth Press, 1940), p. 147.

15. Lindars, ‘Discourse and Tradition in John’, p. 20.

John 1.29

The second passage to be examined in this regard is Jn 1.29. Here Jesus is described by John the Baptist as ‘the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (ὁ ἄμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου)’. In this passage, there are multiple connections with other passages. While the expression τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου echoes Jn 8.21-24, the expressions ὁ ἄμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, and κόσμος as the object of salvation, echo Jn 3.16-17. Above, I argued that eternal life in Jn 3.16 presupposes the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sin. This means that the death of Christ effects or causes the forgiveness of sin. How can his death effect forgiveness? John 1.29 seems to provide the answer to this question. But is the concept of atoning sacrifice present in Jn 1.29? That depends on the meaning of ὁ ἄμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ.

The meaning of ‘the lamb of God’ has been hotly debated among scholars. The Aramaic ܠܡܢܐ means either ‘lamb’ or ‘servant’. Based on the Aramaic background of Jn 1.29, Jeremias argues that this represents a tradition that interpreted the Isa. 53.12 prophecy as fulfilled in the coming of Jesus as the Servant of YHWH.¹⁶ Four other possibilities for this lamb are suggested by other scholars. It is (1) the messianic horned ram of Jewish apocalyptic,¹⁷ (2) the paschal lamb,¹⁸ (3) the Servant of Isaiah, who suffers like a ‘lamb led to the slaughter’ (Isa. 53.7),¹⁹ or (4) the sacrifice of Isaac.²⁰

16. C.J. Ball, ‘Had the Fourth Gospel an Aramaic Archetype?’, *ExpTim* 21 (1909/10), pp. 90-93 (92-93); C.F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), pp. 107-108; O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (trans. S.C. Guthrie and C.A.M. Hall; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 71; J. Jeremias, ‘παῖς θεοῦ’, *TDNT*, V, pp. 677-717 (702); H.W. Wolff, *Jesaja 53 im Urchristentum* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 3rd edn, 1952), pp. 81-82.

17. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 233-36. Dodd’s view assumes that John the Baptist expected a Davidic Messiah that is represented as a conquering lamb in apocalyptic literature. Brown doubts Dodd’s assumption (Brown, *John I–XII*, p. 60).

18. C.K. Barrett, ‘The Lamb of God’, *NTS* 1 (1954–1955), pp. 210-18; E. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), pp. 144-45; M.D. Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant* (London: SPCK, 1959), p. 104.

19. V. Taylor, *Jesus and his Sacrifice* (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 227; M. Barth, *Was Christ’s Death a Sacrifice?* (SJT Occasional Papers, 9; Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1961), p. 39; D.M. Stanley, ‘The Theme of the Servant of

None of these views has gained scholarly consensus. Marshall opts for the messianic horned ram, but still recognizes its connection with the Passover sacrifice and the Servant of YHWH.²¹ Brown seems to opt for the view that the Evangelist intended ‘the lamb of God’ to refer both to the Suffering Servant and to the paschal lamb because both fit into John’s Christology and are well attested in first-century Christianity (1 Pet. 2.22-25).²² The Suffering Servant is preferable to the paschal lamb for three reasons: (1) The Servant of YHWH is described as a sin offering, whereas the paschal lamb was not considered as an expiatory sacrifice in the first century.²³ (2) Jesus is implicitly identified by the Evangelist as the Servant in Jn 12.38 (quoting Isa. 57.1): ‘This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”’ (3) The use of δεῖ and ὑψόω in Jn 3.14 may imply that the death of Jesus is the fulfillment of the Servant prophecy. Thus, Jesus is identified as the Servant of YHWH in relation to his coming death, which is directly related to the problem of sin.

