
PSA Series – What is “Atonement” in the Bible? What does the underlying Hebrew word mean?

Description

In [the previous article in this PSA series](#), we looked at PSA’s #2 pillar, which says that God must punish all sin. As part of that, we looked at the Greek and Hebrew words translated forgiveness/pardon, but there’s one important verse on the topic that we didn’t cover because it springboards into the topic of this article: “What is atonement?”

If you’re interested in PSA, please start with [the series intro](#). **If you only want to know what atonement is, you don’t need to read the previous articles in this series, but they will add context.**

Fortunately, atonement isn’t a complex concept and you’ve almost certainly done it in your life before, though you likely didn’t recognize it as “atonement”. While this is often a battleground in the debate, both those who support PSA and those who oppose it will likely agree with this article’s conclusion on what atonement is. *(I’ve heard PSA guys like Mike Winger teach it as it relates to Christ’s work on the cross, though using different terminology.)*

What is Atonement?

We’ll start with the following verse to springboard into a discussion of atonement. It would’ve been covered in the previous article, but defining “atonement” would’ve made it way too long and distracted from the main topic.

Isaiah 6:7

He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your **iniquity** is **taken away** and your sin is **forgiven**.”

So, there are three important words in the verse, two of which mean basically exactly what they’re translated as. The word translated “taken away” is perfectly translated, so no need to look at it further. *(It’s “?????” ([sur](#)), look at Thayer’s definition #3 if you’re interested.)*

The word translated “iniquity” is “?????” ([avon](#)), and we went into great detail about its definition in my article [How To Do a Word Study of a Greek or Hebrew Word in the Bible](#). You can look at that article for details, but to summarize: it literally means “crookedness”, almost always in the sense of moral crookedness, i.e. iniquity. It can also mean the “guilt for crookedness/iniquity”, and “guilt” here means a judicial sense of being guilty of a sin/crime, not an emotional sense of feeling guilty. Lastly, it can mean the “consequences of crookedness/iniquity”.

The most obvious understanding of those three primary meanings in Isaiah 6:7 is “guilt for crookedness/iniquity” which is “taken away”. (*and again, “guilt” here is in a judicial sense of being guilty of a sin/crime, not an emotional sense.*)

However, the word translated “forgiven” will take some time to unpack.

That’s mostly because it can be a huge battleground in the PSA debate. Why? Because it’s a different word than the others that we looked at in the previous article. It’s the word “???????” ([kaphar](#)), while the Hebrew word translated forgiveness/pardon that we looked at in the previous article is “???????” ([salach](#)). And while “salach” was easy, “kaphar” will take more time to understand fully.

Why?

Because this is the word most commonly translated “atonement”, and/or “make atonement”.

We’ll look at what it means now.

Lexical definition of “kaphar” (atonement)

Because this is such an important word to understand fully, I’ve copy/pasted **all** of the short definitions from the lexicon. (*The full definitions are longer because they cover individual uses, and thus would take up a lot of space. If you want to look at them, you can do so [here](#).*) I grabbed **all** of them, just to be complete so we don’t miss anything.

Please pay special attention to the [first line](#), and also [definitions #1 and #2.b.](#), since they are the most applicable.

Here’s what Thayer’s Greek lexicon says about “kaphar”:

denominative **cover over (figurative)**, pacify, make propitiation; —

Pi`el Perfect ????????

1 **cover over**, pacify, propitiate; ??????????? ??????? ?????????????? Genesis 32:21 **let me cover his face by the present (so that he does not see the offence, i.e. pacify, him;**

2 **cover over**, atone for sin, without sacrifice :

a. man as subject, ?????????? ?????????? 2 Samuel 21:3, with what shall I **cover over**

b. **with God as subject**, with accusative of person, **cover**, i.e. **treat as covered**, view propitiously,

3 **cover over**, atone for sin and persons by legal rites

a. with accusative of sacred places

b. usually c. ??? (l) of things, e.g. of the altar to which the blood of the sin-offering was applied

c. the need of the atonement is expressed by ???: **others understand ??? as = away from

d. with ??? instrumental ??????? Leviticus 5:16; Leviticus 19:22; Numbers 5:8; with a trespass-offering

3 (a); RV by reason of the life

e. with ??????? person, on behalf of

Pu`al Perfect ??????? Exodus 29:33; Isaiah 28:18 (but read ???????, — ? l. ???, — so ??). Hu We Che SS and others see BrMP 209); Imperfect ??????? Numbers 35:33 3t.; 3 feminine singular ?????????? Isaiah 6:7 be **covered over**, atoned for.

1 **apart from the ritual**, ?????? ?????? **Isaiah 6:7 thy sin shall be covered over** (“” ?????? ??????????; by the touch of the live coal from the altar); ?????????????????? ?????????? ??????? **Isaiah 22:14 surely this iniquity shall not be covered over**; with ??? instrumental ?????? ?????? ??? **Isaiah 27:9 by this shall the iniquity of Jacob be covered over** (“” ?????? ?????? namely by the destruction of idolatrous objects); ?????????? ?????? ?????? Proverbs 16:6 **by mercy and fidelity iniquity is covered over**.

