

Substitution... the basis of atonement

Most agree that through Jesus, our representative, God is identifying with us and our sin. But is His death a substitute for our punishment or an example of how human beings should live? To whom was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ directed towards? Was it purely objective and intended for the judicial requirements of God? Or was it subjective and intended for the relationship with human beings?

Authors of the New Testament indicate that Jesus died for sinners and convey the sense of substitution. Examining two Greek prepositions that define this concept of substitution, “anti” and “hyper”, may help one gain a better sense of this.

A preposition is a word placed before a noun or object that qualifies or produces an adverbial phrase. For grammarians, the case, or syntactic relationship or position of the noun, affects the meaning of the preposition and ultimately the meaning of the sentence.

The preposition “anti” (Strong’s #473) affects the meaning of an object in two possible ways: a) to set one object against another, and b) to indicate a substitution or exchange as one object given or taken in return for another.

An example of the first meaning of “anti” is “Antichrist” (“antichristos” in 1 John 4:3), which is a person who would knowingly or ignorantly promote himself as a rival to Jesus Christ or a theology that is blatantly against all that He represents.

Of the second meaning of “anti”, there are several examples that convey the sense of substitution with “in place of” or “instead of.” In comparison to the other preposition “hyper”, “anti” produces a stronger sense of substitution.

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea **in place of** (anti) his father Herod, he was afraid to go there... (Matt 2:22)

You have heard that it was said, “AN EYE **FOR** (anti) AN EYE, AND A TOOTH **FOR** (anti) A TOOTH. (Matt 5:38)

Never pay back evil **for** (anti) evil to anyone... (Rom 12:17)

When used within the context of the crucifixion of Christ, the preposition “anti” is used twice, and for the first century Christian the death of Christ clearly meant substitution. By Jesus’ own words, the apostles understood that the life of Christ was given in exchange for the lives of many human beings:

just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom **for** (anti) many. (Matt 20:28)

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom **for** (anti) many. (Mark 10:45)

These verses convey an objective aspect to atonement; Jesus gave His life as a ransom and a substitute to God.

The preposition “hyper” (Strong’s #5228) conveys both a sense of *substitution* “in place of” and *representation* “on behalf of” or “for the benefit of”.

The sense of substitution can be seen in these examples of the New Testament:

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For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for **the sake of** (hyper) my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, (Rom 9:3)

Agonized by the rejection of the gospel by his Jewish kinsman, Paul, in heartfelt desire for their salvation, wished that he were cursed and cut off from Christ in exchange (substitution).

whom I wished to keep with me, so that **on your behalf** (hyper) he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; (Phil 1:13)

In his letter to Philemon, Paul casts Onesimus as a fellow Christian slave. If Onesimus were kept by Paul, he would have served as Philemon's substitute.

While the above examples show that "hyper" denotes substitution, critics argue that when examining referring to the atonement, "hyper" conveys only the sense of representation "on behalf of" or "for the benefit of".

The following verses are examples of this: Luke 22:19-20; John 6:51; John 10:11, 15; Romans 5:6, 8; Romans 8:32; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:25; 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10; and 1 John 3:16.

These verses convey a subjective aspect to atonement; Jesus is sacrificing Himself for human beings.

Other New Testament passages using "hyper" in reference to atonement also denote representation "on behalf of"; however, Jesus Christ is associated with sin and suffering.

The following verses substantiate this observation: 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 1:4; Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 5:2; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 2:9; Hebrews 10:12; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 Peter 3:18; and 1 Peter 4:1.

This reference to sin and suffering connects Jesus Christ to the Old Testament sacrificial laws.

After their freedom from slavery in Egypt, God teaches the nation of Israel the process that one would do to atone for intentional (i.e. Lev 1:1-17) and unintentional sins (Lev 4:1-35). In both instances, God requires the confession of sin onto an unblemished animal, its sacrifice and burnt offering.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the sins of the nation of Israel were expiated. The sacrificial ritual required two male goats that were physically perfect in age and condition. One goat was slain and its blood and flesh were offered as a substitute payment of the nation's sin. The other goat (scapegoat) received the sins of the nation and was released to the wild to signify that sin left the Hebrew nation (Lev 16:1-34).

The Old Testament sacrificial system clearly used animal sacrifices as a substitute for the atonement of human beings (Lev 17:11). Implicit in this is an understanding of God's judicial penalty of death for sin. An earlier example in Genesis specifically portrays this substitution in Abraham's offering of Isaac (Gen 22:1-14).

