A Bloodthirsty God? The Problem of Divine Violence in Traditional Atonement Theories and the Search for a Non-violent Alternative

Introduction

Stephen Finlan observes that 'What is most noticeable about the literature on atonement written in the last 150 years is the intense concern with *problems* that the authors (and presumably the readers) have with the traditional doctrines of atonement'.[1] Anthony Bartlett agrees, but suggests that the biggest problem for all these writers is 'the issue of [divine] violence',[2] the idea that 'God demanded a bloody victim… to pay for human sin'.[3] This, says J. Denny Weaver (whose work 'represents the best known rejection of traditional atonement formulae', according to Bartlett)[4] 'is the element most offensive to the radical critics of traditional satisfaction atonement'.[5]

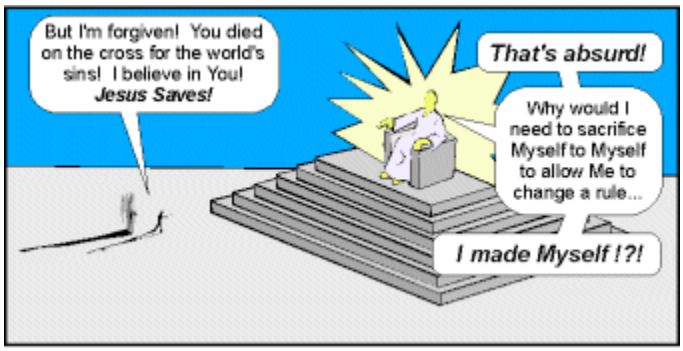
As we will see, the 'problem of divine violence' is perhaps most acute in the particular form of satisfaction atonement known as 'penal substitution' – the idea that Jesus was receiving the punishment due to sinful human beings. However, as both Weaver and Mark Heim say, any theory in which Jesus had to die in order to 'satisfy' God – whether satisfying his justice, restoring His honour or placating his wrath – involves us in the problem of 'divinely sanctioned violence'.[6] Thus, while our discussion will sometimes focus on the penal theory, it should be borne in mind that the problem is 'substitutionary atonement' or satisfaction atonement or in general.[7] We begin by looking at 'the problem' in more detail.

'Blood Theology'

Joel Green and Mark Baker suggest that 'even when it is articulated by its most careful and sophisticated adherents, penal substitutionary atonement remains susceptible to

[1] Finlan 2005, 1.
[2] E-mail from Bartlett to Hardin. Quoted in Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 54.
[3] Finlan 2005, 1.
[4] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 411.
[5] Weaver 2001, 195.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Heim 2006, 22.

misunderstanding and even bizarre caricature'.[8] Many would, no doubt, regard the cartoon reproduced below as an example of the latter.



This image comes from a parody of the Gospel tract 'Last Rites' by the notorious fundamentalist evangelist Jack Chick.[9] It is called 'Dead to Rights' and was written and drawn by Jim Huger, a militant atheist.[10] However, many Christian believers (including many evangelicals) would share Huger's concerns. Robert Daly suggests that this sort of view of the cross 'calls into question the free will, or the justice, or the sanity, or the power of a benevolent God',[11] while Brad Jersak asks, 'Can or must God's wrath against sin be satisfied by punishment before he can forgive what he otherwise could not?'[12] In other words, why is God not free to simply pardon?

Finlan himself is similarly concerned with God's freedom: 'Why [did] the innocent Son [have] to be murdered before any pardon could be issued?' he wonders.[13] He also tackles the issue of God's justice in the penal model asking 'What kind of judge requires punishment but is content to allow the punishment of the innocent?'[14] Meanwhile, the question of the sanity of the God of penal substitution is addressed in highly provocative[15] terms by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann. They suggest that 'this twisted

[8] Green & Baker 2000, 30.
[9] See http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0082/0082_01.asp.
[10] See http://www.jhuger.com/tract/dtr/index.
[11] Daly 2007, 47.
[12] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 26.
[13] Finlan 2005, 85.
[14] Ibid.
[15] John Piper accuses them of 'slander'. See Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 15.