2 with ?? for whom, ?????? ?? ?????? ??? Numbers 35:33 for the land atonement cannot be made, in view of the blood shed in it, except by the blood of the shedder of blood; in the ritual

Hithpa`el Imperfect ?????????????? 1 Samuel 3:14; with ??? instrumental ?????????????? ??????? ?????????????? ?????????????? ?????????????? ?????? the iniquity of the house of Eli shall not be **covered** by peace offering or minchah

Niph`al Perfect ?????????????? ??????? ??????? Deuteronomy 21:8 and the blood shall be **covered** for them.

II. [????????] verb denominative (from II. ???????) — Perfect2masculine singular ?????????????????? ?????????????? **Genesis 6:14 and thou shalt pitch it with pitch** (P).

III. ??? (? of following).

Now, we'll revisit the three most important lines for understanding this word, starting with the overall

summary at the beginning:

denominative **cover over (figurative)**, pacify, make propitiation;

Notice that the primary meaning is to “cover over”, and the parentheses indicate that this is usually (*but not always*) meant in a figurative sense. For example, here’s the first place that “kaphar” is used in the Bible:

Genesis 6:14 (*God speaking to Noah*)

“Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood; you shall make the ark with rooms, and shall **cover (kaphar)** it inside and out with pitch.

Obviously this is a literal sense, but you see the idea. **Kaphar means “to cover” something, either in a literal or metaphorical sense.** Now that we’ve seen a literal sense, we’ll look at the most applicable figurative sense from the lexicon:

1 **cover over**, pacify, propitiate; ?????????? ?????? ?????????????? Genesis 32:21 **let me cover his face by the present (so that he does not see the offence, i.e. pacify, him;**

b. **with God as subject**, with accusative of person, **cover, i.e. treat as covered**, view propitiously,

Notice how well definition 1 meshes with definition 2.b.

When God is the subject — and He almost always is — “kaphar” means to “treat as covered”, with the idea that God purposely doesn’t “see” the offense. Obviously He knows about it, but He “treats the offense as covered/hidden”, as if He didn’t see it. Here is some more reinforcement of that definition from the Ancient Hebrew Research Center:

The Hebrew word kaphar means “to cover over,” but is often translated as atonement. The word atonement is an abstract word and **in order to understand the true Hebrew meaning of a word we must look to the concrete meaning. If an offense has been made, the one that has been offended can act as though the offense is covered over and unseen.** We express this idea through the word of forgiveness. **Atonement is an outward action that covers over the error.**

Original Source: <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/definition/atonement.htm>

Note: *the original website seems to have become defunct since I grabbed that definition, so you can look at the “Wayback Machine”, an archive of the internet: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220728184859/https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/definition/atonement.htm>*

Again, this reinforces our working definition.

In English, we express an almost identical idea to “kaphar” with the word “overlook”.

Our word “overlook” doesn’t have the nuance of “covering over”, but it does mean to act as if something isn’t seen, even though it is. Notice the similarity:

- “kaphar” (*atonement*) means something is “covered over” to pretend it’s unseen even though it was seen.
- In English, we “overlook” something to pretend it’s unseen, even though it was seen.

As a slight spoiler for which we’ll see evidence in a minute, here are the two primary uses of “kaphar” (*atonement*):

1. When a wrongdoer does something to convince the person he wronged (*usually God*) to “overlook” (*treat as “covered over”/unseen*) the wrongdoing.
2. When a wronged person (*usually God*) “overlooks” (*treats as “covered over”/unseen*) a wrongdoing done to him.

We’ll examine the evidence for those two lower down, but for now, **this word is so important to our topic that we won’t only rely on lexicons.**

We’ll also look at how it’s used.

How “kaphar” (*atonement*) is used in the Bible

We’ll look at every place that “kaphar” is used where it’s not translated “atonement” or “atone”, etc. That’s because we’re looking to see what the word means overall, and we want to make sure that our working definitions fit with all the places it’s used.

So, here’s a list of every place “kaphar” is used where it’s not translated “atonement”:

Genesis 6:14 “Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood; you shall make the ark with rooms, and shall **cover** it inside and out with pitch.

Genesis 32:20 and you shall say, ‘Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.’” For he said, “I will **appease** him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.”

Numbers 35:33 ‘So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land and no **expiation** can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. (*Note: most translations have “atonement” here.*)

Deuteronomy 21:8 ‘**Forgive** Your people Israel whom You have redeemed, O LORD, and do not place the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of Your people Israel.’ And the bloodguiltiness shall be **forgiven** them. (*it’s used twice in this verse*)

2 Chronicles 30:18 For a multitude of the people, many from Ephraim and Manasseh, *and* Issachar and Zebulun, had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover contrary to *what* was written. For Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, “May the good LORD **pardon**

Psalm 65:3 Iniquities prevail against me; As for our transgressions, You **forgive** them.

Psalm 78:38 But He, being compassionate, **forgave** their iniquity and did not destroy them; And often He restrained His anger And did not arouse all His wrath.

Psalm 79:9 Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; And deliver us and **forgive** our sins for Your name’s sake.

Proverbs 16:14 The fury of a king is like messengers of death, But a wise man will **appease** it.

Isaiah 6:7 He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is **forgiven**.”

