



### Meditation 3: the meaning of the word, atonement

In the second atonement meditation, we highlighted the dominance of the word “atonement” in LDS discussions concerning the salvific work of Jesus Christ. This stands in contrast with most other, more traditional Christians who utilize the word much less. In this meditation, we will examine the meaning of the word, “atonement.”

In the King James Bible, the English word, “atonement,” translates the Hebrew root, *kpr* (noun, *kippurîm*). As words that are used metaphysically and theologically often originate from words found in the mundane settings of everyday life, it seems best, whenever possible, to examine the meaning of those words in their mundane settings before attempting to ascertain their metaphorical or theological meaning.

In the case of Hebrew, *kpr*, we famously find the verb, *kāpar*, in Genesis 6.<sup>14</sup>, where Noah is commanded to make a boat of “gopher wood,” whatever that is. He is to cover (*kāpar*) the wood with a “coating” or “application” (*kōper*, “covering”), the traditional KJV, “pitch.” Later in the Hebrew Bible, Moses is commanded to make a chest (traditional, “ark”) and to set a “mercy seat” or cover/lid (*kappōret*) on top of it.<sup>1</sup>

We could expand such examples. The mundane setting of such passages illustrates what the lexicons tell us, and provides the baseline for understanding the metaphorical and theological meaning of Hebrew *kpr*. With its basic meaning, “to cover,” “to hide,” “to conceal,” the metaphorical or theological meaning of *kpr* comes to mean the “covering” or “hiding” of sin

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<sup>1</sup> See, Exodus 25.<sup>21</sup>

from God.<sup>2</sup> This is also true for the verb in the Piel stem (*kipper*), “to make a covering”.<sup>3</sup>

To “cover” is, of course, the opposite of “exposing.” Covering removes or hides a previous exposure. We should note that *kpr* can also have the meaning of “rub” (on or off), “smear,” “apply”—in these, however, the nuance of “cover” can still be seen. When we “apply” paint to a wall, for example, we hide or cover what is below the layer of newly applied paint. Interestingly, upon being convicted of their sinfulness, the people of King Benjamin asked that God “apply the atoning blood of Christ”<sup>4</sup> as if it would cover their sins as paint covers a wall. The idea of “application” found in this petition may come from an awareness and celebration of the Day of Atonement when sacrificial blood was “applied” to, “smeared on” temple furnishings, especially the “mercy seat” or ark lid with the intention of covering up or hiding sin.<sup>5</sup>

If, at this point, the reader is wondering how we arrive at “atonement” from “cover” or “covering,” they are not alone. Many have questioned this choice for translating *kpr*. As you can sense, “atonement” is not really representative of the Hebrew root, *kpr*. Before addressing the appropriateness of this English word, atonement, to represent the central aspect of Jesus’ life and, indeed, God’s very nature, we should first consider its history, construction, and meaning.

This English word, atonement, seems not to have existed before William Tyndale’s 16<sup>th</sup> century translation of the Bible. A century and a half earlier, John Wycliffe had used the word “onement” in his writings, but did not use any such word or variation of it in his English translation of the Bible—translating Hebrew, *kipper*, in a wide variety of ways. He never wrote of or translated a Hebrew word as “at-onement.” It seems that Tyndale newly invented the word, “atonement” on his own.

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<sup>2</sup> “Hiding” sin is but one metaphor for what God can do with sin. He can also “send it away,” for example, or “erase” it.

<sup>3</sup> We should mention that when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek—the Septuagint, often designated by LXX—the translators choose the Greek word, *hilaskomai*, to represent Hebrew, *kipper*. This Greek verb comes from *hileos*, meaning, “to be happy,” “cheerful,” “friendly,” “gracious,” “favorable.” Not entirely consistent with Greek culture’s use of the word, *Hilaskomai* means “to make gracious,” “to make friendly,” “to placate,” “be merciful,” “to cleanse,” and “to pardon” in the LXX.

<sup>4</sup> Mosiah 4.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mosiah 2-5 has much in common with the Biblical Feast of Tabernacles with its accompanying Day of Atonement.