Despite their disagreement on the reference of ‘the lamb of God’, most scholars agree that there is a sacrificial idea in the expression.²⁴ Thus, L. Morris does not opt for any particular interpretation, but concludes, ‘He is making a general allusion to sacrifice. The lamb figure may well be intended to be composite, evoking memories of several, perhaps all, of the suggestions we have canvassed. All that the ancient sacrifices foreshadowed was perfectly fulfilled in the sacrifice

Yahweh in Primitive Christian Soteriology and its Transposition by St Paul’, *CBQ* 16 (1954), pp. 385-425 (403).

20. G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (SPB, 4; Leiden: Brill, 1961), pp. 93-94.

21. I.H. Marshall, ‘Lamb of God’, in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I.H. Marshall (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 432-34 (433).

22. Brown, *John I–XII*, p. 63.

23. Dodd, ‘The First Epistle of John and the Fourth Gospel’, p. 10.

24. Ball, ‘Had the Fourth Gospel an Aramaic Archetype?’, pp. 92-93; Burney, *Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 107-108; Cullmann, *Christology*, p. 71; B.H. Grigsby, ‘The Cross as an Expiatory Sacrifice in the Fourth Gospel’, in Porter and Evans (eds.), *The Johannine Writings*, pp. 69-94 (76-77); Jeremias, ‘παῖς θεοῦ’, p. 702; Marshall, ‘Lamb of God’, p. 433; Morris, *John*, pp. 147-48; G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Studia Post-biblica, 4; Leiden: Brill, 1961), pp. 93-94; Wolff, *Jesaja 53 im Urchristentum*, pp. 81-82.

of Christ.²⁵ The sacrificial connection of the phrase ‘the lamb of God’ is supported by its predicate, ‘taking away the sin of the world’ (αἴρω τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου).

The combination of the verb αἴρω with ἁμαρτία as its object occurs in 1 Jn 3.5 in connection with the revelation of Christ, which is later qualified by a sending statement (his atoning sacrifice in 1 Jn 4.10): ‘You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin’ (καὶ οἴδατε ὅτι ἐκεῖνος ἐφανερώθη, ἵνα τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἄρῃ, καὶ ἁμαρτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν, 1 Jn 3.5); ‘he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins’ (1 Jn 4.10). Thus, a sacrificial death is clearly meant by the expression ‘take away sins’ in 1 John.

The phrase αἴρω ἁμαρτίαν can be interpreted in two ways:²⁶ (1) It can mean ‘to remove sin’ by making expiation for it (Lev. 10.17, referring to the sin offering, cf. 1 Sam. 15.25; 25.28). (2) It can mean ‘to remove sin’ by bearing the penalty attached to it on behalf of others (cf. Num. 14.33-34; Isa. 53.12; Ezek. 18.19-20; cf. 1 Pet. 2.24). L. Morris thinks that the Evangelist may have both meanings in mind in his use of the phrase.²⁷ Jeremias argues that the text originally referred to the Servant of God and hence to ‘the representative bearing of the punishment of sin’, but that the Evangelist took it to refer to ‘the setting aside of sin by the expiatory power of the death of Jesus...by the atoning power of His blood’.²⁸ However, as Marshall observes, ‘these two explanations may come down to the same thing in the passage’.²⁹

Based upon these findings, I conclude here that Jn 1.29 points to the coming death of Christ as an atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world, which will be more fully explained in Jn 3.14-17.

John 10.15

In addition to Jn 1.29, the concept of atoning death may be alluded to in the statements of Jesus in Jn 10.15 (cf. vv. 11, 17, 18; cf. 13.37, 38; 15.13; 1 Jn 3.16): ‘And I lay down my life for the sheep.’ Two observations are in order: (1) these statements in the Gospel of John and 1 Jn

25. Morris, *John*, pp. 147-48.

26. Marshall, ‘Lamb of God’, p. 433.

27. Morris, *John*, p. 148 n. 61.

28. J. Jeremias, ‘αἴρω’, *TDNT*, I, pp. 185-86 (186).

29. Marshall, ‘Lamb of God’, p. 433.

3.16 are Johannine equivalents to the Markan ransom saying (Mk 10.45),³⁰ and (2) their linguistic features point to Isaiah 53.