version of events' is tantamount to 'a form of cosmic child abuse' in that it imagines 'a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed'.[16]

Whether or not this is true, Weaver is surely correct when he says that 'atonement theology is actually a discussion of our image of God'.[17] Christopher Marshall and Ted Grimsrud both ask 'Is God nonviolent?'[18] However, for me, the point is made more forcefully by asking 'Is God violent?' Does He, as Weaver puts it, '[defeat] violence with superior violence and [reconcile] sin on the basis of a violent death' or does He '[triumph] over evil and [reconcile] sinners non-violently through resurrection'?[19]

Of course, Weaver is assuming that violence is necessarily evil and some, such as Hans Boersma, would challenge this, as we will see. However, for Michael Hardin and others who accept Weaver's assumption, to ascribe any violent behaviour to God is to contradict the biblical claim (in 1 John 1:5) that 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all'.[20] Indeed, Jersak goes as far as to say that 'A god who demands the child-sacrifice of his own son to satiate his… wrath… is *not* Jehovah; that is Molech'.[21] He is appalled by the idea of a 'bloodthirsty God'[22] who says 'I just can't get over my children's sin. I am so incensed with them. They are repulsive to me and trigger my wrath and need for vengeance… *Somebody* must pay me, and it has to be with punishment; with blood'.[23] He anticipates the objection that, like Huger's cartoon, this is a caricature of the doctrine of penal substitution and not what any serious theologian actually believes. However, he refutes this on the basis that he has 'drawn directly from John Calvin's *Institutes* and Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"'.[24]

[16] Chalke & Mann 2003, 182.
[17] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 340.
[18] Marshall 2003, 71; Grimsrud 2003, 13.
[19] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 340.
[20] Ibid, 73.
[21] Ibid., 24. Jersak is quoting Orthodox Archbishop Lazar Puhalo.
[22] Megill-Cobbler 1996, 20. Quoted in Weaver 2001, 184.
[23] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 30.
[24] Ibid.

Defenders of the doctrine could, of course, point to the statement in Hebrews 9:22 that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' and argue that, while it is incorrect to speak of God's 'blood-lust' (as James Alison does),[25] for some reason God does in fact 'require' blood in order to be able to forgive sin. However, for critics of penal substitution, such as Finlan, 'primitive beliefs about the… magical cleansing power of lifeblood'[26] are precisely the problem. This is not to suggest that the debate is between people who 'take the Bible seriously' and 'liberals' who do not – although that is clearly how Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach see it. Their recent defence of penal substitution begins with an extract from a sermon by Charles Spurgeon in which he speaks disparagingly of so-called 'cultured' people who 'shudder… at the sound of the word "blood"' and 'rebel… at the old-fashioned thought of sacrifice'.[27] They also quote Henri Blocher who suggested that Spurgeon's more liberal contemporaries 'felt outraged at the doctrine and complained about a "blood" theology, [which] in their eyes [was] an ugly relic of primitive stages in man's religious evolution'.[28] However, as we will now see, there are also biblical reasons to reject this 'blood theology'.

The prophetic critique of sacrifice

Following Raymund Schwager, Hardin suggests that while parts of both the Old and New Testaments might, at first glance, appear to affirm the idea of blood sacrifice, on closer inspection, we can see 'a developing anti-sacrificial project' in the Scriptures of both Israel and the Church.[29] This begins with the pre-exilic prophets of the eight century B.C.E. such as Isaiah who has God say, in 1:11, 'I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats'. Similar passages are found in Amos (5:21-24), Hosea (6:6) and Micah (6:6-8) and in all of these – including Isaiah (1:17) – God says that He desires 'steadfast love' (Hosea) or 'justice' (Isaiah, Amos and Micah) rather than sacrifices of any kind.

[25] Ibid., 172
[26] Finlan 2005, 107.
[27] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 22.
[28] Blocher 1999, 129. Quoted in ibid.
[29] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 70.

