

**Jonathan C. Rutledge. *Forgiveness and Atonement: Christ's Restorative Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 2022. xiv + 216pp. \$180 (hbk), \$52.95 (pbk).**

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Forgiveness and atonement are perennially important topics—especially for Abrahamic religions like Christianity—and yet historically have received relatively little attention in analytic theology. Times have changed. Philosophers—secular and theistic—have written extensively about forgiveness over the last 25 years. Atonement has lagged somewhat, but is gaining more attention, especially with seminal works by luminaries such as Eleonore Stump, Richard Swinburne, and Oliver Crisp. Jonathan Rutledge's new book joins this growing chorus, and his voice harmonizes well, while adding some distinctive and compelling melodies. Contributing something of true value to the discussion of atonement is challenging not just because of the long and diverse history of theological thought on the matter, but also because treating the matter well requires skill in a several areas: moral philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and the methodology of each. To his great credit, Rutledge demonstrates a firm grasp of these diverse areas, building on them to construct a nuanced, philosophically and biblically compelling understanding of atonement. In this review, I'll first summarize Rutledge's overall argument, highlighting his most distinctive claims. Then I'll raise a few challenges for his account.

Rutledge's primary goal is to develop accounts of forgiveness and atonement and to demonstrate how they integrate. For both notions, he articulates a set of biblical and philosophical constraints that he uses to construct and defend his own accounts—typically by showing how they are superior to other views on the market. In chapters 2 and 3 he presents twelve biblical constraints (justified by reflection on various scriptural passages) and five philosophical desiderata (justified by reflection on our intuitions about forgiveness and what we want and don't want out of it) and then uses those constraints and desiderata to argue for what he calls *functional forgiveness*:  $S$  forgives  $T$  for some wrongdoing iff  $S$  no longer counts  $T$ 's wrongs/sins against  $T$  (78ff). To no longer count a moral wrong against  $T$  is to treat  $T$  as if he was excusable rather than morally blameworthy. What one must do to count  $T$  as excusable depends on who you are, how you were affected by the wrong, and the nature of the wrong. For some, forswearing resentment may be required. For others who had no resentment, a display of love and affection may be required. And implementing or endorsing punishment of  $T$  can be consistent with forgiving  $T$  if done with the intent of restoring or shaping  $T$ 's character in an appropriately positive way. Because of how “no longer counting sin against one” is multiply realizable, functional forgiveness is not subject to counterexamples facing other popular views, such as forswearing resentment and forgoing punishment views.

One of Rutledge's most distinctive theses is connected with biblical constraint 5, “Forgiveness can be an appropriate response to some nonmoral, but still normative, transgression” (41) which he claims is evident in Leviticus 5, which requires a sin-offering

for unintentional and previously unknown contact with an unclean thing. He thinks Israelites lack moral guilt for such unknown contact with the unclean, and yet stand in some sort of normatively bad relation to God in virtue of such contact which requires forgiveness. Functional forgiveness of such acts requires treating them as if they “had not been performed at all” (85). Indeed, Rutledge makes much of this constraint, as he understands Jesus’s atonement, in part, to be a sacrifice that enables humanity to overcome the normative (but not moral) unfittingness humanity possesses in virtue of having sinned against God. (More about this to come.)

Rutledge then turns to atonement by first presenting several dimensions of the problem of sin that he thinks the atonement addresses. At its root, the core problem of sin is that it stands in the way of union with God. Such disunion has many facets, including: (i) guilt of individuals for their sins against God and the consequences of those sins internally in the sinner and externally on others, (ii) human divisions, which we use to justify disunion with each other and such disunion prevents union with God who loves and cares for all people, and (iii) the guilt of humanity, a collective entity that has failed in the duties God has given humanity, as well as the sins of individuals failing in the responsibilities they have in virtue of being members of the group. Rutledge thus views the problem of sin quite broadly—not just in terms of sinful actions or in terms of dishonor done to God—and to include both individual and collective elements.