Juxtaposing the two will help us see their correspondences more clearly:

John 10.15	Mark 10.45
καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν μου τίθημι ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων	ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου...δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν

Despite minor differences in the Greek wording, the two texts express the same concept of the vicarious death of Jesus. As suggested by Jeremias, their differences can be attributed to different renderings of the same underlying Semitic text.³¹ The differences between Mk 10.45 and Jn 10.15 are threefold:

(1) Whereas Mk 10.45 quotes Jesus' own speech, Jn 10.15 refers to Jesus' salvific death as interpreted by John.

(2) The concept of vicarious atonement seen in λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν in Mk 10.45 is expressed in John's emphatic use of ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων ('for the sheep'). The Markan choice of λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν is more explicit in rendering the Hebrew קָזַב than ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων in John.³² Some scholars question the Markan choice of λύτρον because it is not the same as 'a guilt offering' (קָזַב), as shown by the fact that the LXX never translates קָזַב with λύτρον or any of its cognates, and that none of the Hebrew words represented elsewhere in the LXX by λύτρον and its cognates appear in Isaiah 53.³³ But this phenomenon may be attributed to the result of Mark's interpretive rendering of the Hebrew/Aramaic tradition that preserved the sayings of Jesus. As early as Paul's time, the idea of a ransom was connected with

30. C.H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), p. xxxii; Jeremias, 'παῖς θεοῦ', p. 710; C. Maurer, 'τίθημι', *TDNT*, VIII, pp. 152-68 (155-56).

31. Jeremias, 'παῖς θεοῦ', p. 710.

32. This statement assumes that Isaiah 53 provides the context for Jesus' ransom saying.

33. C.K. Barrett, 'The Background of Mark 10:45', in A.J.B. Higgins (ed.), *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson, 1893-1958* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), pp. 1-18 (4-7); Gundry, *Mark*, p. 591; Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant*, pp. 45-78.

the idea of the vicarious atoning death of Jesus as shown in Rom. 3.24-25:³⁴

They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption (ἀπολυτρώσεως) that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement (ἱλαστήριον) by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.

The idea expressed by λύτρον in Mk 10.45 is equivalent to the idea expressed by the cognate ἀπολυτρώσις in Rom. 3.24-25 (cf. 1 Cor. 1.30; Eph. 1.7; Col. 1.14; 1 Tim. 2.6; Tit. 2.14; Heb. 9.15). They both express the notion of a ransom as part of Jesus' salvific work through his atoning death for his people. This indicates that, in his rendering of the Hebrew קֶדְשָׁם with λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν, Mark may have been influenced by the church's understanding of Jesus' atoning death in terms of a ransom.

(3) While Jn 10.15 employs the verb τίθημι, 'to put, put off', with ψυχῆ, 'soul, life', Mk 10.45 employs the verb δίδωμι, 'to give', with ψυχῆ. Jeremias attributes the difference between Jn 10.15 and the Markan ransom saying to different renderings of the underlying Semitic text, probably נִפְשׁוּ יָם (Isa. 53.10 MT) or מָסַר נַפְשׁוֹ (Targ. Isa. 53.12).³⁵ As noted above, the expression τίθημι ψυχῆν is rare in secular Greek and δίδωμι ψυχῆν is the more widely used Greek term for the actual sacrifice of life, the term used in Mk 10.45. The expression δίδωμι ψυχῆν is 'a traditional way of referring to the death of martyrs among the Jews and of soldiers among the Greeks' (e.g. 1 Macc. 2.50, δότε τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν ὑπὲρ διαθήκης πατέρων ἡμῶν).³⁶ The same expression δίδωμι ψυχῆν may be behind the rabbinic tradition in *Mekilta* ascribed to Jonathan (c. 140), which applies the concept of vicarious atonement to the actions and intercessions of the patriarchs and prophets who risked their lives for Israel (*Mek. Pisha* 1.104-13, לִישְׂרָאֵל נִתְּנוּ נַפְשָׁם עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל). A counterpart in Aramaic is מָסַר נַפְשׁוֹ (Targ. Isa. 53.12), which probably lies behind δίδωμι ψυχῆν in Mk 10.45. This argument is supported by two characteristics of the usage of

34. J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC, 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988), p. 169; D.J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT, 6; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 229 n. 51; L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale Press, 1955), pp. 9-26.

