

ATONEMENT, JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (ESPECIALLY LEVITICUS AND ISAIAH 53): A RESPONSE TO DARRIN SNYDER BELOUSEK'S *ATONEMENT, JUSTICE, AND PEACE*

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Darrin Snyder Belousek's book is written out of the conviction that theology shapes life, especially one's theology of Jesus' atonement. This is admirable and I appreciate the opportunity to engage with his work on the OT concerning such an important topic. While there is much with which I agree, in this limited response I want to identify three significant points of disagreement, particularly his claims about God's wrath in the OT, the nature of atonement in Leviticus, and the significance of the Servant's suffering in Isa 53.

1. GOD'S WRATH AGAINST SIN IS IMPLIED EVEN IN PASSAGES WHERE IT IS NOT MENTIONED

Belousek seeks to break the link between sin, God's wrath, and the necessity of punishment for sin. He says: "The personal wrath of God cannot be reduced to the middle term of a syllogism between sin and punishment, as penal substitution would have it."² Yet the evidence that is mounted to support this thesis, when examined more closely, actually supports the traditional connection between sin and God's wrath and punishment. For instance, Belousek contends that God brought about the flood in Noah's day, "not out of holy wrath against human evildoing ... but rather out of heart-felt regret and sorrow for his own having created a humankind whose heart is inclined toward evil (Gen 6:5-7; cf. 8:21)."³ Hence, the flood is not an instance of God's wrath, but his "heart-felt regret and sorrow." While Belousek is correct to observe that God's wrath is not mentioned anywhere in the Genesis flood account, Isa 54:9 interprets the

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² D. S. Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 213.

³ *Ibid.*, 182.

flood in exactly these terms: “To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again” (cf. 2 Pet 2:5-9). Significantly, in Isaiah this turning aside of God’s wrath is a result of the work of the Servant in the previous chapter, Isa 53, something that I will come to later. Isaiah 54:9 demonstrates that God’s wrath against sin is implied even in passages where it is not mentioned.⁴

God’s wrath and punishment are much more closely connected than Belousek allows.⁵ Even when wrath is not explicitly mentioned in connection with punishment, there are several important passages that establish this as the theological framework through which God’s punishment for sin in the OT is to be viewed. For instance, the covenant curses in Lev 26 and Deut 28–29 provide a framework for interpreting God’s punishment in Israel’s history, to which the prophets often refer. Here the covenant curses are explicitly said to be an outworking of God’s anger (Lev 26:28; Deut 29:23-28). While the book of Judges traces the spiralling of the nation deeper into sin, it only occasionally mentions God’s anger or wrath, yet the framework established in Judg 2:6–3:6 indicates that the reader of the book is to interpret Yahweh’s punishment for sin as an outworking of his wrath (vv. 14, 20).⁶ Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple also looks towards Israel’s subsequent history and indicates that sin arouses God’s anger and leads to the punishment of exile (1 Kgs 8:46). Similarly, the writer of Kings explains the exile of the northern kingdom in exactly these terms (2 Kgs 17:17-18).

So, my first point is: just because wrath is not mentioned, does not mean that wrath is not present. The wider OT context clearly establishes an interpretative framework that teaches us to infer that God’s wrath is a “middle term” between sin and its necessary punishment.

2. ATONING SACRIFICES IN LEVITICUS NOT ONLY CLEANSE BUT ALSO RANSOM

Belousek seeks to demonstrate that the atoning sacrifices in Leviticus make no sense in terms of penal substitution, but in doing so he tells only one side of the story. Belousek rightly talks about the *kipper* rites bringing cleansing, but in Leviticus the *kipper* rites not only bring cleansing, they also serve as a ransom to appease Yahweh.⁷

⁴ Belousek seeks to demonstrate that there is no necessary link between wrath and punishment by citing the instance of Uzzah reaching out his hand to steady the ark when David was transporting the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:6-7). Belousek calls this “inadvertent contact with the holy” and that God’s wrath is “for a cause other than sin.” Yet most commentators agree that David and Uzzah sin in transporting the ark on a cart in violation of Yahweh’s earlier instruction (Num 4:15; 7:9; cf. Exod 25:12-15; 1 Chr 15:13). In transporting the ark on a cart, in the context of the books of Samuel, the Israelites are acting just like the Philistines (1 Sam 6:7-12). Moreover, it may be that David is guilty of manipulating Yahweh into his service. See for instance, R. P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (The Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 232. Hence, this is not simply “inadvertent contact”—it is the climax of a series of sins for which God’s wrath and punishment are a consequence.