Now, as Green and Baker point out, these passages do not necessarily represent 'an outright rejection of the temple' and its sacrificial system *per se*.[30] They can be read in the same spirit as Jesus' statement to the Pharisees in Luke 11:42 that they should have practised 'justice and the love of God' as well as – as opposed to instead of – performing ritual duties such as the tithe. Green and Baker suggest that, for these prophets, the issue was either 'the legitimacy of the priesthood' at that particular time or 'the degree to which sacrificial offerings genuinely represented personal or communal dispositions' – again, at that particular time.[31]

This interpretation is supported by both Heim (according to whom, the eighth-century prophets went 'to the extreme of rejecting the validity of sacrifice completely' at only 'a few points')[32] and by the wider context of the passages in question. One could, thus, conclude (as Green and Baker appear to do) that God was saying that if and when the people and their priests repented (and demonstrated their repentance through their actions) their sacrifices would be acceptable once more. After all, the sacrificial system was ordained by God. Or was it?

According to Weaver, the sixth-century prophet Jeremiah 'questioned whether sacrifices originated with God at all'.[33] Jeremiah has God say, 'On the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices' (7:22). Taken at face value, this statement is unambiguous. Furthermore, similar things are said in the Psalms (e.g. 40:6, 'Sacrifice and offering you do not desire… Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required'). Thus, for Hardin,[34] Jeremiah's statement constitutes 'an explicit disavowal of divine support'[35] for any sort of sacrifice at any time.

[30] Green & Baker 2000, 49 n.18.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Heim 2006, 93.
[33] Weaver 2001, 60-61.
[34] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 70.
[35] Heim 2006, 95.

The implications of this interpretation are, of course, very radical – almost revisionist – and the fact that, in the next verse, we are told that what God did command was obedience means that Jeremiah's words can be understood as simply a restatement (albeit a much stronger restatement) of the message of the earlier prophets that God wants justice *more than* sacrifice rather than as a denial that He ever wanted sacrifice in the first place. (The same applies to Psalm 40:6). However, there is another notorious passage in Ezekiel which potentially provides further support for Weaver and Hardin's radical view.

Ezekiel 20:25 contains what Heim calls an 'extraordinary admission from God':[36] namely, that God gave the Israelites 'statutes that were not good'. It is clear from the following verse (26) that this refers to the specific practice of child sacrifice: 'I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them'. Now, of course, elsewhere (16:20-22; 23:36-39) Ezekiel has God condemn the ritual slaughter of children in the strongest possible terms – and, indeed, such practices are clearly presented as a feature of the idolatrous worship of other gods. The same is true in Jeremiah (7:30-31; 19:4-5) where it is also stressed that God 'did not command or decree such things', nor did they enter His mind. In the light of these more numerous statements, Heim tells us, 'Some interpreters argue that [Ezekiel 20:25-26] refers to God allowing the Israelites to go aside into the practices of other religions'.[37] In other words, He 'gave' them the 'statutes' of Paganism as a punishment.[38] Jon Levenson, however, suggests a very different interpretation.

For Levenson, Ezekiel 20:25-26 is 'a blunt statement that YHWH did indeed ordain child sacrifice'.[39] Of course, the statement is, at the same time, a clear condemnation of the practice but, according to Levenson, it is phrased in this way because 'child sacrifice was at one time part of the official cultus of YHWH'.[40] In other words, those whom Ezekiel was addressing 'saw themselves not as apostates… but as faithful YHWHists following

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:10-11 where 'God sends ['those who are perishing'] a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false… because they refused to love the truth'.
[39] Levenson 1993, 5-6.
[40] Ibid., 11.

the ancient tradition of their religion'.[41] Levenson appeals to Genesis 22 and the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac to support this admittedly-controversial thesis. As he says, 'Were the practice of child sacrifice always so alien to YHWH, so "worthy of severest condemnation", would there have survived a text in which it is this act and no other that constitutes YHWH's greatest test of his servant Abraham?'[42]

Returning to Ezekiel then, is he simply being 'diplomatic' and allowing his child-sacrificing audience to believe that what they are doing was once God's will while telling them, in no uncertain terms, that it is no longer so now? Not according to Levenson. Against 'the majority of scholars',[43] he asserts that Exodus 22:29 ('The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me') refers not to the 'redemption of the firstborn' as detailed elsewhere in Exodus (13:15 and 34:19-20) but rather to the literal, bloody sacrifice of children condemned by the later prophets. If he is correct, then either child sacrifice was, in fact, commanded by God along with the rest of the sacrificial system (albeit for a different reason, namely the one given by Ezekiel) or, as seems more likely to me, the whole system was of human origin as much as divine and, as *per* Hardin's statement quoted earlier, we see, in the Psalms and the Prophets, the gradual recognition – or, indeed, the progressive revelation – of this fact.