35. Jeremias, 'παῖς θεοῦ', p. 710.

36. F. Büchsel, 'δίδωμι', *TDNT*, II, p. 166.

Scripture ascribed to Jesus: a marked preference for the book of Isaiah and a tendency to cite Isaiah in a targumic form (Mk 4.12, citing Isa. 6.9-10; Mt. 26.52, citing Isa. 50.11; Mk 9.48, citing Isa. 66.24), assuming its meaning as developed in the Targum (Isa. 5 is assumed in Mt. 21.33-46 [Mk 12.1-12; Lk. 20.9-19]), and employing diction and themes that are characteristic of the Targum.³⁷ Of particular importance to us are two important phenomena: (1) The theme of announcing the kingdom, and the phrase ‘the kingdom of God’ itself, are featured in the Targum (*Targ. Isa.* 40.9; 52.7; cf. Mt. 3.2; 4.17; Mk 1.15), but not elsewhere in non-Christian Jewish literature. Thus, to a first-century Jewish listener, this announcement of the kingdom would itself evoke such passages as Isaiah 40 and 52, whose major theme is YHWH’s coming, his return, to Zion.³⁸ (2) Occurrences of ‘good news’ or ‘gospel’ are found in the second half of Isaiah (Isa. 40.1-11; 41.21-29; 52.7-12; 60.1-7; 61.1-11).

Compared to the Hellenistic Greek parallels which use τίθημι, the expression τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν in Jn 10.15 has its own distinctiveness. In the former, the expression denotes taking a risk rather than making a full sacrifice of life (Homer, *Od.* 2.237; 3.74; 9.255), whereas the latter emphasizes the actual sacrifice of life.³⁹ In John, Jesus Christ is described as the one who offered himself voluntarily and spontaneously. Thus, the origin of τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν in John must be sought elsewhere. The Greek Old Testament does not help here because the meaning of τίθημαι (τίθημι) τὴν ψυχὴν (Judg. 12.3; 1 Sam. 19.5; 28.21; Job 13.14) follows that of Hellenistic Greek.

The linguistic features of the expression τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν in John point to Isaiah 53. First of all, the combination of τίθημι with ψυχὴ is rare in secular Greek, and in the New Testament it is peculiar to the Gospel of John (8 occurrences, in 10.11, 15, 17, 18; 13.37, 38; 15.13) and 1 Jn 3.16. Of its eight occurrences in the Gospel of John, it is used five times in chapter 10 in reference to Jesus as a good shepherd laying down his life for his sheep. Based upon this statistic, Brown argues that

37. B. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and his Bible* (Good News Studies, 8; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), pp. 90-147; C.A. Evans, ‘Authenticating the Activities of Jesus’, in B. Chilton and C.A. Evans (eds.), *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 3-30 (9); N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 616.

38. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 632.

39. Maurer, ‘τίθημι’, pp. 155, 162.

the idea that Jesus laid down his life on behalf of his people was well known to the Johannine community.⁴⁰ This concept may have its origin in a primitive tradition of the early church as suggested by C.H. Dodd, according to whom the parable of the good shepherd (John 10) is ‘one more indication that John sometimes reaches back to primitive Aramaic tradition by way of a different Greek translation’.⁴¹

