

**Review of J. Alec Motyer, “Stricken for the Transgressions of my People’: The Atoning Work of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.**

**BY David Allen.**

*Originally posted at <http://drdavidlallen.com/> These reviews can also be found, with slight revisions, in David Allen, The Extent of the Atonement: A Historical and Critical Review, B&H Academic (2016), at pages 657-763.*

In Chapter 10, Motyer treats us to a solid exegesis of Isaiah 53. I always try to read Motyer on any text of Scripture which he writes. He is an excellent exegete.

Here Motyer avoids the clutter of quotations from other commentators, and stays directly with his exegesis of the text. It’s smooth sailing until we come to page 252:

(1) A universal task is going to be accomplished successfully (52:13).

(2) It will be achieved by suffering, and the suffering and its result will exactly match each other. As the structure of Isaiah 52:14 displays: . . . . The verse equates those who are appalled by the Servant’s suffering with those who become the beneficiaries of his shed blood, and thus the verse introduces us to the concept of substitutionary atonement.

There is a world of difference between stating the text affirms substitutionary atonement, which it emphatically does, and stating the text affirms the suffering and its result will exactly match each other, which it emphatically does not. Motyer has smuggled in the notion of equivalency between intent, extent, and application – something which the text itself does not affirm.

Problems emerge again on page 261 when Motyer states, “Since universalism is ruled out by Isaiah’s insistence on ‘the many’ . . . 53:4-6 commits the unprejudiced interpreter to an effective particularistic understanding of the atonement.”

Of course universalism is ruled out, here and throughout the Bible. Motyer here and in the next few pages fails to note that Isaiah’s use of “many” does not linguistically necessitate the conclusion that 1) atonement was only made for some, and/or 2) atonement was not made for all.

Another problem is the use of “unprejudiced.” This is nothing more than an ad hominem attack on those who disagree with Motyer’s interpretation and conclusion. In light of 53:6, others

could just as easily say that any “unprejudiced” interpreter would be committed to a universal extent in the sin-bearing of the Suffering Servant.

But the problems continue. Motyer states: “The theological implications are profound: the atonement itself, and not something outside of the atonement, is the cause for any conversion” (261).

This fails to consider further NT revelation on the role of the HS in conversion; fails to recognize that the atonement saves no one until it is applied; fails to reckon with numerous reformed theologians (Charles Hodge comes to mind) who disagree; and fails to properly distinguish between the extent and the application of the atonement.

Even Paul clearly indicates in Eph. 2:1-3 that the believing elect he is addressing were under the wrath of God until they believed. Notice the many times Paul makes the point that believers were once enemies, but now through faith we have peace, are justified, experience no condemnation, etc. Such language necessitates an intervening condition. Justification at the cross is a false doctrine.

Motyer builds on the “many” statements in Isaiah 53 to argue definite atonement (264-65). The many nations for whom the atonement is made does not, however, commit us to universalism (“all without exception”), ... so that even when “many” seems to imply “all,” it still effectively applies only on the individual level – to some in contrast to all (265).

Of course that is the case because the application is not coextensive with the extent. This does not, however, confirm definite atonement or negate universal atonement.

Motyer errs in this statement: “‘Many,’ then, has a certain specificity to it, while also retaining its inherent numerousness; it refers to those for whom the Servant made atonement and to whom he applies that same atonement (cf. Rev. 7:9)” (265). Here again Motyer assumes what he is trying to prove, namely, that the extent of the atonement is coextensive with the application. The text does not state this. Furthermore, this is a misinterpretation of the Revelation passage, which is so often quoted in favor of definite atonement, but which actually has nothing to do with the extent of the atonement, only with the beneficiaries of the atonement.

As an aside, though Motyer does not quote others to support his exegetical conclusions, it is interesting that Calvin himself clearly affirms that the “many” of Isaiah 53:6 means “all without exception.”<sup>1</sup> More importantly, Paul uses “many” and “all” interchangeably in Romans 5, as the Greek text clearly shows.

Motyer’s chapter is an example of generally good exegesis, but then reading one’s theology into the text and drawing the wrong conclusions. Isaiah 53:6 is the heart of the passage,

---

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah*, 66, 70, 78–79.

and it clearly asserts a parallelism between all those who have gone astray and the fact that “the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

There is indeed an equivalency in this passage, but not as Motyer suggests. The equivalency is not between the sufferings of Christ and the elect only. The equivalency is clearly stated in 53:6 and is between those who have gone astray (all) and those (all) for whom the Servant suffers.

This is even more clearly brought out by the inclusio structure which Isaiah employs, beginning and ending the verse with the same Hebrew word *kullanu*, translated “all.” The issue is not the meaning of “the many.” The key is the meaning and use of “all” and that at the very linguistic heart of the five stanza song, 53:6. Definite atonement simply can’t get past the “all” of Isaiah 53:6.