Of course, Levenson may not be correct in his understanding of Exodus 22:29 and, even if he is, some might feel that the presence of a single commandment that cannot now be understood as actually having come from God does not undermine the divinely-inspired status of the other genuinely God-given laws relating to sacrifice (although I am not convinced that this would be logical!) Equally, 'dispensationalists' (defined by Heim as those who regard some of the commandments in Scripture as having been 'God's providential truth to their time' even if they are 'obsolete in ours')[44] and other extreme 'conservatives' might be able to live with the idea that their God once demanded human sacrifice just as they live with the idea that He previously commanded the mass slaughter

[41] Ibid., 4-5.
[42] Ibid., 12.
[43] Ibid., 3.
[44] Heim 2006, 67-68.

of the Canaanites (a point to which we will return in due course). However, many other conservatives would, presumably, not be comfortable with this idea and would thus feel compelled to reject Levenson's thesis. Yet, the very fact that they would feel compelled to do so surely raises questions about their ability to perform exegesis rather than 'eisegesis' on the texts in question.

Meanwhile, since Levenson may well be correct in his analysis, Heim's conclusion that 'The Bible, the faith that it expresses, and the God that it describes are all entangled in the dynamics of mythical sacrifice'[45] seems hard to escape. Thus, rather ironically, while Spurgeon and his contemporary counterparts, Jeffery, Ovey and Sach, would consider human sacrifice in a Pagan sense to be an abomination in the sight of God, the concept of sacrifice that they want to defend as being the heart of the Christian Gospel may not be entirely unrelated to it.

Naturally, the latter three deny this. Following John Stott, they attempt to place 'clear blue water' between their penal substitutionary understanding of the atonement and 'pagan sacrificial ideas' on three grounds.[46] Firstly, the divine anger which needs assuaging is not 'the volatile and erratic caprice of pagan deities';[47] rather, it is 'predictable because it is provoked by evil and by evil alone'.[48] Secondly, 'the propitiation [of God's wrath] is not made by us, but by God himself'[49] and, similarly, thirdly, 'the person God offered was not someone else… No, he offered himself'.[50]

This third point, in particular, has some force and is made by many defenders of penal substitution or satisfaction theories in general.[51] However, as we will see in our discussion of Weaver, the 'mutuality of the Trinity'[52] can just as easily be invoked as an argument against any atonement theory that ascribes violence to God. Meanwhile, I am

[45] Heim 2006, 68.
[46] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 228.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Stott 1986, 173. Quoted in ibid.
[49] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 228.
[50] Stott 1986, 174. Quoted in ibid.
[51] E.g. Van Dyk 1996, 24; Houts 1992, 30 (both quoted in Weaver 2001, 184); Marshall 2007, 56-61.
[52] Weaver 2001, 184.

not convinced that the water is as clear or as blue as Jeffery *et al* would like to imagine. While they attempt to deny the 'supposed dependence [of penal substitution] on paganism' (dismissing it as a 'grotesque caricature'),[53] in fact, they affirm that God's wrath could only have been averted by the bloody sacrifice of a human being.[54] Yes, this human being was also 'fully God', but does this really change the picture as much as they seem to think it does?