Provided that the expression τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν in the Gospel of John and 1 Jn 3.16 has its origin in a primitive Aramaic (or Hebrew) tradition, the most natural place to seek its ultimate origin is Isaiah 53, for two reasons. First, in Isaiah 53 the concept that a human mediator voluntarily offers himself as an atoning sacrifice is explicitly attested in the form of prophecy. We find a similar concept in both Moses’s mediation after the golden calf episode (Exod. 32.30-34) and the martyrdom tradition in late Judaism that the suffering of martyrs has atoning efficacy, as observed in *4 Maccabees* (6.28-29; 17.21-22). These traditions, however, fail ‘to account for the emphasis in the Gospels on the death of Jesus as a scriptural necessity’⁴² (see Mt. 27.30; Mk 14.21 and par.; Mk 15.19 and par.; Mk 15.34; Lk. 22.22, 37). Thus, Isaiah 53 is more credible as the primary background for the saying than either of these alternatives, although the Old Testament tradition of Moses’s mediation or the martyrdom tradition as observed in *4 Macc.* 6.28-29; 17.21-22 may have indirectly influenced Jesus. This argument is supported by the paradigmatic uses of the Isaianic Servant motif in some rabbinic traditions. We find in the rabbinic literature that the Isaianic Servant motif is applied to exemplary figures such as Moses (*b. Sot.* 14a) and Phinehas (*Sifre Num.* on Num. 25.13). All three traditions appeal to Isa. 53.12 for their vicarious mediation. The fact that the tradition in the *Sifre* may well belong to the Tannaitic period indicates that the paradigmatic use of the Isaianic Servant motif may have been popular among the rabbis during the first century.

Secondly, the Greek expression τὴν ψυχὴν μου τίθημι ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων in Jn 10.15 corresponds closely to the Hebrew of Isa. 53.10 וְשָׂם נַפְשׁוֹ עַל־שָׂרָף עַל־שָׂרָף. The Greek τὴν ψυχὴν μου τίθημι corresponds

40. R.E. Brown, *Epistles of John* (AB, 30; New York: Doubleday, 1982), p. 448.

41. C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 383.

42. S. Page, ‘Ransom Saying’, in Green, McKnight and Marshall (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 660-62 (660).

exactly to the Hebrew נִפְּשׁוּ יְיָ except the personal pronoun, while ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων is a rendering of קָזַף metaphorically.⁴³ The evidence for this is:

(1) There is close connection between Hebrew יָשַׁם and Greek τίθημι. The former stands behind some 260 of 560 τίθημι references in the LXX. This statistic leads Maurer to conclude, ‘the material Hebrew equivalent of τίθημι is יָשַׁם, which combines local and transferring elements and is thus predominantly translated by τίθημι and compounds’.⁴⁴

(2) The rendering of קָזַף by ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων is supported by the use of ὑπὲρ formulae in the other New Testament references to the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus. The four prepositions (ἀντί, περί, διά, and ὑπέρ) are used in statements about the vicarious death of Jesus in the New Testament. Of the four, ὑπέρ is used most frequently (Mk 14.24; Lk. 22.19, 20; Jn 6.51; 10.11, 15; 11.51-52; 15.13; 17.19; 18.14; Rom. 5.6, 8; 8.32; 14.15; 1 Cor. 1.13; 5.7; 11.24; 15.3; 2 Cor. 5.14, 15, 21; Gal. 1.4; 2.20; 3.13; Eph. 5.2, 25; 1 Thess. 5.10; 1 Tim. 2.6; Tit. 2.14; Heb. 2.9; 7.27; 10.12; 1 Pet. 2.21; 3.18; 4.1; 1 Jn 3.16). In particular, it is used five times in the Gospel of John with ‘to lay down life’, including Jn 10.11, 15 (‘And I lay down my life for the sheep [ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων]’), in Rom. 5.8 (‘Christ died for us [ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν]’), and in Mk 14.24 (‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many [ὑπὲρ πολλῶν]’). This indicates that the preposition ὑπέρ had become standard in Christian descriptions of Jesus’ vicarious death.⁴⁵