⁵ A sample of passages that explicitly connect God’s wrath with his punishment of sin in the OT include: Exod 32:9-10; Lev 26:14-33; Num 12:9-15; Deut 4:25; 6:15; 7:4; 1 Kgs 8:46; 11:9; 2 Kgs 17:17-18; Ezra 9:13-14; Ps 11:5-6; Isa 10:5-6; Jer 4:4; Lam 3:42-43; Ezek 7:3, 8-9; Zech 1:12, 15.

⁶ God’s anger at sin which is expressed in punishment is explicit in Judg 3:8; 6:39; 10:7.

⁷ J. Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005). This is also suggested by J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1082, and R. E. Averbeck, “*kpr*,” in

It is important to note that the *kipper* rites only functioned in certain circumstances. Normally the consequence of intentional sin in the priestly literature is death, either by the hand of Yahweh directly, or by the hands of the covenant community.⁸ The *’āšām* sacrifice (also referred to in Isa 53) is only for sin that may be atoned for. The *’āšām* or “guilt” seems to refer to some sort of general suffering that prompts the sinner to seek out the sin they have committed, or to confess the sin that they have tried to hide.⁹ If the sin was not properly dealt with through the appropriate sacrifice, then the implication is that the person would also die.¹⁰

In determining the meaning of *kipper* it is important to study the use of the cognate noun, *kōpēr*. It refers to the “payment” or “ransom” that in some sin contexts can appease the injured party and bring peace to a damaged relationship (e.g., Exod 21:28-32; 30:11-16; Num 35:30-34). Jay Sklar, in a recent study of atonement in Leviticus determines that a *kōpēr* is:

...a legally or ethically legitimate payment which delivers a guilty party from a just punishment that is the right of the offended party to execute or have executed. The acceptance of this payment is entirely dependent upon the choice of the offended party, it is a lesser punishment than was originally expected, and its acceptance serves both to rescue the life of the guilty as well as to appease the offended party, thus restoring peace to the relationship.¹¹

Sklar demonstrates from several passages that the verb *kipper* (“to make atonement”) in sin contexts, refers to the effecting of a *kōpēr* (“ransom”) on behalf of the guilty party (as well as purification).¹² For instance, Lev 10:17: “Why have you not eaten the purification offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy, and he has given it to you in order to bear away the sin of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD.”¹³ Note how the offended party (the LORD) has agreed to a *kōpēr* (the “purification offering”) by which sin is removed (“to bear away”) so that the sinner no longer needs to face the consequences of their sin.¹⁴

Belousek notes that *kipper* also occurs in the context of impurity and quite naturally asks: “Why would YHWH be wrathful toward the very altar he has just ordained for the tabernacle? ... [Why] is God wrathful against a woman for having given birth or a man for having a skin lesion?”¹⁵ The answer is that while it is clear that these are not sins that have aroused God’s anger, in the Levitical system, impurity endangers life. Both sin and uncleanness have a polluting effect. For instance, Lev 20:2-3: “Any Israelite

New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis vol. 2 (ed. W. A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 689-710 (693-695).

⁸ Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 41, notes the terms “death,” “cutting off,” and “to bear sin” are all found in the context of intentional sin and refer to the death of the sinner.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 78. *kōpēr* is also used to refer to an ethically questionable payment which delivers a guilty party from a just punishment and is translated “bribe” (e.g. 1 Sam 12:1-5; Prov 6:34-35; Amos 5:12).

¹² *Ibid.*, 100. Note that the means of *kipper* is not always sacrifice (cf. the scapegoat in Lev 16:21-22; a golden plate in Exod 28:38).

¹³ Following the translation of *ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁵ Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 176-177.

or any foreigner residing in Israel who sacrifices any of his children to Molek is to be put to death. The members of the community are to stone him. I myself will set my face against him and will cut him off from his people; for by sacrificing his children to Molek, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name.”¹⁶ Those who suffer from a major impurity also defile the sanctuary, even if they do not come in direct contact with it. This is seen in Lev 15:31: “You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.”¹⁷

While impurity and sin have different starting points, they both end at the same place: they both defile (requiring cleansing) and they both endanger (requiring ransom).¹⁸ This is why the *kipper* rites must not only cleanse and remove pollution, they must also ransom and appease. The life of the offerer is ransomed by means of the life of the animal, its blood (cf. Lev 17:11), which is payment that the offended party (Yahweh) has agreed to and provided.¹⁹ Hence atonement (*kipper*) sacrifices not only cleanse, they also ransom. The life of the animal substitutes the penalty of death for those who are defiled by uncleanness or sin.