Clearly, the idea of God 'taking his anger out on himself' is preferable to that of Him doing the same to a third party (particularly an innocent one) since, in this scenario, He is the only one who suffers. However, this is surely a bit like saying that it is better for an angry man to get rid of his anger by self-harming rather than by beating his wife. What would be better still would be for him to have anger-management therapy. The problem for critics of penal substitution is not so much the idea that someone died but, rather, the idea that God had to perform an act of extreme violence in order to be able to forgive sin. Ultimately, who was on the receiving end of that violence is not the issue. The problem is the imagined violence in the heart of God. As Hardin says, 'Atonement is all about violence and how we perceive God's relation to violence'.[55]

Jeffery *et al* would, no doubt, regard Hardin as 'unbiblical'.[56] In turn, however, Hardin suggests that while those with a 'sacrificial hermeneutic' such as theirs 'may quote the Bible', they are, in fact, 'out of sync with the prophetic/wisdom approach to reading Scripture adopted by Jesus and the early church'.[57] We have already considered the 'anti-sacrificial project' in the Old Testament but must now examine how it develops in the New.

For both Finlan and Heim, Jesus' quotation of Hosea 6:6 ('I desire steadfast love [or 'mercy'] and not sacrifice') in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7 is evidence that he stood in the

[53] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 228.
[54] Boersma admits that 'the Anselmian tradition… has often explained the cross as a human sacrifice to appease a wrathful God'. Boersma 2004, 148. See also Chick's cartoon (A) in the appendix.
[55] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 76.
[56] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 236.
[57] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 70..

'anti-sacrificial'[58] tradition of the earlier Prophets. His insistence that people were more important than 'purity laws' echoed the prophetic message that what God really wanted was 'love and justice' and that all cultic rituals were, effectively, meaningless in their absence. This is not to suggest that he was opposed to the cultic system *per se*. As previously stated, in Luke 11:42 he told the Pharisees that they should have practised 'justice and the love of God' as well as – rather than instead of – their ritual duties such as tithing. Meanwhile, as Finlan points out, there is no suggestion in Matthew 5:27 that there is anything fundamentally wrong with offering a gift at the Temple altar – indeed, the pericope ends with Jesus saying 'come and offer your gift'.[59] The point, once again, is that the offering is invalidated if the one bringing it is in a state of broken relationship with his brother or sister. However, Finlan suggests that this issue of 'ritual fastidiousness' that elevates 'external ritual correctness' above 'compassion for the needy'[60] was literally a matter of life and death for Jesus – in two senses.

Firstly, if Tom Wright is correct, the parable of the Good Samaritan provides an example of how placing 'ritual minutiae above persons' can have lethal consequences.[61] The reason why both the priest and the Levite 'passed by on the other side', according to Wright, is that they did not want to become ritually impure – as they would have done had they discovered, on going to the man's aid and touching him, that he was already dead.[62] Their concern for their own ritual purity was greater than their compassion for a fellow human being in trouble. Like the prophets who came before him, Jesus was 'scathing' in his criticism of this attitude (on many occasions) and Finlan believes that this was why 'the advocates of ritual correctness (the Pharisees) and the landlords of ritual sacrifice (the Sadducees)… orchestrated [his] death' just as they had all the prophets… since the foundation of the world' (as Jesus says in Luke 11:47-51).[63] Weaver believes the same – indeed, it is a significant part of his argument and since, as Bartlett said, 'Weaver's work represents the best known rejection of traditional atonement

[58] Heim 2006, 233.
[59] Finlan 2005, 113.
[60] Ibid., 112-13.
[61] Ibid., 112.
[62] Wright 2004, 127.
[63] Finlan 2005, 115.

formulae' (from a non-violent perspective), it seems appropriate to focus our discussion on him at this point.

Weaver begins with three related assumptions:

1. That 'God is fully present in the life of Jesus' and that 'Jesus truly reveals God the Father'.[64]

2. That, in the light of this, the life of Jesus must be 'the norm for theology' (meaning that anything that is 'intrinsic to the story of Jesus… should be a constitutive, shaping element of Christian theology' while anything that he rejected must be, similarly, rejected by theology).[65]

3. That 'Jesus lived and taught nonviolence'.[66]

Putting aside for a moment the issue of whether or not we accept these assumptions, if we do, then Weaver's conclusion that 'it is important to talk about the God revealed in Jesus in ways that do not visualise God in the position of intending or needing violence to achieve [His] purposes'[67] is, effectively, entailed. If we further assume, as Weaver does, that demanding and engineering a bloody sacrifice as a punishment for sins (or for any other reason pertaining to 'satisfaction') would count as violence, then it also follows that the cross cannot have been about penal substitution. We cannot say that 'God uses the violence rejected by Jesus'.[68]

