

Article

Closed Atonement and Open Forgiveness: Reconciliation and the Meaning of Jesus' Death

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that atonement and forgiveness embody fundamentally different logics of reconciliation—one a closed moral economy of compensation and equivalence and the other a relational and non-economic logic of restoration. The article begins with a paradox: following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E., rabbinic Judaism moved away from sacrificial atonement toward practices of repentance, prayer, and ethical repair, while Christianity increasingly centered divine reconciliation on the atoning death of Jesus. Deepening Ehrman's distinction between atonement and forgiveness, I explore the different logics of reconciliation they represent, arguing that Christianity chose atonement as a means of making sense of the divine necessity of Jesus' violent death. Given the theological tensions generated by the atonement paradigm, this article concludes with the suggestion that Jesus' death is better understood not as divinely planned but as a divinely accepted consequence of incarnation in a violent world.

Keywords: atonement; forgiveness; resurrection

1. Introduction

In this paper, I explain the historical emergence of atonement theology as a consequence of interpreting Jesus' death as necessary and show philosophically that atonement and forgiveness embody fundamentally different logics of reconciliation—one compensatory and closure-oriented and the other relational and non-economic. I combine historical reconstruction with conceptual analysis, examining how differing understandings of reconciliation developed and what theological implications follow from them. Like other authors (Abelard 2011; Finlan 2007; Nelson-Pallmeyer 2001), I propose theologically that Jesus' violent death should not be considered any part of God's plan but at most the expected consequence of the incarnation of divine light in a fallen world.

The article begins with a paradox. Following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E., rabbinic Judaism moved away from sacrificial atonement toward practices of repentance, prayer, and ethical repair; at the same time, Christianity increasingly centered divine reconciliation on the atoning death of Jesus.

Deepening the Ehrman's distinction between atonement and forgiveness, I argue that they embody fundamentally different logics of reconciliation. Atonement operates within a closed moral economy governed by equivalence, compensation, and necessity, whereas forgiveness represents a more personal mode of reconciliation grounded in restored relationships rather than settled accounts.

I further argue that the centrality of atonement in Christianity arose from interpreting Jesus' death in light of the resurrection, leading to a construal of that death as neces-



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sary for divine purpose. Once this necessity is assumed, sacrificial and compensatory interpretations follow naturally. However, this closure-oriented logic generates significant theological tension, including the portrayal of God as unable to simply forgive and tying reconciliation to participation in a more exclusionary salvific mechanism.

In contrast, I propose that we can better understand Jesus' violent death not as part of a divinely required plan of atonement but as a divinely anticipated consequence of incarnation accepted in divine love, with resurrection vindicating the life and love expressed in that death. Decoupling Jesus' death from a divinely required compensatory scheme permits a return to a more open paradigm of forgiveness that better conforms to the God Jesus' ministry revealed.

2. Ehrman on Jesus' Love Ethic and Forgiveness

Given Bart Ehrman's fame as a critic of Christianity, his latest book (Ehrman 2026) is quite a remarkable tribute to Jesus himself. Ehrman argues that Jesus' emphasis on love has been missed as an ethic and a revolutionary one at that. Something akin to what is often described as a feminist ethic of care (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984), Jesus' admonition to love differs only in its extremity. Whereas the canonical treatments of the care ethic emphasize concern for those in ongoing relations, Jesus enjoins care even for absolute strangers, including enemies.

As part of his treatment of Jesus' love ethic, Ehrman writes that Jesus taught forgiveness rather than atonement. Ehrman himself expects two modern reactions to that declaration. One is that what Ehrman reports is hardly new—everyone knows that Jesus taught forgiveness. The claim takes on a different significance, however, within historical-critical scholarship, which does not assume that everything attributed to Jesus in the Gospels is historically authentic. There is, nevertheless, broad agreement that the ethic of love and forgiveness attributed to Jesus reflects a central and historically grounded feature of his teaching (see, e.g., Meier 2009; Crossan 1991). Although Jesus' forgiveness is evident elsewhere as well, Mark 2 is especially useful for present purposes because it combines three elements central to the argument developed in this article: the immediate granting of forgiveness, the absence of ritual or sacrificial mediation, and the controversy such forgiveness provokes among Jesus' contemporaries. The passage, therefore, provides a particularly clear illustration of the contrast between direct forgiveness and priestly atonement.

