

EXCERPT



The Cross in Context *Reconsidering Biblical Metaphors for Atonement*

November 22, 2022 | \$25, 272 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0028-1

How has our understanding of cultural and historical context shaped our views on atonement? Combining missiology, theology, and biblical studies, theologian Jackson W. draws from the entire biblical canon to help Christians interpret Scripture more faithfully and form a richer, more robust theology of atonement.

Reconciling Atonement Theories

The law of Moses placed numerous dietary restrictions on ancient Israelites. Shrimp, pork, and various birds were forbidden. By and large, the early church did not follow these regulations. Christians today enjoy a more expansive menu.

When it comes to doctrine, however, we find an ironic reversal, especially with respect to atonement. Not only are many Christians content with a small menu of “atonement dishes,” they argue over which dish is most important or inspired by God. Historically, theologians offer a select group of atonement theories from which to choose. By contrast, the Bible never presents such systematic formulations. Biblical writers instead act as master chefs who offer a succulent buffet of truth even while using only a few basic ingredients.

Envisage a society with only a few meal choices: fried chicken, pasta, scrambled eggs, chicken and dumplings. In this imaginary culture, factions arise that claim the superiority of one dish over another. Debates rage about the relative virtue of eggs over fried chicken. By analogy, these dishes are like the popular atonement theories we’ve inherited from history. They nourish us. We are thankful for them. But restricting ourselves to these few options looks increasingly unnecessary, even harmful, the more we look at the situation.

Someone familiar with cooking will notice an oversight on the part of our imagined society. Each food item above can be made with just a few ingredients. There is no reason that people must restrict themselves to those specific dishes. With only flour, chicken, eggs, milk, and potatoes, we have an array of culinary options. For example, one could also make chicken soup, waffles, breakfast skillet, potato soup, grilled chicken, and a basic omelet.

In this analogy, the ingredients represent a small set of biblical metaphors that can be rearranged to form numerous doctrinal theories. Nevertheless, we tend to start with a limited set of atonement theories and *overlook the more fundamental elements that are common to each theory*. When discussing the Bible’s teaching on atonement, we “lose at the starting line.” The Bible provides a collection of theological ingredients, but we often don’t start here. Instead, we settle for a narrow set of doctrinal dishes. Although nourishing, they do not represent the biblical medley available to us.

To put it another way, we need something like a “Taco Bell approach” to the doctrine of atonement. This popular, Tex-Mex inspired, fast-food restaurant urges people to “think outside the bun” and serves an impressive variety of dishes. The vast menu has tacos, nachos, burritos, and quesadillas, yet also includes original creations like the Naked Chicken Chalupa. Why do I say “impressive”? When you look at its menu, Taco Bell uses a relatively small set of ingredients and, still, it always boasts an assortment of options for customers. With respect to doctrine, we need to think outside the box of convenient categories. By delving deep into the Bible, we find a handful of motifs that combine to form a richer, more robust theology of atonement.

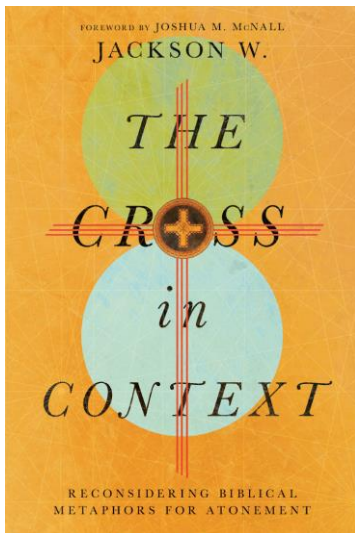
Our context largely influences how we combine biblical themes and texts. Church tradition, personal experiences, education, and culture shape our questions and assumptions. They affect what we see *and* what we don’t. In church history, particular theories of atonement arose to explain Christ’s death in fresh ways. Such formulations are helpful, but they are not our starting point. *Merely comparing atonement theories is a recipe for failure*. We need to look back at both history and the Bible in order to savor the fullness of Christ’s atoning work.



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To what extent do common theories of atonement reflect biblical logic?