Of course, for Weaver, the sad fact is that the Church has said precisely this through its adoption of a penal or sacrificial understanding of the death of Jesus. He believes that this is 'the most fundamental error in the entire history of Christian thought' both because it violates the 'mutuality of the Trinity' referred to earlier (the Son is not violent but the

[64] Ibid., 352; Weaver 2001, 204.
[65] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 318, 316, 320.
[66] Weaver 2001, 12.
[67] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 352.
[68] Weaver 2001, 208.

Father is) and because it legitimated 'the sword that Jesus rejected' – with, at times, catastrophic results (the Crusades, the Inquisition etc.)[69] Richard Rohr says very much the same thing. He suggests that because the Church ignored Jesus' teaching about God wanting 'mercy not sacrifice', and instead made 'God the Father into the Chief Sacrificer… basing the very notion of divine redemption on a kind of "necessary violence"', 'a huge disconnect' emerged between the teachings of Jesus and the practice of those who claimed to be his disciples who were now able to say: 'If even God uses and needs violence, maybe Jesus did not really mean what he said in the Sermon the Mount'![70]

However, as we saw earlier, Weaver's primary concern (and, indeed, my own) is our image[71] of God: what is God like and what sort of behaviour can we expect from Him? Weaver's answer to this question is that God is like Jesus and thus, as Hardin says, as 'good…loving… kind…self-giving... forgiving… [and] generous'[72] as He was. Meanwhile, the idea that a non-violent God would 'orchestrate'[73] the violent death of Jesus is not only self-contradictory for Weaver, but contrary to the account of how and why Jesus died given in the Gospels.

Like Finlan, Weaver believes that Jesus was killed because he 'confronted the purity code taught by the religious leadership' of his day in various ways (e.g. 'healing people on the Sabbath).[74] As Weaver says, 'these acts of Jesus were… intentionally confrontational'.[75] Like previous prophets, his agenda was to challenge 'unjust practices'[76] and his 'cleansing of the Temple' was certainly consistent with that agenda: 'You have made [my house] a den of robbers' (Luke 19:46). However, just as Jesus was more than a prophet,

[69] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 316, 352, 320.
[70] Ibid., 210.
[71] Ibid., 340.
[72] Ibid., 63.
[73] Weaver 2001, 204; Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 338.
[74] Weaver 2001, 37-38; Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 321.
[75] Weaver 2001, 38.
[76] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 347.

so there was a greater and more radical significance to this act – which, according to both Weaver and Wright was the event that finally 'precipitated his death'.[77]

In Mark 2:3-12, Jesus claimed to have the authority to forgive sins – to the horror of the 'scribes' who cried 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' Of course, as Karl Olav Sandnes says, the Temple priests had this right, but only 'within the sacrificial ritual prescribed by God'.[78] Jesus, meanwhile, not only claimed this right but exercised it 'outside the prescribed rituals'.[79] The forgiveness that he offered was 'based neither on cult nor on ritual washing, but on his own presence'.[80] His 'unauthorised' forgiveness thus constituted a claim to be the true Temple, the one mediator between God and man, a claim which is made explicitly in Matthew 12:6 ('something greater than the temple is here').[81] For Sandnes, the cleansing of the Temple is, similarly, best understood as a 'prophetic symbolic action'[82] designed to assert Jesus' primacy over and replacement of the Temple sacrificial system. As Weaver says, in the light of this claim, it is hardly surprising that Jesus came into conflict with the Temple authorities.[83] Thus, Weaver's answer to the question of who killed Jesus is that it was 'various figures… the mob, some religious authorities, Pilate and the Roman occupation force'.[84]

