



## Meditation 2: the choice of the word, atonement

In referring to and discussing the saving work of Jesus Christ, the LDS tradition most often uses the word “atonement.” This has been true throughout my life. The phrase, “the Atonement of Jesus Christ” is ubiquitous and dominates all other words in contemporary LDS discussion of Jesus’ saving work. The LDS people use “atonement,” far, far more than other more traditional Christians. In this and the following meditations, I would like to offer a few observations about the usage and meaning of this word, “atonement.”

First, by my count, the word is found 80 times in the English King James translation of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the dominant translation used in the LDS religious tradition. Of these, over half (49) are found in Leviticus. Seventy-six of the eighty are located in the Pentateuch. This means that the word appears outside of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers (it does not appear in Genesis or Deuteronomy) only four times. Given the size of the Hebrew Bible, the word cannot be said to have a significant influence in that Book, particularly outside the Pentateuch.

The word is found but once in the King James translation of the Christian Bible (New Testament). This one occurrence has occasioned some skepticism. It is found in Romans 5.<sup>11</sup>, and translates the Greek word, *katallagē*. Only Paul uses this Greek word in the Christian Bible, and then, only sparingly (4 times). It is not translated, “atonement” in the other three occurrences, but “reconcile.” Clearly the English word “atonement” has very limited, if any, influence in the Christian Bible.

It might be thought that the minimal influence of the English word, “atonement” in the Bible

goes a long way in explaining why the word is mostly absent in traditional Christian discussions of Jesus' saving work, especially when compared the word's usage in LDS discussions.

However...

The English word "atonement" is found only 27 times in the Book of Mormon and is distributed throughout. This small number of occurrences might surprise the reader. The Book of Mormon is just a bit more than 1/3 the size of the Bible, so the smaller number of occurrences is to be expected. Still, one might have expected more. As it turns out, by using a bit of math wizardry we find that the English word, "atonement" represents .00010215% of the Bible's total word count and 00010025% of the Book of Mormon's word count, meaning, the words are used at about the same frequency in both standard works. Thus the word does not dominate discussions of Jesus' salvific work any more than the little influence it had in the Bible.

The word is even less common in the Doctrine and Covenants, easily explained by the strong "administrative" purpose of much of the Book. It does not make an appearance in the Pearl of Great Price. Therefore, whatever the reason behind the LDS preference for the word, "atonement," in describing Jesus' saving work, and the culture's penchant to use it far more than other traditional Christians, the preference does not come from the Bible or any scripture unique to the LDS faith.

None of this is meant to say that the principles found in the word, "atonement," are rare or absent when the word itself is rarely used or absent. The principles found in the word are scattered about everywhere. It is one of my major contentions that even though the word is not used in the Gospels, for example, the Gospels are jam packed with "atonement." Indeed, "atonement" is to be found on nearly every page of the Gospels in nearly every word Jesus spoke and in nearly every action he took.

Anyway, I do not know why there is such divergence in the use of the word between LDS and more traditional Christians. I do not know why the LDS tradition has latched onto the word atonement at the near exclusion of other words that might be used to describe Jesus' salvific work. I will offer no explanations. I will, however, offer some possible reasons why the word is

so very appropriate to Jesus' salvific work and even his very being—indeed, why it may be the best word that a finite human language can produce to describe what is infinite and beyond language. But, before doing that, we should examine the word, “atonement,” itself, and its meaning. That will be the subject of our next meditation in this series.

I do believe in atonement. I do believe in Jesus' atonement. I have intimately experienced it and its benefits in my life. In this series of meditations and on the *Atonement* page of this site, I hope to make clear what the “it” is that I have experienced, and to assist others in not only growing in their understanding of the near incomprehensible, but in experiencing what is beyond words.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!