In the foregoing discussion, I have shown the correspondences and the differences between the Markan ransom saying and Jn 10.15. Now I will evaluate them with regard to their mutual relationship. On the one hand, the extent of their correspondences points to their common origin, particularly in their correspondence in the allusion to Isaiah 53. On the other hand, the extent of the differences between the two seems to exclude the possibility of any direct literary relationship between these Greek texts. More likely, both John and Mark refer back to a primitive Aramaic (or Hebrew) saying of Jesus by way of different Greek translations.⁴⁶ This Semitic tradition may have included kingdom sayings of Jesus that interpreted his death as a vicarious atoning sacrifice, as

43. Maurer, ‘τίθημι’, p. 155; Jeremias, ‘πάσις θεοῦ’, p. 710.

44. Maurer, ‘τίθημι’, p. 153.

45. Brown, *Epistles of John*, p. 448.

46. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 383.

shown in Mk 10.45, the so-called parable of the good shepherd in John (10.11, 15, 17, 18), and in 1 Jn 3.16.

The Eucharistic Language in John 6

The next passage to consider is John 6. It is a current scholarly consensus that eucharistic language pervades John 6 as a whole, and 6.51-58 unmistakably deals with the Eucharist itself.⁴⁷ John 6.51-58 reads:

‘I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’ The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.’

John 6.51-58 is very similar to the institutional formula of the Eucharist in the Synoptic Gospels and in 1 Corinthians, primarily in three ways:⁴⁸ (1) Jesus himself dominates as the agent and the source of salvation. (2) The emphasis of the passage is clearly on eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking his blood. They reproduce the words we read in the

47. J. Betz, *Eucharistie in der Schrift und Patristik* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979), pp. 22-23; Brown, *John I–XII*, p. 557; Cullmann, *Christology*, p. 186; R.A. Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 163; Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 64; F. Hahn, ‘Abendmahl und Bundesgedanke im Neuen Testament’, *EvT* 35 (1975), pp. 337-75 (343-44); Jeremias, ‘αἶμα’, pp. 185-86; W.G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament according to its Major Witnesses: Jesus–Paul–John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), p. 262; E. Schweizer, ‘Das johanneische Zeugnis vom Herrenmahl’, *EvT* 12 (1952–1953), pp. 341-63 (353-63); S.S. Smalley, *John, Evangelist and Interpreter* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2nd edn, 1998), p. 49; R.A. Whitacre, *John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 166-67.

48. Brown, *John I–XII*, pp. 284-87; Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 58-64.

Synoptic account of the institution of the Eucharist (Mt. 26.26-28): ‘Take, eat; this is my body;...drink...this is my blood.’ (3) John 6.51 (‘The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh’) resembles the Lukan form of the words of institution: ‘This is my body, which is given for you’ (Lk. 22.19). Brown suggests that the Johannine form of the words of institution in Jn 6.51 may actually be closer to the original language of Jesus than what we find in the Synoptic Gospels.

Based on these observations, Dodd concludes: ‘There is very strong probability that the Fourth Gospel depends on a form of tradition entirely independent of the Synoptics: its rendering of the “words of institution”, which seems to presuppose a translation of the original Aramaic different from that which underlies the Synoptic rendering.’⁴⁹

In the Last Supper accounts in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 26.26-29; Mk 14.22-25; Lk. 22.15-20) and Paul (1 Cor. 11.23-26), three elements are closely bound together:⁵⁰ (1) the kingdom of God, (2) the death of Christ, and (3) new covenant fellowship. The Last Supper anticipates the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice. This death is also the means by which Jesus initiates his people into new covenant fellowship with God. This new covenant fellowship is also the kingdom fellowship that anticipates the final messianic banquet with Jesus in the kingdom of God (Mk 14.25; cf. Mt. 26.29).

But did the Johannine eucharistic tradition include the themes of the new covenant and atonement? As Dodd suggests, the form may not be exactly the same as the form found in the Synoptic Gospels and 1 Corinthians, but in general the Johannine eucharistic tradition is essentially congruent with the other eucharistic traditions. There are at least four factors that lead to this conclusion:

(1) The words of institution as witnessed in Jn 6.51 are very close to those of Lk. 22.19, which may indicate that the rest of the Johannine eucharistic tradition is close to the other traditions as well.

49. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 64.

50. M. Hengel, *Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (trans. J. Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 72; Jeremias, ‘αἶρω’, p. 185-86; Lang, ‘Abendmahl und Bundesgedanke’, pp. 524-38 (533); C. Levin, *Die Verheissung des Neuen Bundes in ihrem theologiegeschichtlichen Zusammenhang ausgelegt* (FRLANT, 137; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), p. 273; W.G. Morrice, ‘New Wine in Old Wine-Skins’, *ExpTim* 86 (1975), pp. 132-36 (134-35); E. Schweizer, *The Lord’s Supper according to the New Testament* (trans. J.M. Davis; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 16-17.

(2) Mark and Matthew on the one hand, and Luke and Paul on the other, have given fundamentally concordant reports about this last will and testament of Jesus.⁵¹ There is no particular reason why the Johannine tradition would be otherwise.

(3) As implied in 1 Cor. 11.23-26, in which Paul reports that the celebration of the Eucharist (as ἀνάμνησις of Christ) was invariably (ὁσάκις ἔαν κ.τ.λ.) accompanied by a recital of his passion, the report on the institution of the Eucharist has found an organic extension in the passion narratives that cover Christ's arrest and condemnation, crucifixion, burial and resurrection.⁵² The Synoptic Gospels show a heavy concentration of context-parallel triple traditions in and around the text units that deal with Christ's baptism and passion.⁵³ Reicke rightly argues that in early oral traditions the passion story had the value of a most hallowed sanctuary, as testified by Paul (1 Cor. 15.1-7) and Ignatius (*Phil.* 8.2). Thus, it was memorized with special care, and had many fewer variations in its contents and their order than other parts of the gospel tradition. In particular, the saying about humility and service in the Lukan passion narrative finds its counterpart in the story of foot washing in Jn 13.4-17.

The relative congruence of the passion narratives in the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John suggest that they should all share the same essential elements in their eucharistic words as part of the passion narratives.

(4) The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (c. 215) records the eucharistic liturgies, in which we find echoes of both John 6 and the eucharistic words preserved in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul (Mk 14.24; Mt. 26.28; Lk. 22.20; 1 Cor. 11.23-26).⁵⁴ *Apostolic Tradition* 23.1 has both bread-words and cup-words: (1) 'the bread into the representation of the Flesh (σάρξ) of Christ', (2) 'the cup mixed with wine for the antitype of the Blood which was shed for all who have believed in Him'. The former seems to reproduce Jn 6.51, 'The bread ...is my flesh (σάρξ)', but is identical in meaning to the Synoptic and

51. Cullmann, *Christology*, p. 64; B. Reicke, *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 145.

52. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 59; Reicke, *Roots of the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 147-49.

53. Reicke, *Roots of the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 65, 148-49.

54. G. Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus of Rome* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), pp. 40-43.

Pauline ‘This is my body (σῶμα)’ (Mt. 26.26; Lk. 22.19; 1 Cor. 11.24). The latter seems to reproduce such eucharistic words as ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many’ (Mt. 26.28; Mk 14.24), ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’ (Lk. 22.20), and ‘This is the new covenant in my blood’ (1 Cor. 11.25), but the last relative clause seems to echo Jn 6.40, ‘All who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life’ (cf. vv. 29, 47, 64).

Apostolic Tradition 23.5 reads, ‘And when he breaks the Bread in distributing to each a fragment (κλάσμα) he shall say: The Bread of Heaven in Christ Jesus’, clearly echoes John 6.