Isaiah 22:14 But the LORD of hosts revealed Himself to me, “Surely this iniquity shall not be **forgiven** you Until you die,” says the Lord GOD of hosts.

Isaiah 27:9 Therefore through this Jacob’s iniquity will be **forgiven**; And this will be the full price of the pardoning of his sin: When he makes all the altar stones like pulverized chalk stones; When Asherim and incense altars will not stand.

Isaiah 28:18 “Your covenant with death will be **anceled**, And your pact with Sheol will not stand; When the overwhelming scourge passes through, Then you become its trampling place.

Jeremiah 18:23 Yet You, O LORD, know All their deadly designs against me; Do not **forgive** their iniquity Or blot out their sin from Your sight. But may they be overthrown before You; Deal with them in the time of Your anger!

Ezekiel 16:6 so that you may remember and be ashamed and never open your mouth anymore because of your humiliation, when I have **forgiven** you for all that you have done,” the Lord GOD declares.

So, 9 of the 15 places where it’s not translated “atonement”, it’s translated “forgive”, and once it’s translated “pardon”. **However, “atonement” (kaphar) and forgiveness/pardon are not the same thing.** We know this because there things that atonement is unable to do that forgiveness/pardon can do.

The difference between atonement (*kaphar*) and forgiveness/pardon

There are things for which no “atonement” (*kaphar*, “covering over”/overlooking) can be made. For example: murder.

Numbers 35:30 (NKJV)

30 Whoever kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses; but one witness is not *sufficient* testimony against a person for the death *penalty*.

31 Moreover you shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer who *is* guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death.

32 And you shall take no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the priest.

33 So you shall not pollute the land where you *are*; **for blood defiles the land, and no atonement (*kaphar*) can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it.**

So, more literally:

“no **covering over** (*overlooking*) can be made for the land”

If we stay with the definition we’ve been holding to, this simply means that in the case of murder, God won’t “overlook” the murder (*pretend he didn’t see it*). That is, for murder specifically, God is unwilling to treat the murder as if He didn’t see it, likely because the crime is so serious. **So atonement (*kaphar*) cannot be made for murder, but God has forgiven/pardoned murderers before.**

That reinforces a crucial point:

Atonement (*kaphar*) and forgiveness/pardon are not the same thing.

They are different things.

Yes they can be closely related, but they are different.

As evidence for that, look at the verse above to see that there’s no “atonement” (*kaphar*) for murder, but then look at the following passage about David to see that God pardoned/forgave him for murder.

After David had Uriah murdered, God gave him the death penalty. However David repented and God gave him a partial pardon.

2 Samuel 12:9-13

9 ‘Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight? **You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword**

, have taken his wife to be your wife, and **have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon.**

10 ‘Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’

11 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give *them* to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight.

12 ‘Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun.’”

13 **Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.”**

So again, a pardon/forgiveness can do what atonement (*kaphar*) could not do: absolve David from the sin of murder. Both “kaphar” (*atonement*) and forgiveness/pardon refer to the relationship between a wronged person and the wrongdoer, but the difference is who does the action and what action is performed.

It’s crucial to understand one thing though: **Atonement has two understandings, depending on who is doing it.**

- **If the wrongdoer is “making atonement (kaphar)**, it refers to an action taken by the wrongdoer (*sometimes with help, as in a sin offering*) to “cover over” the wrongdoing so the one who was wronged will “overlook” the wrong.
- **If the wronged person is “making atonement (kaphar)**, then it means that he “covers over” — i.e. “overlooks” — the offense and pretends not to see it. (*which is similar to forgiveness, but still not the same.*)

For example, if you crash into my car, I might be quite angry with you. But then if you come to me and apologize, that act of an apology could be a “kaphar”; it’s something that “covers over” your wrongdoing and might convince me to overlook the wrongdoing. Perhaps another example would be if after crashing into my car, you offered to either pay for the repairs or replace the car. (*Ignoring insurance for the sake of the example*)

Notice that “atonement” (kaphar) usually comes from the wrongdoer, not the wronged person.

Obviously not always, but usually. The overwhelming vast majority of the time, “kaphar” comes from the wrongdoer to the wronged person in order to convince the wronged person to overlook the wrong.

Here’s an example of that from the Bible:

Genesis 32:19-20

19 Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, "After this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him;

20 and you shall say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.'" For he said, "I will **appease** (*kaphar*) him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me."

"Kaphar" is translated "appease" here because the idea is that the gift/present will cause Esau to overlook Jacob's past misdeeds, and therefore accept him. **It's a way to "appease" and thus restore the broken relationship.** Again, the most common usage of "kaphar" is from the wrongdoer to the wronged person (*usually God*) to convince the wronged person to overlook the wrong.

Thus, every time you apologized for something you did wrong, you've tried to "make atonement" (*kaphar*). Every time you've offered to compensate or replace another person's belongings that you damaged, you've tried to "make atonement" (*kaphar*). We also see this with public figures who who get caught in some misdeed; they often come out with apology videos, or donate large amounts of money to charity, or promise to do better in the future to "kaphar" (*make atonement*) for the misdeed and to convince people to overlook their misdeed.

Forgiveness/pardon is different.

***By definition*, forgiveness/pardon must always come from the wronged person and be given to the wrongdoer.**

It simply can't happen another way.