3. THE SUFFERING SERVANT DEALS WITH GOD’S WRATH

Belousek claims that in Isa 53: “There is not so much as a single allusion to, much less mention of, God’s wrath in the entire Song, no suggestion that God is angry and needs to be appeased.”²⁰ While it is true that the fourth Servant Song does not mention God’s wrath, the claim that God’s wrath is nowhere in view is mistaken when the Song is read in the context of the book. Isaiah 1 sets up the frame for understanding the book as a whole and central to Israel’s problem is God’s wrath at their sin (1:24-26; cf. 1:9, 18-20).²¹ Indeed, in Isa 40–66, a variety of vocabulary is used to refer to Yahweh’s anger/wrath: *’ap̄* (42:24-25; 48:9; 63:6; 66:15); *qesep̄* (47:6; 54:8-9; 57:16-17; 60:10; 64:5, 9); *hēmā* (42:25; 51:17, 20, 22; 59:18; 63:3, 5, 6; 66:15).

God’s wrath is the presenting issue in Isa 53. For instance: Isa 51:17, 19 “Awake, awake! Rise up, Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath ... These double calamities have come upon you—who can comfort you?” The question posed from the wider and immediate context is—how can the cup of God’s wrath be removed so that God’s people can be restored? The answer is that it is the Servant who effects salvation and turns aside God’s wrath. Isaiah 49–52 anticipates this salvation and in 54–55, the people are invited to participate. As noted earlier, on the other side of the Song, Yahweh states: “In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but

¹⁶ The polluting effect of sin is seen also in Lev 16:30 and 18:24-25a.

¹⁷ Num 6:9-11 shows that the inadvertent defiling of something that has been sanctified is considered sinful—if someone dies in the presence of a Nazirite, the Nazirite is considered to have sinned. In the priestly literature, defiling the sacred is a serious sin itself.

¹⁸ Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 173-174.

²⁰ Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 226.

²¹ Cf. M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (FOTL 16; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 70: “The oracles contained in this chapter summarize the main themes and message of the book.”

with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,' says the LORD your Redeemer. 'To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again'" (54:8-9). Isaiah 53 is the turning point where the "arm of the LORD" (v. 1) will bring salvation through the Servant, just as it had in the Exodus (cf. 51:9).²² The salvation is salvation from Yahweh's wrath, like the days of Noah.

The language of this Servant Song resonates with the priestly world of sacrifice, which links the function of the Servant with the substitutionary sacrificial motif.²³ Given the context of exile, which is explicitly connected with God's wrath elsewhere in the OT (see my first point), and the way that the wider context of Isaiah understands God's wrath as the presenting problem, the wider context demands that Isaiah 53 be understood as the solution to God's wrath at sin.

While Belousek is correct to note that Isa. 53:5a should be translated "He was wounded 'because of' or 'by' our transgressions" rather than "for our transgressions," this is not the most compelling reason for reading the Servant Song in terms of penal substitution. There are other more substantial reasons. Verse 4 indicates that the Servant's suffering is related to the people's "pain" and "suffering."²⁴ Verses 11-12 then indicate that the "pain" and "suffering" are the consequence of sin. The statement of v. 4, "surely he took up (*nāsā*) our pain" uses the same Hebrew verb as v. 12, "he bore (*nāsā*) the sin of many." Similarly, "he bore (*sābal*) our suffering" in v. 4, uses the same verb as v. 11, "he will bear (*sābal*) their iniquities." Using the same verbs, the terms for suffering early in the Song are replaced with terms for sin at the end. The Servant does more than just share in the suffering of the people—there is a transfer of suffering and sin to the Servant.

The verb "bear, lift up" (*nāsā*), is used in connection with "sin" (*ḥēṭ*) in eight other passages in the OT. Four times it means "incur guilt" (by a person's own wrong actions) (Lev 19:17; 22:17; 22:9; Num 18:22, 32) and in the four other instances it means "experience punishment" (for a person's own wrong actions) (Lev 20:20; 24:15; Num 9:13; Ezek 23:49). In all eight instances, the person incurs guilt or experiences punishment for their own wrongdoing.²⁵ In contrast, here the Servant incurs guilt/experiences punishment not for his own sins, but for the "sins of many" (v. 12). There is clearly a transfer of penalty from "us" to the Servant, a transfer that in the context of the Song brings salvation—the "punishment that brought us peace" (v. 5). This transfer is traditionally captured in the phrase "penal substitution" (cf. 1 Pet 2:24).