Finally, *Apostolic Tradition* 23.13 reads, ‘And we have delivered to you briefly these things concerning Baptism and the Oblation because you have already been instructed concerning the resurrection of the flesh (σάρξ) and the rest according to the Scriptures (κατὰ τὰς γραφάς)’, seems to echo both 1 Cor. 11.23 and 1 Cor. 15.3-4. As a whole, this particular record of the eucharistic tradition seems to follow the Johannine tradition, but its features also resemble the other eucharistic traditions preserved in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul, which seems to imply that the Johannine eucharistic tradition may have shared essential features with the other eucharistic traditions.

Assuming congruence between the Johannine eucharistic tradition and the other eucharistic traditions, what we have observed from the Last Supper accounts in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul may equally apply to the Johannine tradition. The most important observation from the tradition was the dual emphasis on the eschatological covenant and the fulfillment of the Servant prophecy in Christ’s death. W.G. Kümmel regards ‘God’s new eschatological covenant with men’ as the heart of the saying in the Upper Room and the culmination of Jesus’ activity and teaching.⁵⁵ Schweizer makes it the second of his three motifs in the New Testament: ‘Every celebration is a new confirmation of God’s covenant with his church’.⁵⁶ The conceptual basis of the covenant concept in the Supper traditions may be found in Exod. 24.8-11, where blood sacrifice and a heavenly meal appear in connection with the institution of the covenant, and from its counterpart in the analogous meals practiced by the Qumran sect.

Schweizer concludes that ‘probably all three of the theological motifs which were later given expression in the accounts of the Last Supper,

55. Kümmel, *Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 91-95.

56. Schweizer, *Lord’s Supper*, pp. 2, 16-17.

i.e., the sacrificial death, the covenant with its table fellowship, and the eschatological perspective that looked toward the heavenly meal, were from the very beginning implicitly bound up with the Supper'.⁵⁷

Considering these four factors, together with the allusions to the eschatological new covenant in the expression 'new commandment' (Jn 13.35; 15.12, 17), I think it is very likely that the Johannine eucharistic tradition would have included the concept of atonement together with the other two theological motifs.

Summary and Conclusion

In this study, I have examined selected passages in the Gospel of John with regard to the theme of atonement/forgiveness. First, I focused my inquiry on the two sending statements in John (3.16, 17). As some scholars have pointed out, the theme of atonement is not explicitly attested in Jn 3.16, 17. However, I have demonstrated the implicit presence of the theme of atonement in the passage by presenting three lines of evidence: (1) The forgiveness of sin is presupposed in such expressions as *μὴ ἀπόληται* (3.16) and *κρίνη τὸν κόσμον* (3.17), when they are seen together with 8.21-24 and 5.24. (2) Jesus' death is presupposed in the expression *ὑψωθῆναι*, as implied in v. 14 and the explanation in 12.32-33. (3) The use of *δεῖ* and the verb *ὑψόω* in Jn 3.14 points to the passion predictions of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels and the Servant of YHWH in Isaiah. Based upon this observation, I conclude that the concept of an atoning sacrifice is assumed in the two sending statements in Jn 3.16-17.

The second passage examined was Jn 1.29. I demonstrated that this verse points to the coming death of Christ as an atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world from three observations: (1) the phrase 'the lamb of God' alludes to the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53; (2) The phrase has a sacrificial connection; and (3) the phrase *αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν* refers to the representative bearing of the punishment of sin.

I then examined the statement in Jn 10.15 (vv. 11, 17, 18; cf. 13.37, 38; 15.13): 'And I lay down my life for the sheep (*καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν μου τίθημι ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων*). I demonstrated that these passages echo the language of atonement because: (1) these statements in the Gospel

57. Schweizer, *Lord's Supper*, pp. 16-17.

of John are Johannine equivalents to the Marcan ransom saying (Mk 10.45). (2) Their linguistic features point to Isaiah 53.

Finally, I focused on the eucharistic language in John 6 and showed that John 6 echoes the eucharistic words of Jesus given in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul. Based upon this observation, I conclude that the Johannine eucharistic tradition would have included the concept of atonement.

The conclusion, then, is that the theme of atonement is presupposed in many passages and expressions in John.