

Did Jesus Die for “Many” or Did He Die for “All”?
The Controversy Of Limited Atonement
A Series on What is Atonement: Part 7

The doctrine of “limited atonement” is the belief that Jesus’ death on the cross was strictly limited for the sins of Christians and had nothing to do for the sins of non-Believers. Christ died for the purpose of saving only those whom He wanted to save.

Limited atonement is also referred to as “definite atonement”, “particular redemption” (Christ died for particular people) and “effective redemption”.

Although this doctrine was attributed to John Calvin, it was not a view held by him. The view gained prominence with Theodor Beza (1519-1605) and did not appear in any creed until the Canons of Dort (1618-19); thus, the doctrine is relatively recent.

Many Christians who think they share the view of limited atonement believe that Jesus died for all but the benefit of salvation is limited to Christians. This is contrary to Beza’s view, and instead reflects a view called “unlimited atonement” or “general redemption.”

This confusion arises from the fact that most are unaware of the two dimensions of atonement, the objective and subjective. This table can help clarify the issue:

Theological view	Objective sense (from God’s judicial / legal perspective)	Subjective sense (from God’s perspective of man)
Limited Atonement	Jesus died only for the sins of Christians.	The benefits of atonement only apply to Christians.
Unlimited Atonement	Jesus died for the sins of each and every human being.	The benefits of atonement only apply to Christians.

In comparing the two theological views, the question comes down to one singular issue: did Jesus die in the objective sense exclusively for Christians? How does one understand Jesus’ words in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45, “...give His life a ransom for **many**.”

The Greek term for “many” is “polloi.” This term draws a distinction between the many (but not all) and the rest.

In both English and Greek languages, the term “many” is exclusive and has a different meaning from the term “all.”

The term “polloi” provides the sense of a majority and is the antonym of a minority.

Thus, Greek as well as English, has two different words that exclusively mean “many” and “all.”

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While English translations of the New Testament are based on the Greek and Latin versions of the New Testament, Matthew wrote his book in the Hebrew language intentionally for the Jewish reader. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (140 A.D.) writes that “Matthew wrote down the sayings in Hebrew and each translated as he was able.” Early Arabic, Persian and Syriac manuscripts also indicate that Matthew wrote in Hebrew. And it is believed that Jesus spoke in a Semitic language (either Aramaic or Hebrew).

Because the original Hebrew text of Matthew’s no longer exists, does the Greek translation “many” in the exclusive sense accurately reflect the original Hebrew autograph?

In contrast to Greek or English, Hebrew and Aramaic have no word for “all” in the sense of the whole totality and sum of its individual parts.

Whereas “all” expresses the sum and totality, Hebrew and Aramaic can express only one of those concepts at a time.

The Hebrew term that expresses the totality is “rabbîm,” and it has in view the many individuals in a totality where a possible residue may not be considered. “Rabbîm” is understood as the inclusive sense for the whole.

In the Greek Old Testament (LXX), the Greek term “polloi” is used to translate the Hebrew term “rabbîm.” So it is likely that in Matthew 20:28, contrary to the Greek exclusive meaning, the term “many” is in an inclusive sense.

Does the term “many” used in Mark 10:45 also have a basis for the inclusive sense?

The text of Mark 10:45 has evidence of being linguistically of Semitic origin. Various versions and translations of this passage are consistent with and point to a common Semitic original.

Most scholars agree that Mark 10:45 is based on Isaiah 53:10-12, and, in Isaiah 53:10-12, the Hebrew term “rabbîm” is understood in the inclusive sense.

Pre-Christian Judaism interpretations understood Isaiah 53:10-12 in the inclusive sense. After the 2nd century A.D., with the onset of Christianity, reinterpretations would occur with an anti-Christian bias.

The New Testament understood the Greek term “polloi” in the inclusive sense.

Both apostles John and Paul understood the ransom that Jesus paid was for the many in an inclusive sense (John 6:51; 2 Cor 5:14, 19; 1 Tim 2:6; Heb 2:9).

In Romans 5:15-19 John draws a comparison between Adam and Jesus, “For as through the one man’s disobedience the many (polloi) were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many (polloi) will be made righteous.”

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It appears that Jesus' words in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45 should be understood in its original Semitic sense; thus, the atoning work of Jesus is comprehensive and objective: Jesus died and paid the ransom for all.

References:

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