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2: 1–5)

The second reaction expected from modern readers is that atonement and forgiveness are the same thing. Etymologically, "atonement" derives from "at-one-ment," denoting reconciliation. So, if one is forgiven, then two parties who were once estranged by some offense are no longer so. Their relationship has been put to right, and they are now conciliated. Ehrman, however, uses the word atonement to make an important distinction.

It may not come as a surprise that Jesus taught forgiveness, but the implications are startling. Jesus did not teach atonement. Jesus believed that God forgave sins. He did not demand a penalty, payment, or substitutionary sacrifice. If someone remorsefully confessed a sin (or more often multiple sins), repented, vowed to

do better, and really meant it, God forgave them. That was the end of the story. (Ehrman 2026, p. 130)

Apart from denying that Jesus taught atonement, what Ehrman claims may still seem unsurprising to modern readers. As Ehrman himself goes on to say, Jesus instructed his followers to forgive others in the same way that God does. This is, in fact, the ethical response enshrined in what has come to be called the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive those indebted to us." Modern readers, however, generally fail to put Jesus' ethic of forgiveness in its proper first-century context and therefore fail to realize both how revolutionary it was then and how discordant it is even today with some prominent Christian doctrine.

The distinction between atonement and forgiveness is essentially a contrast between a moral economy governed by exchange, balance, and equivalence and a logic of forgiveness that dispenses with such economic categories altogether. The tension between these two logics is missed because modern readers focus on a different aspect of the reaction of Jesus' contemporaries to the forgiveness he both announced and practiced. We see that reaction in the continuation of the Markan pericope:

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2: 6)

What modern Christian readers take away from such passages—and indeed are often instructed to take away—is that the primary issue was one of authority: Jesus' first-century compatriots just did not realize that Jesus was the son of God who did have the authority to forgive sins.

Authority might well have been part of the issue, but Ehrman identifies a deeper issue with Jesus' practice: the non-economic logic it represented. There are many historical currents found in the Bible that eventuated in the first-century Jewish understanding of atonement. That first-century understanding was based on a priestly moral economy of equivalence—that is, one in which cosmic disruption called for a proportionate, compensatory response—via formal ritual. According to this logic, mere repentance was not enough to set things right. Sin or transgression required a structured ritual response capable of restoring balance, mediated by priests, particularly in the temple at Jerusalem.

We see the vestiges of this moral economy even in the wording of the Lord's prayer. Although Matthew's version also speaks of trespasses, in both the Lukan and Matthew versions, the prayer speaks of debts, which are something owed and require if not literal payback then at least some kind of proportionate response.

The Lord's Prayer as a whole, however, reflects a different, non-economic logic. Jesus taught not only that God forgives sins in response to repentance but that this forgiveness is granted in a personal way, without ritual mediation but by release or cancelation of what is owed rather than repayment. From a priestly perspective, this aspect of Jesus' preaching challenged the status quo, particularly the Temple institution.

Jesus did not invent this unmediated, personal relationship with God. In this respect, he was instead reviving a current extending back to the early prophets that was embraced by the J and E streams of thought integrated into the Bible as we now have it. By the time of Jesus, however, these currents had been overshadowed by priestly-sacrificial forms associated with the Temple. We will now take a closer look at this historical dynamic.

3. The Social Complexity of Ancient Judaism

Sociologically speaking, neither Judaism nor Christianity is a single entity. It would be more accurate to speak of multiple Judaisms and multiple Christianities. The same

diversity evident today was present in the first century, where there were Essenes alongside Pharisees and Sadducees and prophetic movements such as that associated with John the Baptist.