Going back to the car example, once you've "made atonement" (*kaphar*) by apologizing and/or offering to right the wrong you did, I might forgive you. However, you can't make me forgive you because forgiveness must come from the wronged person, not the wrongdoer. You can make me more inclined to forgive by "kaphar" (*making atonement*), but you can't actually make me forgive you.

But there's another, more important difference between "kaphar" and forgiveness/pardon. **When we talk about God overlooking (*kaphar*) a sin/crime, the fact that He overlooked (*kaphar*) it doesn't mean that He can't or won't bring charges later.** The same is true whenever something is (*intentionally*) "overlooked" (*kaphar*). **Someone can choose to stop overlooking it.** By contrast, once a legal pardon has been given, the crime in question can't be charged again.

Here's the most important difference between "kaphar" and forgiveness/pardon:

- An overlooked (*kaphar*) sin/crime can still be charged later.
- A pardoned/forgiven sin/crime cannot be charged again later.

Here's an example to help explain the difference:

When the wrongdoer "makes atonement" (*kaphar*): A man commits a crime, (*stealing for example*) is caught, and then sincerely apologizes to his victims and pays to replace

everything he stole and then some without being asked. The victims are no longer crying out for justice, and so the District Attorney “overlooks” the indictment and decides not to press charges at that time. **Notice: the wrongdoer could still be charged later.**

When the wronged person “makes atonement”: A man commits a crime and is caught. The cops and the District Attorney say that if the man “makes atonement” (*kaphar*) by informing on his criminal friends, then they will “overlook” the man’s crime and not press charges at that time. **Notice: the wrongdoer could still be charged later.** (and yes, I know this usually involves deals so he won’t be charged, but please ignore those for this example)

When the wronged person forgives/pardons: A man commits a crime, (*stealing for example*) is caught, charged, tried, convicted, and sentenced to prison time. However, the governor of the State hears that he sincerely apologized to his victims and paid to replace everything he stole and then some without being asked. Then the governor issues him a pardon for his crime of stealing. **Notice: he cannot be charged later for that crime.** The man’s guilt was “taken away” by the pardon, and thus he cannot further be punished for that crime. (Notice too that the “*kaphar*” of the thief apologizing and paying to replace what he stole prompted the pardon. Again, “*kaphar*” and forgiveness/pardon are often closely related, but they are different things and aren’t always related.)

Again, a District Attorney might choose to “overlook” (*kaphar*) a crime, and then not press charges against the criminal for that crime. However, that District Attorney could bring charges later if he wanted to. That’s “atonement” (*kaphar/overlooking*). By contrast, a pardon/forgiveness is given to a convicted criminal and he can’t be charged for that crime again.

This understanding makes perfect sense wherever the word “kaphar” is used, as long as you don’t forget the aspect of reconciliation. (*Which we’ll talk about more in a minute.*)

Again, “atonement” (*kaphar*) — regardless of the source — “covers over” our sin so that God “overlooks” it — like in the District Attorney in the example above — but He can deal with it later if He chooses to.

Conversely, a pardon/forgiveness **permanently** deals with our sin **after** we have been convicted.

As you’ll see in the next article (*on sin offerings and the “Day of Atonement”*) that whenever God decreed that the Israelites had to do something to “kaphar” (*make atonement*), He was effectively saying “*If you do ____, I will overlook your sin for now.*” If you look back at the example of Jacob sending a present out to Esau, it fits perfectly. Jacob wanted Esau to “overlook” (*kaphar*) Jacob’s past misdeeds in order to reconcile them.

This idea of “reconciling” is almost certainly the reason the word “atonement” was chosen to translate “kaphar” in the first place, which we’ll look at more in the next two sections.

Why “kaphar” is sometimes translated forgiveness/pardon

When the person who was wronged does “kaphar”, he “covers over”/overlooks the wrong and thus pretends that it didn’t happen. **This definition is why it’s sometimes translated “forgiveness”, because something can be (*intentionally*) “overlooked” indefinitely.**

This is where the line between forgiveness/pardon and atonement (*kaphar*) can get murky, but there still is a line. If the wronged person decides to overlook a sin/crime indefinitely, the effect is very *similar to* forgiveness/pardon, but again, *it’s not the same*. (*Remember that atonement can’t be made for murder, but murder can be forgiven/pardoned; they’re different.*) A permanent “overlooking” (*kaphar*) *sounds* very similar to forgiveness/pardon — which is why it’s translated that way sometimes — but isn’t *actually* a pardon/forgiveness.

They also both have an element of reconciliation intrinsic to their meanings, as you saw above in the verse about Jacob and Esau. They both restore a broken relationship, but via different means.

This element of reconciliation is — in my own personal opinion — part of the reason why God used the word so often. It contains a highly beneficial combination of “overlooking” (*covering over to treat as unseen*) and also contains the idea of reconciling.

When we look at the sin offerings and Day of Atonement (“*kaphar*”/overlooking) in the next article, you’ll see both of these elements. However, just because God overlooked the sin/crime so His people could be reconciled to Him doesn’t mean that the sin/crime was finally or fully dealt with. **It’s simply not in the nature of “kaphar” (*overlooking/reconciliation*) to solve our sin problem because it’s a mere “overlooking” that allows the reconciliation, not a true solution to our sin problem.** (*The true solution required Jesus.*)

However, “kaphar” did allow a measure of reconciliation.