Theology is not equivalent to biblical truth. Hopefully, these two have much overlap. However, we cannot assume that our theology—our understanding of Scripture—wholly captures the Bible’s teaching.

We all have limited perspectives. We live in particular cultures and historical periods. No one studies the Bible in a vacuum. Our cultural, historical, and personal contexts influence how we interpret the Bible. In this sense, all theology is contextualized.

“Context” is not just culture; it also includes history. Different historical ages are different contexts. How does context influence our theology? Specifically, how do our assumptions and history shape the way we understand the atonement?

Different historical periods and subcultures have varying perspectives on Christ’s death. Sometimes these views complement one another. At other times, they contradict. In every case, people’s historical context influences how they explain atonement.

As I write this, the world wrestles with Covid-19. Before the pandemic, if my daughter developed a small cough and fever, we’d have given her some medication, kept an eye on her, and thought little about it. But in the context of the Covid-19 virus, we now fixate on her symptoms with new seriousness. The only thing that’s changed is the context.

Of course, every generation has a limited vantage point. We all have blind spots. This is as true for theology as it is with medicine. Just a hundred years ago, doctors recommended drinking radium to cure arthritis and impotence. We need people from other generations to give us an alternative perspective. They challenge our modern assumptions and priorities. By studying history, we dialogue with historical thinkers. Historical views of atonement inevitably affect our interpretations. Even seemingly novel perspectives resemble older views in some way.

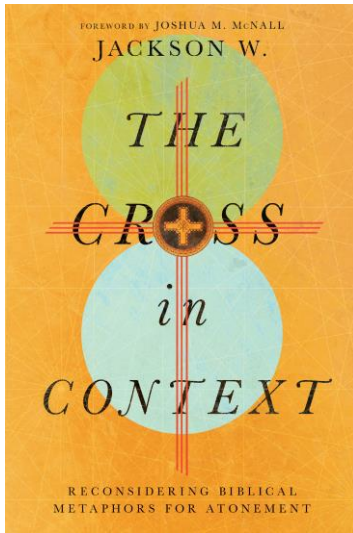
—Adapted from chapter one, “Reconciling Atonement Theories”



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Q & A



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Jackson W. (pseudonym; PhD, Southeastern Baptist) has served as the theologian in residence at Global Training Network. He previously lived and worked in East Asia for almost two decades, including teaching theology and missiology at a seminary for Chinese pastors. He serves on the Asian/Asian-American Theology steering committee of the Evangelical Theological Society and is the author of *Saving God's Face*, *One Gospel for All Nations*, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*, and *Seeking God's Face*.

A Refreshing and Nuanced Look at the Atonement

What led to your interest in and now sharing about Christ's atonement?

Jackson W.: Few things divide the church as does the doctrine of Christ's atonement, whose death brings about the reconciliation of all creation. While his sacrifice reconciles us to God, it seems to split the church into factions. This observation is as ironic as it is tragic. One reason for this is that various atonement theories actually complicate our view of atonement, foster disunity in the church, and make it more difficult to communicate Christ's message and ministry. This book brings theological conversations about atonement back to the Bible's explicit categories and away from the theories that populate works of systematic theology.

What is your main thesis in *The Cross in Context*?

Jackson: This book proposes a way to reconcile popular theories of atonement that sometimes seem to be in conflict or at least in tension. To do so, we'll consider the influence of context on our understanding of the atonement. The biblical narrative uses several metaphors that help us find the intersection of the biblical text with contemporary contexts. The biblical narrative has an inherent logic that gets lost amid endless theory-laden debates. Rather than approach the topic from the perspective of systematic theology (as is customary), this book employs the insights and methods of biblical scholars.

Who did you have in mind as you were writing this book?

Jackson: Pastors, theologians, and missionaries who seek to contextualize (understand, communicate, and apply) Christ's work of atonement.

What do you hope your book contributes to the study of atonement?

Jackson:

- Add clarity and cohesion amid the clutter of atonement theories.
- Assist readers to contextualize the Bible's teaching concerning the atonement.



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