“As its spelling suggest, but its pronunciation disguises, *atone* comes from the phrase *at one*, ‘united, in harmony’ . . . It may have been modeled on Latin *adunare* ‘unite,’ which was similarly compounded from *ad* ‘to, at’ and *unum* ‘one.’”<sup>6</sup> Now, we can take a verb, add a suffix, and create a noun. The suffix, *-ment*, is one such suffix—another example would be, *-tion*. By adding the suffix, *-ment*, to our verb *atone*, we come up with *atonement*. The suffix *-ment* forms nouns which refer to an action or process, or its result. If, for example, someone disappoints another they create disappointment. If someone agrees with another, they create an agreement. If something argues with another, they create an argument. In like manner, when someone is at one with another they create atonement.

Now, what do we make of all this “data.” I am only speaking for myself when I say that the word, “atonement,” captures the essential act, or better, the essential character—a character that was best and most clearly revealed in the earthly ministry of Jesus—of God the Father and His Son, Jesus, who is, himself, “God himself.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, I would argue that few words in any language have ever better captured the essence of the divine character better than the English “at-one-ment.”

Many times over a 30-year ministerial career, I asked students and congregants to consider synonyms for the word, “atonement.” I was often met initially with perplexed looks, as if the very idea was somehow bizarre. Then, after a quick scripture search and a bit of wrestling with the English language, they would come up with the most common answer, “sacrifice:” the “atonement of Jesus Christ” is the “sacrifice of Jesus Christ.” Less common proposed synonyms were “redemption,” “reconciliation,” or the rare “expiation,” “satisfaction,” and “propitiation.”

The proposal of such synonyms is unsurprising. When Christians think of Jesus’ atonement, they think, first and foremost, of his final hours on earth. They think of his suffering in Gethsemane and at Calvary. They then think of his resurrection. A few extend his atonement to include his ascension into heaven.

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<sup>6</sup> *Dictionary of Word Origins*, p. 42

<sup>7</sup> See, Mosiah 13.<sup>34</sup>

But, we suggest, these “acts of atonement” are not “atonement” itself. Neither are acts of atonement limited to these climactic events, important as they are. I would argue that Jesus’ entire life, from the first breathe he took in the manger to the last breath he took on the cross was a ministry filled with atonement. When he lay in the hay of his crib, he was engaged in at-one-ment. When he healed the leper with a touch, he was engaged in at-one-ment. When he healed a woman with an issue of blood through her brave touch, he was engaged in at-one-ment. When he sat and ate at table with publicans and sinners, he was engaged in at-one-ment. When he dismissed legions from a man in the land of the Gadarenes, he was engaged in at-one-ment. When he rescued his helpless disciples by calming the tempestuous waters of Galilee, he was engaged in at-one-ment.

Nor has his ministry of atonement ended, but continues today from the right hand of God. His every encounter with another, in time and in eternity, is a moment of atonement.

So, no. I don’t think that “sacrifice of Jesus Christ” is a synonym for “atonement of Jesus Christ.” It falls far short of capturing the word, atonement, and the all-encompassing aspect of Jesus’ character and labors that the word entails. So, after inviting my students and congregants to break the word into its constituent parts—“at,” “one,” “ment,” I would ask again for synonyms. You can probably guess the most common proposed synonym.

“Unity.”

“Excellent! Now, let’s hear some synonyms for ‘unity.’”

“Oneness.” “Connectedness.” “Attachment.” “Participation” “Engagement.” “Linkage.”  
“Bonding.”

This, then, is what I mean by, and how I use the word, “atonement.” As I understand atonement, it is a state of oneness. It is to be attached, connected, linked, united. Jesus’ atonement is Jesus’ unity, oneness, connectedness, attachment, etc. with and to us. Jesus’ *sacrifice* flowed out of his feelings of connectedness to us. His sacrifice did not *create* connectedness—either with him or his Father—that had never existed previously. Rather, his sacrifice *revealed* a connectedness that

was as eternal as God, Himself. It is this eternal nature of atonement that is the subject of our next meditation.

Tyndale's discovery of "atonement" in *kpr* was a stroke of genius. His translation of "atonement" was a bold move, without precedent and with little lexical support. The assertion that God is "at-one" with humanity; that he feels connected, attached, linked, and united with and to them is truly the greatest of Jesus' revelations. It is the most essential revelation among all the revelations that are to be had by human beings. Everything rides on our awareness, acceptance, and experience of God's connectedness with us. It opens possibilities that would otherwise remain unknown and out of reach.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!