We will mostly focus on the “overlooking” (*covering over to treat as unseen*) aspect in this article, but please don’t forget the reconciliation aspect because it’s important.

Remember, God is both our Judge and our Father. The “overlooking” is a more legal aspect to “kaphar” while the reconciliation is a more personal relationship aspect to it.

Next, we’ll look at how “atonement” was used when it first entered Bible translation in the 1500s.

The usage of “atonement” when it first entered Bible translation

The following quote is a concise explanation, with an example to follow. Tyndale might not have created the word, but he “coined” it in the sense of bringing it into common religious use.

Atonement. Leviticus 16 contains a description of the most solemn of the festivals of the law of Moses called *Yom Kippur* in Hebrew.[19] Tyndale coined three new English words in conjunction with this festival: **atonement**, *scapegoat*, and *mercy seat*. The Hebrew root behind *Kippur* is *K-P-R*, which has the sense of “to cover up” and occurs in contexts where it means “to appease, make amends, or reconcile.”[20] Leviticus 16 contains many occurrences of this word in a verbal form describing the rituals of reconciliation between God and man. The Septuagint translates this word meaning “reconciliation” with various Greek words including *exilasmus* and *hilasterion*, which both mean “propitiation.” The Vulgate uses *expiationum*—which has the sense of satisfying or appeasing.

Tyndale went in search of the perfect word that could be used as a noun or a verb and would describe the process by which man would offer sacrifices and offerings in order to cover over, appease, make amends, or reconcile with God. The word he coined was *atonement*. While many have stated that Tyndale invented this word, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists several variations and combinations of “at” and “one,” such as “to one,” “at one,” or “at once,” “one ment” (used by Wycliffe), and “atonement,” that were used in Tyndale’s time. But Tyndale saw that this term was a very good match for the theological context of the relationship between God and man and put the verb *atone* and the noun *atonement* into his passages in the Old and New Testaments.

Tyndale used *atonement* in his 1526 New Testament in 2 Corinthians 5:18: “preaching of the atonement” (KJV “ministry of reconciliation”). While this term has become a common theological term in religious discussions, the King James translators continued to use this word in terms of the Old Testament usage but only actually used the term *atonement* in Romans 5:11. They preferred to use the words *reconciliation* and *propitiation* in the New Testament. Nevertheless, this term has become the common designation throughout Christianity for the saving acts of Jesus Christ on behalf of the children of men and the possibility of reconciliation and **“at-one-ment”** offered through His sacrifice.

[Source.](#)

Notice the highlighted phrasing in the final sentence of the quote.

It’s not “a-tone-ment”.

It’s “at-one-ment”.

This idea of “at-one-ment” means that the people involved are “at one”, or reconciled to each other. That was the original intent behind choosing “atonement” to translate “kaphar”, because “atonement” meant to be reconciled, or “at one”. This can be confirmed by looking at its usage around the time it was first used in Bible translation. **The earliest use I can find for “atonement” is in “*The History of King Richard III*” by Thomas More.**

When you read the quote, it will make perfect sense if you read “atonement” as “at-one-ment”. (*assuming you don't struggle with old English*)

For where as now every Lord loved other, and none other thing studied upon, but about the Coronation and honour of the King: if the Lords of her kindred should assemble in the King's name much people, they should give the Lords atwixt whom and them had been sometime debate, to fear and suspect, lest they should gather this people, not for the King's safeguard whom no man impugned, but for their destruction, having more regard to their old variance, than their new atonement.

[Source](#), page 11.

The lords used to hate each other, but now “*every Lord loved [every] other*“, and this is described as their “new atonement”. **Again, if you read that as “at-one-ment”, it makes perfect sense.**

Again, this is contemporary with the first use in Bible translation:

More's History of King Richard III, written in Latin and in English between about **1513 and 1518**, is the first masterpiece of English historiography.

[Source](#).

Notice the date it was written: 1513-1518. This is notable because Tyndale began his translation work soon after.

Because of the influence of printing and a demand for Scriptures in the vernacular, **William Tyndale began working on a New Testament translation directly from the Greek in 1523.** After church authorities in England prevented him from translating the Bible there, he went to Germany in 1524, receiving financial support from wealthy London merchants. **His New Testament translation was completed in July 1525 and printed at Cologne.**

When the New Testament was finished, Tyndale began work on the Old Testament. **The Pentateuch was issued in Marburg in 1530**, each of the five books being separately published and circulated.