This diversity was the product of a long and complex history marked by division, exile, and the preservation of multiple, sometimes competing, traditions. Cross-cutting these developments was a persistent tension between priestly–sacrificial forms of religious life and prophetic emphases of justice and mercy. Thus, as early as the eighth century B.C.E., Hosea proclaimed that God desires mercy rather than sacrifice, and Micah asked, “What does the Lord require of thee but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God?”

These diverse currents were eventually woven together in the composite text now known as the Bible. Although contested in some quarters, the *Documentary Hypothesis* associated with Julius Wellhausen remains a useful point of entry into understanding this complexity. On this account, the Pentateuch reflects the interweaving of several distinct strands—commonly labeled J, E, D, and P—each of which presents a more or less continuous narrative when read on its own.

Most important for present purposes is the contrast between earlier narrative and prophetic traditions (often associated with J and E) and the more formal, priestly perspective represented by P. Where J and E depict a more immediate and personal divine presence—God walking with Adam and Eve in the garden, bargaining with Abraham, and engaging humans through vivid narrative encounters—these scenes are absent from the P materials.

As Richard Elliott Friedman (1997) emphasizes, the priestly strand presents a more austere and transcendent image of God, placing particular emphasis on ritual mediation. Where the earlier traditions depict a more immediate and personal divine presence, the priestly materials consistently underscore the role of the priest and the sacrificial system as the proper channel through which human beings may relate to God. As Friedman puts it,

Over and over, P develops this point that the Aaronid priest at the sacrificial altar is the people’s proper channel to the deity. If you have sinned and want to be forgiven, the thing to do is bring a sacrifice to a priest at the Tabernacle...The point, apparently, is to develop the idea that forgiveness cannot be had just because one is sorry...God has established a set of rules by which one can acquire forgiveness, and the rules must be followed. (Friedman 1997, p. 176)

For the purposes of this article, this formulation is striking. It encapsulates precisely the concept of atonement that Ehrman contrasts with forgiveness. In the teaching and practice of Jesus, forgiveness, as Ehrman understands it, takes the form of a personal I–Thou relation that one party seeks as an expression of a change in heart—the *New Testament’s* term *μετάνοια*—and that the other grants out of love, without the need for further compensatory action.

By contrast, the priestly articulation of atonement de-emphasizes the immediacy of such personal encounters, instead placing the primary weight on formally prescribed ritual procedures. In this framework, sin disrupts the relationship between humans and God and calls for a structured response governed by established rules through which cosmic balance is restored. Thus, atonement is not simply a matter of repentance but of participation in a system of ritual actions. The logic, accordingly, is not one of God’s discretionary response but of rule-governed settling of accounts.

As Friedman (1997, p. 176) observes, P’s account is not merely a matter of narrative variation but of theological development: “The person who wrote P was not just changing details of stories. He was developing a concept of God.” It is a conception in which the

distance between the human and the divine is increased and in which reconciliation is governed less by an immediate personal encounter than by adherence to formal procedures.

By the time of Jesus, these priestly–sacrificial forms had come to structure the dominant institutional expression of Judaism centered on the temple. Against this background, the ethic of forgiveness attributed to Jesus can be understood as a retrieval and intensification of an earlier theme within the tradition—one that emphasized mercy, relationality, and the possibility of direct reconciliation with God. In this sense, Jesus’ teaching did not introduce an entirely new conception but rather reactivated a strand that had been overshadowed within the prevailing religious order. We will now turn to the consequences of this tension.

4. Judaism’s Transition from Sacrifice to Prayer, Study, and Kindness

Judaism’s Second Temple period is usually dated from circa 515 B.C.E. to 70 C.E. In 586 B.C.E., the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II sacked Judah and destroyed the temple. By 538 B.C.E., however, the Persians under Cyrus had overthrown the Babylonians and permitted exiled Jews to return and rebuild the temple.

