

Review of Michael Haykin, “We Trust in the Saving Blood: Definite Atonement in the Ancient Church,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective – Part 3.*

BY David Allen.

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Michael Haykin, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality and Director of the Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, contributes a chapter on definite atonement in the ancient church. Though perhaps Haykin is known more as a scholar of Baptist history, he did write a dissertation on the Pneumatomachian controversy in the 4th century of the Patristic era. Historically, the normal point of departure to examine the question of the extent of the atonement would be the Patristic era.

Before launching into a discussion of seven key Church Fathers, Haykin finds it necessary to point out that the question of the extent of the atonement was not a controversial issue in the early church. Hence, “what can be gleaned about this doctrine in this era is mostly from implied comments rather than direct assertion” (60). This is an important point to make, because in actual fact, there is no overt assertion of definite atonement by any of the Patristics, though there are several clear statements concerning universal atonement.

Haykin surveys the following seven leading Church Fathers: Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Jerome, and briefly Augustine and Prosper of Aquitaine.

Clement of Rome.

Haykin accepts Gill’s “contextual equation” of “the elect of God” with “us” in 1 Clement 49.5 as “entirely justifiable” (61). But this is no proof Clement held to definite atonement in the sense that Christ died for the sins of the elect only. In fact, Haykin even points us to 1 Clement 7:4, where the blood of Christ “made available/won the grace of repentance for the whole world.” This would appear to be a clear statement affirming a universal sin-bearing on the part of Christ for the world. Haykin concludes his brief analysis of Clement by noting the passages examined “provide glimpses of soteriological perspectives, one of which seems to be clearly in line with NT emphases on Christ’s death being for the elect” (62). This is a far cry from asserting that Clement himself held to definite atonement.

Justin Martyr.

Here Haykin references perhaps a dozen statements by Justin, none of which speaks specifically to the question of the extent of the atonement. Haykin concluded that “all of these references imply specificity in the extent of the atonement.” Two things should be noted: 1) Haykin’s use of “imply” is his admission that Justin Martyr does not overtly teach definite atonement; and 2) actually, contextually, all these references do is imply specificity with respect to the application of the atonement to those who believe, not to a limitation in sin-bearing in the atonement for the elect only. Haykin then rightly points to a key text that indicates Christ died for the sins of all: Christ suffered “in the stead of the human race” (Dialogue with Trypho 95.2) (64). But Haykin concludes that these texts in Justin “do not provide an unambiguous statement regarding the extent of the atonement.” The attempt to juxtapose Justin’s clear statement about a universal atonement with his other statements and then conclude “they may well be interpreted as affirming a particularity in the extent of the atonement” (65) amounts to special pleading. There is particularity in the application of the atonement as all the Church Fathers affirm. But there is no statement limiting the atonement in its extent to the elect alone.

Hilary of Poitiers.

Haykin quotes Hilary in On Psalm 129.9, including the statement that Christ “came to remove the sins of the world” (67). Noting that Hilary frequently uses the first-person plural with regard to the atonement in his commentary on the Psalms, Haykin concludes “the concept of particular redemption is not outside the purview of Hilary’s thought” (68). But this misses the point that when any author, biblical or otherwise, speaks of the atonement in the context of addressing believers or with reference to believers, the use of first-person plurals would be unavoidable and would in no way serve to indicate that the author was speaking only of those people. To assume such would be to invoke the negative inference fallacy. That Christ’s death “has a special import for believers” (68), is not denied by anyone, but certainly does not imply definite atonement.

Ambrose.

Here Haykin noted that “close analysis of Ambrose’s statements about the cross reveals the seeds of certain textual explanations . . . that would later be employed in defending definite atonement in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century” (70). But again, this is no argument that Ambrose held to definite atonement. Haykin, dependent upon Gill and Gill’s translation of the original Latin, assumes Ambrose employs the “double jeopardy” argument which was used by John Owen to support his case for definite atonement. But contextually, two things become evident.

First, it is clear Ambrose affirms universal atonement in the following quotation immediately preceding the citation by Haykin:

Scripture said, too, in a marvelous fashion, “He has delivered him for us all,” to show that God so loves all men that He delivered His most beloved Son for each one. For men, therefore, He has given the gift that is above all gifts; is it possible that He has not given all things in that gift? (“Jacob and the Happy Life,” 1.6.25, in *Seven Exegetical Works*, Michael McHugh, trans. [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1972], 135-136).

Here Haykin’s dependence upon Gill for his point is problematic. Nothing in Ambrose would lead one to conclude he affirms definite atonement.

Second, Ambrose is not using the double jeopardy argument (a person being punished twice for the same crime) as Owen used it. As Shedd rightly noted, double jeopardy as Owen tried to use it is inadmissible because no one person is being punished twice (*Dogmatic Theology* 2:443). In the section Haykin quotes from Ambrose, Ambrose makes it clear that he is addressing believers (note the second person “you”). He has already stated that Christ died for the sins of all men. Now he is addressing the benefits of that salvation to those who believe. Ambrose is rightly distinguishing between the extent of the atonement and the application of the atonement, which Owen and Haykin fail to do. Ambrose’s meaning is believers can no longer be held liable to future punishment.