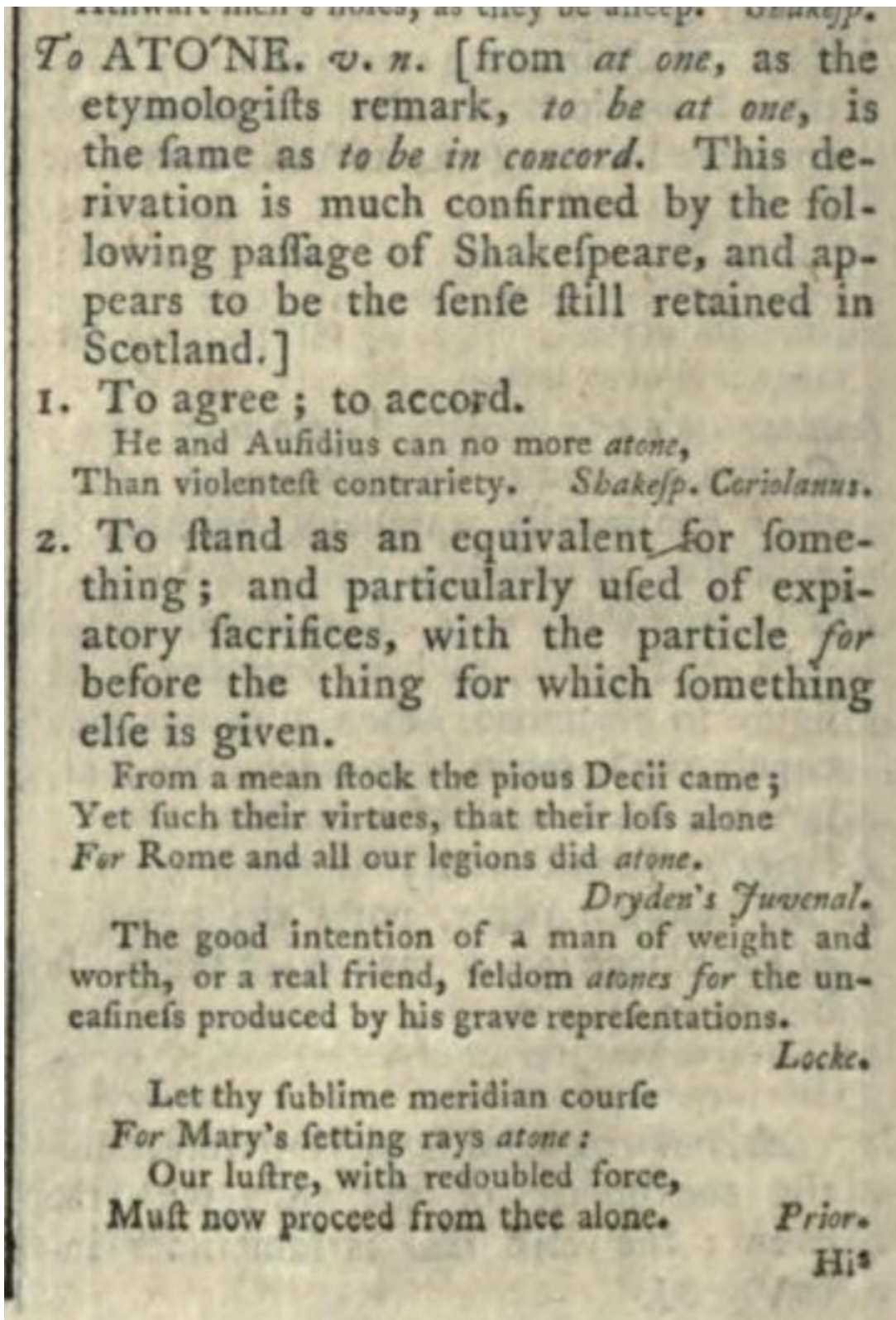
[Source](#).

So we have a source very close in time to Tyndale who used “at-one-ment” to mean “to be at one”.