The returning Jewish intelligentsia brought with them the text we now call the Torah or Pentateuch and promoted a renewed devotion to Yahweh centered on priestly sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. The Hebrew term for sacrifice, *korban* (קָרְבָּן), derives from a root, meaning “to draw near,” and sacrificial offerings were understood as a primary means by which humans could approach the holiness of God. This approach emphasized carefully prescribed ritual procedures and the mediating role of the priesthood in maintaining the relationship between God and the people.

Although by the first century, the temple and its Sadducean priesthood occupied a central place in Jewish religious life, it was not without rivals. The Essenes rejected the temple cult altogether, while the Pharisees advanced a more distributed and, in some respects, democratized vision of religious life. For them, connection with God was cultivated not only through temple sacrifice but through prayer, study of the Torah, and disciplined observance of its commandments.

Central to the Pharisaic project was the development of what they understood as an oral tradition given alongside the written Torah. Their guiding principle was to “build a fence around the law”—that is, to establish additional restrictions that would safeguard against inadvertent transgression. While Christian sources portray Jesus as disputing aspects of this tradition, its broader effect was to extend holiness into the practices of everyday life, independent of the temple cult.

The destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., followed by further upheavals in the early second century, could have marked the end of Judaism as a viable religious system. Instead, under the leadership of the rabbis, heirs to the Pharisaic tradition, Judaism underwent a profound transformation. Deprived of sacrificial worship, it reconstituted itself around practices that did not depend on the temple: prayer, Torah study, and ethical conduct.

This transformation is reflected in the *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*), compiled around 200 C.E., which preserves the oral teachings of the early rabbis. In this text, we find accounts of the pillars on which the world stands that make no reference to sacrifice. According to Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik, the world rests on Torah study, prayer, and acts of loving kindness; while according to Shimon ben Gamliel, on justice, truth, and peace. In both cases, the emphasis falls not on ritual offering but on ethical and relational practices.

Central to this reconfiguration is the concept of *teshuvah*, or “return,” through which reconciliation with God is understood not as the satisfaction of a deficit through sacrifice but as a process of repenting, changing one’s mind, and restoring one’s relationships. Al-

though rabbinic tradition retains the language of atonement (*kippur*), it now signifies a return to right relationships with God and others through repentance, prayer, and ethical repair.

In this way, from the destruction of the temple to the present, Judaism developed a form of religious life in which reconciliation is no longer grounded in a moral economy of sacrificial repayment but in practices of return, transformation, and relational restoration.

5. Christianity Recenters Atonement

As described above, with the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., rabbinic Judaism moved away from sacrificial atonement to practices of repentance, prayer, and ethical repair. It is thus a striking irony that, despite Jesus' emphasis on forgiveness without repayment, Christianity increasingly came to interpret the meaning of his life in terms of atoning sacrifice.

This development is especially pronounced within Evangelical Protestantism, which often advances a juridical understanding of Jesus' death in which divine justice demands punishment, while divine mercy provides a substitute (for contemporary statements, see, e.g., the [Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals 1996](#); or the [Southern Baptist Convention 2000](#)). Although Catholic theology resists some of the harsher implications of this view, it nonetheless, following Anselm of Canterbury, understands Christ's death as providing satisfaction for the offense of sin (see [Catholic Church 1997](#), para. 614–17). In both cases, different as they are in formulation, reconciliation is construed within a moral economy of imbalance and offset.

This paradigm has not gone uncontested within Christian thought. It was contested almost immediately by [Abelard \(2011\)](#) and in modern times most famously by [Girard \(1977\)](#) and the Girardians (e.g., [Schwager 2000](#); [Williams 1991](#)). Others have also criticized the atonement paradigm for reasons covered here (e.g., [Finlan 2007](#); [Nelson-Pallmeyer 2001](#)); however, the main concern of this article is how atonement, in one form or another, came to occupy so central a place within Christian theology.