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In his prophecy of the Messiah, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah provides the significance of the Messiah's sacrifice within the context of the Levitical sacrificial laws (Isaiah 53:1-12).

The Servant's sacrifice was for iniquity (Isa 53:5, 6, 11), transgression (Isa 53:5, 8) and sin (Isa 53:12).

The Servant's offering was a guilt offering (Isa 53:10).

The death of the Servant was substitutionary in nature, and it was in substitute for human beings (Isa 53:5, 11, 12).

The New Testament authors certainly understood the crucifixion of Christ within the context of the Old Testament sacrificial system: the sacrifice of an unblemished animal takes the place of the sinner, and its blood makes atonement.

For Christ to be the unblemished animal, He had to be sinless, and both apostles Peter and Paul indicate that (2 Cor 5:21 and 1 Pet 2:22-24; 3:18).

The Apostle John referred to Jesus as the "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29).

When seen from this perspective of the Old Testament sacrificial system, the understanding of Christ's crucifixion takes on an objective function; it was intended to satisfy the judicial requirement of God.

Yet while the New Testament authors wrote of similarities to the Levitical sacrificial system, they also developed the idea of Jesus Christ being of a high priestly office (Heb 7:11-28) and how His sacrifice was something above and beyond.

Instead of the sacrifice of an unblemished animal, the high priest offers Himself for the sins of human beings (Heb 7:27-28). Instead of the lid of the Ark as the place of propitiation, Jesus Christ Himself is the mediator of the new covenant (Heb 9:11-15).

For the Believer, no more animal sacrifices were necessary for the atonement of one's sins.

While the preposition "hyper" does denote representation "on behalf of" or "for the benefit of", when used in reference to Christ's work of atonement, it implies substitution and takes into account the context of the Old Testament sacrificial system and the Jesus' own use of the Greek term "anti".

Jesus' use of "anti" sets forth the idea that His substitution had an objective function as a "ransom" for God's judicial purpose.

Associated with the Old Testament sacrificial law provides further imagery of this objective function of Christ's crucifixion; Jesus suffering in the place of human beings the penalty that God would have placed on us. Jesus experienced the full weight of God's wrath that had accumulated since Creation.

Jesus' penal substitution was a propitiation.

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And while the use of “hyper” informs the reader about the objective purpose of substitution, its use also depicts a subject purpose in Jesus’ sacrifice and reconciling result for man.

Jesus’ penal substitution was a demonstration of God’s love and justice.

Jesus’ penal substitution was very personal; He exchanged His life for each one Believer.

Scripture reveals that Jesus died as a substitute for sinners. However, over the history of Christianity, this thought has not always been the case. Several theories viewed the purpose of the crucifixion differently, and were discredited because they failed to take into account the biblical passages regarding Christ’s work in salvation:

They ignore the biblical passages that show how the guilt of sin can be removed from human beings.

They ignore the biblical passages revealing Christ work of earning forgiveness and salvation for human beings.

They ignore the biblical passages regarding God’s absolute justice and requirement of holiness for all who come into His presence.

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This table summarizes the major concepts behind these historical theories:

Theory (Founder)	Why Christ Died	Theological Problems
Ransom to Satan (Origen: 185-254 A.D.)	Jesus died as the ransom Satan required to redeem human beings.	God did not require payment of sin. Satan has the power to demand payment for sin from God.
Moral Influence (Abelard: 1079-1142)	The death of Jesus demonstrated how much God loved human beings; it was an example of divine empathy for human suffering and death.	God did not require payment for sin. A teaching example of how much God loves human beings.
Example (Socinus: 1539-1604)	The crucifixion of Jesus provided an example of how human beings should trust and obey God even if it means death.	God did not require payment for sin. A teaching example of how human beings should live.
Governmental (Gortius: 1583-1645)	Jesus died to show that when God's law is broken, there must be some penalty to pay. Jesus did not die for the sins of human beings.	God did not require payment for sin. As God is omnipotent, He can set aside the penalty for sin and forgive sins.

Why is substitution the basis of atonement?

From an objective perspective, His substitution was sacrificial and paid God's judicial price in full. He stood in the place of human beings, represented us and bore the total penalty of our sins. This view of Christ's death is often called the theory of "penal substitution" or the theory of "vicarious atonement."

From a subjective perspective, His substitution imputed His righteousness upon us. His atonement brought us into God's favor and reconciled our relationship with Him. Jesus' sacrifice was individually for each one of us and a supreme demonstration of God's love.