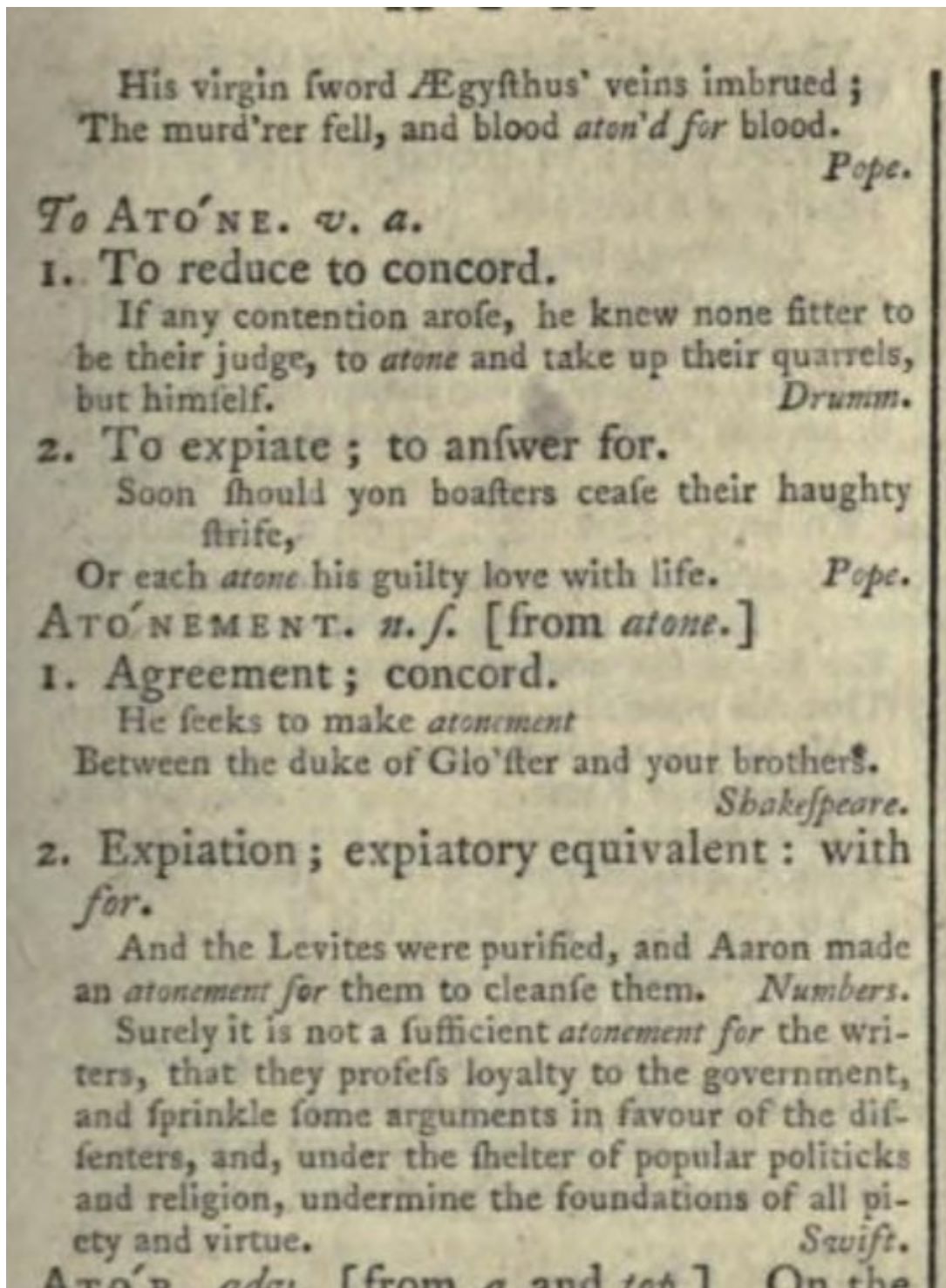
And there are other sources as well.

If you look at older dictionaries, you find this idea too. The following pictures are from Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language (1785), which is the earliest English dictionary I could find with an entry. You can read it online [here](#) if you like, which is where I pulled the following pictures.

Note: the letter “s” looks a lot like an “f” in this font; I have no idea why.



And it continues on the next page.



Now, you probably noticed the phrase “to expiate”, and the word “expiation” in the definition. Since that’s also an important word in the PSA school, we’ll take a look at that as well.

EXPIABLE. *adj.* [from *expiate.*] Capable to be expiated, or atoned.

TO EXPIATE *v. a.* [*expio*, Latin.]

1. To annul the guilt of a crime by subsequent acts of piety; to atone for.

Strong and able petty felons, in true penitence, implore permission to *expiate* their crimes by their assiduous labours in so innocent and so hopeful a work.

Bacon's Phis. Remains.

The odium which some men's rigour or remissness had contracted upon my government, I resolved to *expiate* by regulations.

King Charles.

For the cure of this disease an humble, serious, hearty repentance is the only physick; not to *expiate* the guilt of it, but to qualify us to partake of the benefit of Christ's atonement.

Ray.

2. To avert the threats of prodigies.

3. To make reparation for.

The treasurer obliged himself to *expiate* the injury, to procure some declaration to that purpose, under his majesty's sign manual.

Clarendon.

The more they have hitherto embezzled their parts, the more they endeavour to *expiate* that unthriftness by a more careful managery for the future.

Government of the Tongue.

EXPIATION. *n. s.* [from *expiate.*]

1. The act of expiating or atoning for any crime.

2. The means by which we atone for crimes; atonement.

Law can discover sin, but not remove,
Save by those shadowy *expiations* weak,
The blood of bulls and goats,

Milton.

The former part of this poem is but a due *expiation* for my not serving my king and country in it.

Dryden.

Let a man's innocence be what it will, let his virtues rise to the highest pitch of perfection, there will be still in him so many secret sins, so many human frailties, so many offences of ignorance

I need to copy/paste the main definition to draw attention to it because it's very important:

EXPIATE

1. **To annul the guilt of a crime by subsequent acts of piety; to atone for.**

Notice that the meaning of “expiate” in the 1700s is quite similar to the Hebrew word “kaphar”. Not identical, but quite close.

However, that definition of “expiate” is entirely different from what the PSA school claims. For example, Easton’s Bible Dictionary defines it thusly:

Expiation

Guilt is said to be expiated when it is visited with punishment falling on a substitute.

Expiation is made for our sins when they are punished not in ourselves but in another who consents to stand in our room. It is that by which reconciliation is effected. Sin is thus said to be “covered” by vicarious satisfaction.

[Source.](#)

That’s directly contrary to the definition in the 1700s, but I digress. We’ll come back to this and likely talk a lot more about an upcoming article on “propitiation”, and what that means. **However, remember that when it originally entered biblical usage, “expiation” meant “To annul the guilt of a crime by subsequent acts of piety”, but did not mean “To annul the guilt of a crime by punishing a substitute”.**

Anyway...

Returning to “atonement” from the definitions above.