A primary reason for the reassertion of atonement may lie in the interpretation of Jesus' death in light of the resurrection. Whatever the historicity of the resurrection itself, historically, the earliest Christian community experienced a decisive vindication of Jesus. That experience could strongly suggest that the events surrounding his death were not accidental but in some way instrumental to a larger divine purpose.

Once this assumption is made—that Jesus' violent death was a part of a divine plan—the following question naturally arises: what role did that death play? It is at this point that various interpretive frameworks emerge, each seeking to articulate why such a death would be necessary.

Some scholars, going back to [Albert Schweitzer \(2001\)](#), have argued that Jesus himself may have begun to interpret his death in apocalyptic terms. While such reconstructions remain debated, traditions such as the Last Supper—widely regarded as early and significant—have been considered to suggest that Jesus may have associated his impending death with the establishment of a new covenant (see, for example, [Burkholder 2017](#)).

An early framework within this interpretive space was what later came to be called *Christus Victor*, a term popularized by [Gustaf Aulén \(1931\)](#). According to this view, the world was held in bondage to Satanic powers in opposition to God, and Jesus' death and resurrection served to defeat or outmaneuver those powers.

For many, *Christus Victor* remains attractive to this day. [Lewis \(1952\)](#) famously favored it over more juridical accounts that portray God as requiring punishment or satisfaction. Yet in all its various forms, *Christus Victor* also continues to assume that Jesus' violent death was, in some sense, a necessary part of a divine plan. Moreover, its more traditional

formulations depend on a cosmological framework of personalized evil that many modern interpreters find difficult to sustain, even when as in Wright (2016) it is recast in more metaphorical terms.

Christianity decisively moved toward the atonement model in the eleventh century with Anselm of Canterbury's (1998) *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God Became Man*). Rejecting the idea that God owed anything to Satan, Anselm instead proposed that sin constituted an offense against God's honor, generating a debt that required satisfaction. Because God's honor is infinite, so is the debt, requiring an offering of infinite value. Ultimately, only the death of God's own son could restore balance.

Subsequently, Martin Luther and John Calvin reframed Anselm's argument by shifting the focus from divine honor to divine justice (see Melancthon 2000; Westminster Assembly 2025). The underlying logic, however, remained the same: reconciliation requires a proportionate response to wrongdoing, and where the offense is infinite, so too must be the satisfaction or punishment that redresses it.

Although the Catholic Church also accepts other accounts of Jesus' salvatory action, it retains the logic of satisfaction, while Evangelical Protestantism emphasizes penal substitution. Either way, atonement remains central to much of the Christian understanding of Jesus' life and death. What unites these otherwise different accounts is the shared assumption that Jesus' death was not merely contingent but necessary to the realization of divine purpose.

6. Atonement vs. Forgiveness

We return to where we began, now with a closer look at atonement and forgiveness. They differ fundamentally in structure. Atonement operates through a closed moral economy of equivalence and compensation, whereas forgiveness interrupts that economy through the restoration of relationship without compensatory exchange.

Atonement begins with a deficit that must be addressed by some proportionate compensatory response. With the appropriate response, the deficit is settled and the account definitively closed. In *Christus Victor*, the deficit is resolved by a ransom paid to the Satanic forces of evil binding humankind. Anselm reinterpreted the deficit as an affront to God's honor, while the Protestant reformers—Luther and Calvin—recast it as a legal debt owed to divine justice. What unites these otherwise different perspectives is an economic framework of balance, accounting, and regulated exchange.

Forgiveness, by contrast, is not conceived in economic terms. It does not require any exchange of equivalents nor any satisfaction of a deficit. Rather than balancing accounts, it suspends them, restoring relationship without requiring that the wrong be compensated. Rather than rule-governed procedures, forgiveness operates through a direct and personal I–Thou relationship between the penitent and the offended.