He then works towards his account of atonement in large part by critiquing penal substitution. First, he notes that penal substitution typically assumes retributivism about punishment—i.e. either that “deserved punishment is intrinsically good” or that “we have a moral obligation to punish deserving individuals because it is intrinsically good” (113). He then argues that in fact retributive punishment is hard to find in scripture. Rather, he argues, we find many passages that endorse punishment as a restorative measure—i.e. as a means to restore the sinner to a better state by transforming their awareness, character, and subsequent behavior in a morally positive way. Second, he argues that penal substitution is poorly motivated by scripture because one of the primary lenses scripture uses to understand atonement is sacrifice, and the Levitical sacrifices are not best understood as penal substitutes. Rutledge compellingly argues that William Lane Craig, author of a recent book-length defense of penal substitution, misinterprets the hand-leaning gestures used in sacrificial rituals to imply a transfer of guilt/sin. They almost assuredly do not imply this, with the one exception being the gesture the priest uses on the scapegoat during Yom Kippur. Notably, the scapegoat is *not* killed or sacrificed, but is driven out of the camp.

Using a set of three criteria for evaluating explanations, Rutledge argues that penal substitution scores low as an explanation of atonement. According to these criteria, an explanation of atonement is better to the extent that it (i) alleviates our own subjective befuddlement, (ii) fits better with scripture, and (iii) better balances theoretical virtues such as simplicity, explanatory scope, and power. He argues that although penal substitution possesses theoretical simplicity, it fits poorly with scripture. A better explanation would score equal to or higher than penal substitution across these three criteria. Rutledge suggests the theory he builds does exactly that.

Since sacrifice is the central conceptual framework used in the New Testament to discuss Jesus’s atoning work, Rutledge builds his theory on a nuanced discussion of Hebraic sacrifice. His theory has four main parts. First, Jesus is a high priest who offers from himself his own blood (which represents life) as an atoning sacrifice for humanity and its members who recognize him as their representative. The reason Jesus’s sacrifice is acceptable is that, through his entire life, he fulfills the duty of humanity to reflect God to both God and the

world. Second, his death is restorative: it inspires fuller devotion to God. In virtue of these first two components, Jesus's work fulfills and enacts restorative justice. Third, it is unfitting for humanity to dwell in God's presence in virtue of its sinfulness (this is a normatively unfitting matter beyond the moral offense humanity has committed towards God); Jesus's life and death as a human counter this unfittingness. Fourth, Jesus also functions as a Passover sacrifice; as the blood of the Passover lamb protects the Israelites and liberates them from death and Egypt, leading to the initiation of a covenant with God (at Sinai), so the blood of Jesus protects his followers from death and Rome, leading to the initiation of a new covenant (sealed at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit). Rutledge says that it makes sense for God to use Jesus's crucifixion as a kind of Passover sacrifice because, "God's decisions about what to do are sensitive to the needs and decisions of the people with whom he interacts, and as a result it is reasonable to think that God would choose a symbol and event at the very center of the Jewish experience to usher in the promised new covenant" (191).

There's much of value in Rutledge's book. His sensitivity to biblical texts and interaction with biblical scholarship, as a philosopher, is rivaled (in this area) only by Eleonore Stump. I agree that the best way to develop an account of atonement is by reflection on sacrifice in scripture and I think a compelling account should explain how Jesus deals with the collective sins of humanity (indeed, I have myself defended these claims in the pages of this journal in Thurow 2015 and 2021). However, I'll now raise a few challenges. That I'll spend more time on criticism than on praise, however, is no sign of my overall evaluation of the book (which is very positive). Rather, it's a sign of the sheer number of interesting claims Rutledge raises that are worth further engagement.