Furthermore, since in Leviticus the *ʾāšām* sacrifice both cleanses and ransoms, it seems defensible to read these ideas from Leviticus into the sacrifice of the Servant (v. 10) as the way that God's wrath is

²² J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 385: "Yes, Israel had suffered temporal results for its sins, but that did not mean that it was automatically restored to fellowship with God. For that to happen, for Israel to be enabled to be the servants of God, atonement was necessary."

²³ M. J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 209. For instance, "sprinkle" (52:15); "bear" (53:6); "guilt offering" (53:10).

²⁴ The following summarises R. B. Chisholm Jr., "Forgiveness and Salvation in Isaiah 53," in *The Gospel According to Isaiah 53* (ed. D. L. Bock and M. Glaser; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 191-210 (199).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

dealt with. Of course the sacrifice of the Servant here is unique, which is expected given the sacrificial system was not designed to cover the kind of sin the people had committed.²⁶

Belousek contends that the Servant intercedes for the people by “standing in the breach,” as Moses did in the aftermath of the sin with the Golden Calf (Exod 32). Yet while Moses’ intercession mitigates God’s anger and punishment, it does not remove it completely.²⁷ God only relents from his earlier intention to destroy the nation (v. 14), he still punishes them—the Levites strap swords to their side and kill three thousand of the people (v. 28). Significantly, after this punishment Moses offers to substitute his own life as atonement for sin (32:30-32). Yahweh rejects Moses’ offer and declares he will punish the people for their sin, striking them with a plague (32:34-35). Moses’ intercession mitigates God’s punishment (he will not destroy the nation), it does not remove it—the people suffer. Indeed, the whole sacrificial system of Leviticus must be understood in the narrative flow of the Pentateuch as instituted by God to deal with his wrath at sin.²⁸ Furthermore, perhaps it is this instance in Exodus which provides the background for the Servant.²⁹ While Moses offered to substitute his own life as atonement for sin and was rejected, God will provide a Servant whose obedience to death will bring atonement.

Admittedly, there are aspects of Isa 53 which are difficult to interpret. Yet, when the theological framework of the OT is taken into account (which connects the exiles of Israel and Judah directly with God’s wrath and punishment for sin), and the context of Isa 53 is acknowledged (which looks to a solution to the problem of God’s wrath amongst other things), and the sacrificial language from Leviticus is fully appreciated (where the *ʿāšām* sacrifice is shown to include cleansing and ransom), then it becomes clear that the work of the Servant in dying to bear the sin of many is what finally brings atonement, deals with God’s wrath, and restores fellowship with God. Yet this is not the end-point in Isaiah’s vision. Yahweh’s salvation through the work of his Servant is a work of justice that not only brings about restoration for the nation, it also brings about a new community who are agents of God’s justice and righteousness in the world—people who have experienced Yahweh’s justice and so are to bring justice and righteousness to the nations as part of the transformation of all creation, for the display of his splendour (e.g., Isa 51:1-8; 55:13; 58:6-14; 60:21).³⁰

²⁶ Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 209.

²⁷ Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 212, uses the Golden Calf incident to argue that God’s wrath sometimes “is turned away by human actions, including prophetic or priestly intercession (Exod 32:7-14; Num 11:1-3; Num 14; Deut 9:15-21; Ps 106:32).”

²⁸ Cf. Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 49: “[Leviticus] contains the legislation that will make possible the enduring presence of Yahweh in the camp (Exodus 40) and nurture the covenant relationship established with Yahweh in Exodus 19–24.”

²⁹ Suggested by G. P. Hugenberger, “The Servant of the Lord in the ‘Servant Songs’ of Isaiah,” in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess and G. J. Wenham; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 105-140 (137). While Moses provides the background for the idea of a human substitute for the nation, I would contend that for Isaiah the Servant is a Davidic figure. Also G. V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* (NAC 15B; Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 448.

³⁰ On the relationship between Yahweh’s justice in the atonement and justice, righteousness, and peace among God’s people see A. Sloane, “Justice and the Atonement in the Book of Isaiah,” *Trinity Journal* 34 (2013): 3-16. E. A. Martens, “Yahweh, Justice, and Religious Pluralism in the Old Testament,” in *The Old Testament in the Life of God’s People: Essays in Honor of Elmer A. Martens* (ed. J. Isaak; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 126, notes how in the OT, “Justice has both a retributive and a compassionate edge.”