The theological concerns associated with atonement arise from construing reconciliation within a closed moral economy in which deficits require determinate and compensatory resolution. Once such closure is assumed, forgiveness without satisfaction appears impossible, and reconciliation becomes dependent upon participation in the mechanism through which closure is achieved.

From this perspective, the atonement paradigm appears difficult to reconcile with the ministry of Jesus as presented in the Gospel traditions. Throughout that ministry, Jesus repeatedly forgave sins directly and immediately, without requiring compensatory action or ritual repayment. Further, this forgiveness is not portrayed as pending some future sacrificial event. At most, it required trust in the possibility of forgiveness itself and in the gracious God whom Jesus proclaimed.

In extending forgiveness, Jesus does not present himself as acting independently of God but as expressing what God himself offers. The ethical implication is that human beings are likewise called to forgive one another in imitation of the divine example. That, as we saw, is the central logic of the Lord's Prayer: to "Forgive us our debts," or "trespasses," "as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Here is where tension emerges. Human beings are enjoined to forgive others without demanding recompense, but atonement theories imply that God himself cannot forgive in this way because divine honor or justice require satisfaction. The result is a conception of God that appears more juridically constrained than we ourselves are and more remote than the personal "Abba" of Jesus' ministry.

Defenders of atonement frequently respond that God's ways are not our ways. This may be true, but the atonement paradigm appears to portray God as incapable of the highest moral ideal we are enjoined to follow, contradicting Jesus' own teaching that we are to follow this ideal precisely because it emulates God's own exemplary behavior, i.e., forgiveness without conditions attached.

A related concern involves the exclusivist implications that frequently accompany atonement theology. If reconciliation with God depends upon participation in a specific salvific mechanism centered on Jesus' death, then access to reconciliation becomes tied to either doctrinal belief, sacramental participation, or inclusion within a particular religious community. Historically, this dynamic was first expressed through the claim that salvation was available only within the Church, while later Protestant forms frequently relocated the condition to committed faith in the doctrine of justification by faith.

Unavoidably raised, therefore, are questions concerning those who, for historical, cultural, or epistemic reasons, are outside the salvific mechanism. Instead of a God who loves even his enemies, we end up with one who appears to distribute reconciliation selectively according to participation in a particular salvific mechanism. Finally, the atonement framework also encourages a preoccupation with personal salvation over the pursuit of universal love that builds the kingdom Jesus sought to inaugurate.

How, then, did Christianity come to center reconciliation so heavily upon atonement? Arguably, the answer lies in the perceived necessity of Jesus' death. Many scholars, beginning with [Albert Schweitzer \(2001\)](#), have argued that Jesus himself may have come to regard his death as necessary. Many, like [Sanders \(1985\)](#), [Crossan \(1991\)](#), [Fredriksen \(1999\)](#), and [Wright \(2016\)](#), even think that Jesus went to Jerusalem specifically to provoke it. If we attribute some historicity to the Last Supper and what Jesus may have said there, Jesus himself may have suggested its necessity (see [Burkholder 2017](#)). Certainly, the gospel passion stories depict Jesus almost performatively acting out the *Suffering Servant* passages of the prophet Isaiah. It is thus possible that the ultimate priestly sacrifice encoded in the *Epistle to the Hebrews* reflects something of Jesus' own view.

Still, it was likely the experience of resurrection that confirmed the necessity of Jesus' death for his disciples. Whatever Jesus may have thought and said, it appears that Jesus' disciples were nevertheless confounded and demoralized by Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. If so, then it was not his death itself that changed the disciples' minds.

The resurrection, or at least the experience of it, served to vindicate Jesus and definitively to deprive his death of its apparent finality. Resurrection derives significance precisely because it reverses an apparent defeat.

Indeed, it is even likely that the death had to be as egregious as it was for the resurrection to hold such strong meaning. It is hard to imagine such power attaching to a resurrection following a perfectly natural, peaceful death.