First, Rutledge's account of forgiveness turns on the ideas of treating people as if their action was excusable, or as if they hadn't done it at all. However, what's the difference between these states? Surely in neither case do I literally forget (or aim at forgetting) that *A* occurred. Say you did wrong action *A* but you didn't realize what you were doing (non-culpably) or some constellation of forces compelled you to do *A*, or made it almost impossible for you not to do *A* in the circumstances. I see all this. In this case, it seems like the explanation for your doing *A* isn't you, but the circumstances; you, as an agent—or, as the agent you are—is barely involved in the explanation. As a result, I won't hold *A* against you; I won't downgrade my assessment of your character by *A*; I won't resent you for *A*. I'll still acknowledge that *A* occurred. I may have to make a variety of different decisions because you did *A*. (For example, we're driving down the road and you exclaim "Oh crap, I left the back door unlocked! I just was so busy packing everything up that I forgot that." You are excusable. But I'm still going to turn the car around so we can lock the door.) Now suppose I forgive you for *A*. It's not clear what, of everything mentioned above, changes. It seems to me what we need is a list of the morally distinctive ways we react to culpably, morally wrong actions. If, when we forgive someone, we treat their action as if it were excusable, presumably that means we should at least seek to eliminate in ourselves those morally distinctive reactions. But then, what's left to eliminate when we treat an excusable action as if it hadn't occurred? Are there perhaps some permissible morally distinctive reactions to excusable wrong acts and it is those we need to eliminate if we treat someone as if *A* hadn't occurred? If so, what are they?

Second, although I find it somewhat plausible that we can forgive acts that are not morally wrong but that amount to some sort of normative transgression, it isn't clear to me that his account of how this sort of forgiveness features into the sacrificial system is quite right. Let's start with this, to my mind, plausible example of forgiveness of a non-moral

transgression: in competitive basketball it is understood that it is a transgression of good strategy to miss getting the ball to someone who is in position for an excellent shot. I fail to see my teammate who is wide open for a great shot (and the teammate is a good shooter), and I take a much worse shot; as a result, we lose the game. It makes sense for me to feel a sort of guilt/shame and to ask for my teammates' forgiveness, although clearly I have done nothing morally wrong. Now, let's turn to the purity system in Leviticus. People can become unclean for all sorts of reasons. In some cases, unlike with the basketball case, becoming unclean doesn't seem to carry with it any hint of a transgression for which one could be forgiven—for instance, having an article of clothing being made unclean because a dead gecko fell on it (Lev 11:32), or intentionally touching the carcass of a dead unclean creature (Lev 11:24). In these cases, Leviticus just straightforwardly reports what it takes to get clean (the passing of time, dunking something in water, etc.). So, if touching an unclean thing intentionally requires no sacrifice so long as you observe the purification process, why does touching an unclean thing unintentionally require sacrifice? I suggest it's because when you touch something unclean unintentionally (and unknowingly), you then go about your day as normal and spread your uncleanness around to others. And that's wrong. So, I think it's best to interpret these unintentional (and unknowing) transgressions as moral transgressions. There is independent reason to think that we can be morally responsible for some things we unintentionally and unknowingly do (see, e.g. Adams 1985 and Sher 2009). (Other ways of becoming unclean do require sacrifices of atonement alongside purity rituals; those require a different explanation.)

Lastly, I have a few comments on Rutledge's account of Jesus's atonement. He says that Jesus's blood takes care of the non-moral normative problem of being sinful. But how does it do so? He doesn't say. In addition, isn't the normative problem entirely a consequence of humanity's moral offenses against God? And so, if that problem is resolved by Jesus's restorative sacrifice, what further work needs to be done? He does say that there is the fact that we have sinned against God, which remains even after sin has been atoned for. But that fact can't be affected at all; it remains eternally true that we sinned against God. In short, I find it difficult to identify what nonmoral transgression remains to be rectified by Jesus's work.

Rutledge's account turns on Jesus's death being transformative for humanity, but he doesn't discuss at much length how it is transformative or whether it would be more transformative than other ways of influencing humanity. Given the death of the innocent son of God is intrinsically terrible, the restorative consequences of it better be considerably better than other means. But this is far from clear. We are inspired by many acts of heroism and God could send his spirit of grace in many ways. It seems to me Rutledge's account needs supplementation to adequately explain why Jesus's death is central for atonement.

I've only scratched the surface of Rutledge's rich book, which will reward careful readers. I heartily recommend it to all interested in understanding forgiveness and atonement.

## References

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