As you can see from reading the definitions above, atonement primarily means to make “at one” people who aren’t “at one”; **essentially, it means to reconcile.** It also has a secondary meaning of to expiate — through pious acts, not punishment — or annul the guilt for something. I’m sure you see how “kaphar” has a very similar range of meanings, though it primarily means to expiate (*again, through pious acts, not punishment*) and secondarily means reconciliation. The primary and secondary meanings are flipped, but otherwise, they are very similar.

Thus, it makes perfect sense why “kaphar” was translated “atonement” according to the definition up to the 1700s.

Later of course, the meaning changed rather a lot, and that’s a shame.

Next, we’ll examine how this relates to Jesus’s salvific work with the understanding we’ve gathered so far.

Jesus, “kaphar”, and forgiveness/pardon

To begin, we'll look at a few verses in Hebrews chapter 10. I recommend reading all of Hebrews chapters 8-10 for context, but a few verses at the beginning of 10 will suffice for now.

Hebrews 10:1-4

- 1 For **the Law**, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, **can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.**
- 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?
- 3 But **in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year.**
- 4 For it is **impossible** for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Remember, the law says that the animal can “make atonement” for Israel’s sin — which means that God will “overlook” (*kaphar*) it *for the time being* so they could be reconciled to Him — but Hebrews says that “it is impossible” for an animal to take away our sins.

So an animal can “kaphar” (convince to overlook), but cannot forgive/pardon/“take away” sins that we’ve committed. That’s the difference between an animal sacrifice and Jesus’s sacrifice; the difference between “kaphar” (overlooking) and forgiveness/pardon.

Romans chapter 3 talks about this.

Romans 3:23-25

- 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
- 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;
- 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because **in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;**
- 26 for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The word translated “passed over” is “???????” ([paresis](#)).

Definition:

a letting go

Usage: overlooking, suspension, remission of punishment for.

And from HELPS Word Studies:

3929 páresis(from 3844 /pará, “from close-beside” and hi?mi, “let go”) – properly, to release something closely felt, i.e. an “overlooking, suspension, remission’ of punishment for” (Souter).

Those definitions sound exactly like “kaphar” (“cover over”), especially the usage of “overlooking”.

Here’s the crucial point:

Animal sacrifices “covered over” our sins so that God “overlooked” them, which brought a measure of reconciliation. However, they couldn’t bring forgiveness/pardon or “take away” our sin. Thus, our sin problem remained, it was merely “overlooked” for a time.

Conversely:

Jesus didn’t merely “cover over” our sin problem so that it was merely “overlooked”; He brought true forgiveness/pardon and “took away” our sin problem, thus bringing full reconciliation.

I think PSA advocates will entirely agree with that. I’ve certainly heard PSA guys like Mike Winger explain Romans 3 in a similar way, though using different terminology. It seems entirely consistent with the Bible and thus is a legitimate understanding of Scripture, regardless of which view of Jesus’s salvific work you take. (*It actually works with every view that I’m aware of, which is nice.*)

Sidebar entitled: “Oh, the irony”: Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA) isn’t actually about atonement (*kaphar*) because Jesus didn’t “atone” (*kaphar*) on the cross, He forgave/pardoned/“took away” our sin. If Jesus had merely “atoned” (*kaphar*), then God would still be simply “overlooking” our sin problem, and it wouldn’t actually be dealt with. Thus, PSA is terribly named. “Oh, the irony.”

(Though, it’s likely that whoever coined the term “Penal Substitutionary Atonement” was referring to the “reconciliation” aspect of the definition. That makes it less bad, but still not good because it implies that Jesus merely caused our sins to be overlooked at the cross, not dealt with them fully.)

Conclusion

The word “atonement” (*kaphar*) means to “cover over” so that a person who was wronged will pretend that he doesn’t see the offense. We express the same idea in English with the word “overlook”. When the wrongdoer engages in “kaphar”, he does something to convince the wronged person to “overlook” the wrong. When the wronged person engages in “kaphar”, he decides to “overlook” the wrong.

The difference between “kaphar” (*atonement*) and forgiveness/pardon is that the former merely covers/hides the wrongdoing, while forgiveness/pardon means that the wrongdoer has been “convicted” and found guilty, but won’t be punished for the wrong. A wrongdoing that has been overlooked (*kaphar*) could be brought up at a later time, while forgiveness/pardon means that it’s permanently dealt with and can’t be brought up again. **Overlooking (*kaphar*) brings a measure of reconciliation, but not a full one.**

Jesus solved our sin problem, not merely “atoned” (*kaphar*) so that God would overlook it. He brought us forgiveness/pardon/“took away” our sins, which animal sacrifices couldn’t do. That brought full reconciliation.

The next article in this series will discuss the “Day of Overlooking/Reconciliation” (*kaphar/atonement*) and the Old Testament sin offerings. Doing so will also help us answer an unresolved question from [the previous article](#) concerning sin offerings. (*For those who haven’t read the previous article, the question was if the sin offerings in the Old Testament were an example of forgiveness/pardon being given after punishment.*)

The next article was originally part of this one, but I split it up because it got so long. Fortunately, that means it’s nearly ready to publish, needing only final editing. Hopefully, I’ll have time to finish the editing soon.