

Making Sense of the Cross: New Testament Metaphors for Christ's Death

"We were hoping that it was he who was going to redeem Israel!" (Luke 24:20-21)

The Synoptic Gospels: surprisingly few clear sayings about the significance of Christ's death

1. Mk 10:45; Mt 20:28: "The Son of Man came not to be served to serve, and to give his life a **ransom** for many."
2. Mk 14:22-25; Mt 26:26-29; Lk 22:19-20: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

Context: Jesus' pattern of service and self-giving subverts Roman quests for power and greatness. Jesus' death is pictured as the **emancipation / deliverance / rescue** of slaves, rather like God's emancipation and deliverance of Israel from Egypt (cf. Ex 6:6; 16:13).

The Gospel of John: a humiliating tragedy is the glorious pinnacle of God's saving work.

1. **Giving of Jesus' life:** God gave his son who laid down his life (Jn 3:16; 10:11-18)
2. **Passover Lamb:** the lamb who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29; 18:28; 19:14)
3. **Exaltation:** the Son of Man is lifted up and draws people (Jn 3:14-15; 8:28; 12:32-33)

Acts: God raised up the crucified Jesus and exalted him as Savior and Lord.

1. **Forgiveness:** God raises the crucified one to extend forgiveness of sins (Ac 5:30-31; 10:43)
2. **Purchase:** the blood of Christ purchases those who join his church (Ac 20:28)
3. **Humiliation:** the cross is the ultimate disgrace that leads to exaltation (Ac 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; cf. Dt 21:22-23)

Paul: a diverse collection of images from Israel's scriptures, Roman society & beyond.

1. **Redemption:** release from bondage (Ga 3:13; Ro 3:24; cf. the *exodus*)
2. **Representation / Substitution:** one died *on behalf of* (or *in the place of*) all (2C 5:14-15)
3. **Curse bearing:** in the place of those under judgment for lawlessness (Ga 3:13; cf. Dt 21:22-23)
4. **Sin offering:** restoring broken relationships (Ro 3:25; 8:3; Lev 4-5, 16)
5. **Reconciliation:** in response to the world's alienation from God (2C 5:18-20)
6. **Defeat of evil powers:** the end of the old epoch and the inauguration of a new creation (2C 5:17; Co 2:15; Ga 1:4)
7. **Justification:** God's final approval of those who embrace Christ as Lord (Ro 3:24)

Hebrews: Jesus is both perfect offering and perfect mediator.

1. **Sacrificial victim:** whose blood is shed to bring forgiveness and to ratify a new covenant (He 9:22)
2. **High priest:** who identifies effectively with humanity, yet without sin (He 9:25-28; 10:10, 12-14)

1 Peter: Jesus is the ideal model of innocent suffering and faithful obedience.

1. **Passover Lamb:** whose precious blood brings deliverance (1P 1:2, 18-19)
2. **Suffering servant:** whose sinless death offers an example to follow (1P 2:21-25)

Revelation: Jesus is worthy to open the scroll and to receive our praise.

1. **The Worthy Lamb:** whose blood ransomed people from every nation (Rv 5:9)
2. **The Worshiped Lamb:** whose death cleans and sanctifies his people (Rv 7:9-17)

Discussion

1. Which metaphors have had the greatest (or least) impact on your thinking?
2. Is it risky to focus exclusively on a single image?
3. To what extent are these images indebted to / derived from 1st c. Greco-Roman culture?
4. What metaphors might speak most powerfully to the (post-)modern West?