If no terrible death, no resurrection, it is not hard to imagine that this seemingly catastrophic death was necessary and in fact part of God's plan. If so, to what purpose?

We return to the first century and the dominance within the Judaism of that period of temple sacrifice. Not limited to Jews, sacrifice was the major means for ancient people to communicate with their deities. As such, it was not always about atonement. Where sin was an issue, however, atonement was the natural purpose of sacrifice. If Jesus' death were somehow divinely necessary, it would make sense to tie it to atonement, which, as we have seen, packages a necessary response to a cosmic deficit in a secure, tidy way.

Atonement comes, however, at a theological cost. The challenge, then, is whether Christianity can preserve the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection without construing reconciliation through a compensatory logic of closure.

One possible solution was suggested long ago by Schweitzer (2023). Ehrman (2014) observes that among the many ways early Christianity might have understood Jesus, it quickly identified him with the pre-existent wisdom or logos of God. In this case, as Schweitzer suggests, the significance of Jesus' violent death need not depend upon its having been planned by God as a compensatory sacrifice. It is sufficient that such a death was just divinely anticipated as an inevitable consequence of incarnation accepted with divine love.

Understood in this way, Jesus' death remains profoundly significant without functioning as an act of compensatory atonement. The death is neither meaningless nor accidental; it represents the willing acceptance of the consequences of incarnational solidarity with a violent and resistant world. The resurrection, in turn, vindicates not a completed transaction but the transcendence of death by the light Jesus represented.

This understanding also helps explain why belief in the resurrection became compelling. As Wright (2016) argues, resurrection claims do not become persuasive in a vacuum. What rendered the proclamation believable to Jesus' followers was inseparable from the character of the life that preceded it. Jesus' ministry of extraordinary forgiveness, table fellowship, healing, and radical love made conceivable the conviction that such a life could not be overcome by death.

Decoupling Jesus' death from a divinely required plan of atonement frees Christian theology from the closed logic of compensatory necessity. Reconciliation no longer depends upon satisfying a cosmic deficit through equivalent exchange. Instead, Christianity can return to the more open and relational paradigm of forgiveness that Jesus himself practiced and proclaimed—and that rabbinic Judaism, in its own way, also came increasingly to emphasize after the destruction of the temple.

Such a shift also transforms the meaning of participation in Jesus' mission. As Schweitzer (2023) himself suggested, participation need not consist primarily in assent to a doctrinal theory of salvation but in the work of the kingdom Jesus inaugurated: love, justice, reconciliation, and repair. In this respect, the forgiveness paradigm encourages a more expansive and less exclusionary understanding of religious life, one centered less on boundary and mechanism than on the shared task Jewish thought calls *Tikkun ha Olam*, healing a fractured world.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, I have attempted to deepen the distinction between atonement and forgiveness to which Ehrman first draws attention by arguing that they embody fundamentally different logics of reconciliation. We began with the paradoxical historical development whereby rabbinic Judaism progressively moved from sacrificial atonement to forgiveness, while Christianity, despite Jesus' own teaching, increasingly interpreted reconciliation through atonement.

I argue that Christianity's movement in this direction stemmed from early attempts to interpret the meaning of the resurrection experience, which seemed to imply that, if the

resurrection were God's doing, then Jesus' violent death was likewise part of God's plan. To understand the divine purpose Jesus' death served, the atonement logic of first-century temple worship provided a natural interpretive framework.

Finally, I explain that the atonement framework does not do justice to and even contradicts the nature of God as revealed and preached in Jesus' own ministry. To the extent that the atonement paradigm follows from construing Jesus' death as part of a divine plan, this counsels surrendering this construal in favor of a divine acceptance of the violent death as an inevitable consequence of divine incarnation. On such construal, Jesus' death remains meaningful without the theological troubles the atonement paradigm brings.

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