Jerome.

Haykin cites Jerome’s *Commentary on Matthew* (3.20) with reference to Matthew 20:28. He admits there is ambiguity in Jerome’s statement but says the words “hint that Jesus saw Christ’s death to be for a particular group of people—believers” (70). Again, here the issue is whether Jerome has in mind the intent, extent, or application of the atonement. Nothing in this quotation affirms definite atonement nor precludes universal atonement.

Augustine.

Haykin never says Augustine taught definite atonement, but states some of his comments “imply” it (71). He appeals to Augustine’s statements on John 10:26; 14:2; and 1 John 2:2. Many Calvinists themselves who affirm an unlimited atonement interpret 1 John 2:2 to refer only to the

church.¹ Furthermore, Haykin fails to note the fact that it is clear Augustine thought that Jesus atoned for the sins of Judas!²

Since this part of the review is already lengthy, I'll not take the space to recount the many times Augustine affirms unlimited atonement through the use of such phrases as Christ died "for the sins of the whole world," how Christ's death is the "ransom for the whole world," and how Christ "paid the price for the whole world." In his "Exposition on the Book of the Psalms," (The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, 8:471-72), Augustine speaks of the "world" in relation to the atonement in such a way that precludes any possibility of meaning other than every person in the world.

Haykin appeals to Raymond Blacketer for his take on Augustine. Interestingly, Blacketer correctly noted that "there is no single statement from the bishop of Hippo that explicitly declares that God's intention in the satisfaction of Christ was to procure redemption for the elect alone." But he then incorrectly concluded that this was "precisely the view that Augustine held."³

Blacketer, and perhaps Haykin, confuses Augustine's statements about God's predestinarian will for the elect with his view on the actual satisfaction for all sin which Christ accomplished in the atonement.

Prosper.

Haykin also wrongly interprets the early Prosper of giving "strong hints of a definite atonement in Augustine" (72). He quotes Prosper as saying that Christ died "for all" but also noted Prosper says "that He was crucified only for those who were to profit by His death" (72). Haykin fails to rightly discern in what sense Prosper means these statements. In response to the objection that Christ "did not suffer for the salvation and redemption of all men," Prosper clearly affirms Christ's death for the sins of all men, but also affirms that only those who believe will benefit from Christ's saving work: "Accordingly, since our Lord in very truth took upon Himself the one nature and condition which is common to all men, it is right to say that all have been redeemed and that nevertheless not all are actually liberated from the slavery of sin."⁴

¹ For examples, see my chapter "The Atonement: Limited or Universal," in *Whosoever Will: a Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 61-107.

² See Augustine's "Exposition of Psalm LXIX," Section 27, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, ed. P. Schaff (1888; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 8:309.

³ R. Blacketer, "Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives*, eds. Charles Hill and Frank James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 308.

⁴ Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine, trans. P. De letter, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 32 (New York: Newman Press, 1963), 164.

Haykin further noted that Prosper, in his later career, “appears to have softened this commitment to definite atonement, or even rejected it in favor of an advocacy of the universal salvific will of God based on his reading of 1 Timothy 2:4” (73). But even in his earlier, so-called high Augustinian period, Prosper held to the same exegesis of 1 Tim 2:4 that he did in his alleged later departure phase. There is no evidence from his interpretation of 1 Tim 2:4 in Call of the Gentiles that Prosper departed from an alleged earlier position of definite atonement. All of this is a misreading of Prosper and can be seen to be so when one carefully reads pertinent sections of his Defense of St. Augustine.⁵ It is clear Prosper held to unlimited atonement, and never held to definite atonement.

In conclusion, Haykin should be commended for the fact that he does not state any of these authors he surveys clearly affirms definite atonement.

But he must be faulted for several issues. First, the chapter is only a very brief survey of seven Church Fathers. Second, Haykin has missed significant counter-factual evidence that clearly shows some of these men held an unlimited satisfaction for sins and thus did not affirm definite atonement. He did not canvass the extant writings of his chosen Church Fathers with a view to engaging in an analytic/synthetic survey. Granted he cannot cover all the ground; no one could. But more ground surely needs to be covered than is reflected in this chapter. Third, he appears to be heavily dependent upon secondary sources Gill and Blacketer, and fails to interact with other significant secondary sources. These are serious methodological problems.

Haykin’s chapter has the feel of being rushed and too reliant on secondary sources. This certainly is not the norm for Haykin’s writing. I appreciate his usual careful thoroughness. But in this case, his chapter is not a reliable guide on this subject.

⁵ Ibid., 149–51; 159–60; 164.