Of course, no theologian – or, indeed, historian – would dispute this. As Jersak says, 'Even most non-believers can agree that Jesus was mistreated and wrongly killed under Pontius Pilate'.[85] Meanwhile, Jeffery, Ovey and Sach are clear that 'those who put Jesus to death were guilty of… [an] unjust act of violence' for which they are condemned in Acts 3:15 ('you killed the Author of life') and Acts 7:51-52 (which we will consider in more detail in a moment).[86] However, unlike Weaver, they believe that 'it is also true…

[77] Ibid.; Wright 1996, 566.
[78] Sandnes 1994, 21.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Significantly, this statement is made in the middle of the discourse with the Pharisees on mercy, sacrifice and the Sabbath.
[82] Sandnes 1994, 21.
[83] Weaver 2001, 41.
[84] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 338.
[85] Ibid., 28.
[86] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 323.

that God worked through *those same actions* for his good purposes' i.e. the 'holy and righteous punishment of our sin'.[87]

Now, at first glance, the passages that they cite in support of this proposition seem so unambiguous that it is hard to imagine how anyone could refute it. Acts 2:23 says that Jesus was handed over to those who killed him 'according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' while, according to Acts 4:27-28, 'Herod and Pontius Pilate' *et al* did only what God's 'hand' and 'plan' had 'predestined would take place'. However, if we now look at the other passage in Acts 7 to which Jeffery *et al* refer on the very same page, we see that the picture is not quite so straightforward. In his speech before the council, Stephen says:

> You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, *you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit*, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.

It is hard to see how Jesus' murderers could have been opposing the Holy Spirit and fulfilling God's plan at the same time. Of course, as Stephen Dintaman says, the idea that 'events can have multiple levels of causation' is 'well developed in scripture and Christian theology'.[88] He cites, as an example, the actions of Joseph's brothers which, according to Genesis 50:20, God intended for good, their evil intent notwithstanding and this is a fair point. However, Stephen's association of those who killed Jesus with those who persecuted the prophets who foretold his coming – with the clear implication that they are the same kind of people doing exactly the same thing – makes the idea that Jesus' murderers were 'actually acting according to the will [or plan] of God'[89] rather problematic.

[87] Ibid. Emphasis mine.
[88] Dintaman 2006, 7.
[89] Weaver in Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 339.

In Luke 11:47-51 (mentioned earlier), Jesus condemned the Pharisees as the descendants of those who killed the prophets. Clearly, those murders were in no way the will of God. Thus, when Stephen reiterates Jesus' condemnation of those killings using very similar terminology[90] and, further, classifies Jesus' death as the logical conclusion of the same sinful sequence, it jars somewhat to suggest that while this last murder is fundamentally the same as the others, it is also fundamentally different. Moreover, there is nothing in the immediate context of Acts 11 to warrant this – quite the opposite, in fact.

Meanwhile, according to both Jersak and Finlan, the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-11) is evidence that Jesus viewed his (at that point impending) death in exactly the same way that Stephen did later: as the last in a series of events which were increasingly offensive to God. As Finlan says, 'The owner [of the vineyard – who is universally accepted as representing God] is not happy nor even sadly resigned when the tenants kill his son; he is angry'.[91] Furthermore, if anything, the parable suggests that the owner sent his 'beloved son' precisely to stop the killing: the words 'They will respect my Son' imply that, unlike the slaves who came before him, the son will not be killed. Of course, we cannot assume that a theological point is being made in every single detail of any given parable. As James Barr says of the parables in general, 'only the story as a whole has a meaning relatable to reality'.[92] However, Finlan concludes from this particular parable (taken as a whole) that Jesus 'did not think that it was God's will that he should be murdered'.[93] Jersak agrees and his analysis of this parable has considerable synergy with Weaver's 'Narrative Christus Victor' theory to which we now turn.

Narrative Christus Victor

According to Jersak, in Mark 12, Jesus 'presents himself as the final prophet in a series of missionary attempts by a loving God to deliver his message of salvation'.[94] The fact that he died in the course of carrying out this mission is directly analogous to a human

[90] Obviously, both accounts are written by Luke.
[91] Finlan 2005, 109. According to Jersak, the vineyard-owner was 'furious'. Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 27.
[92] Barr 1983, 12.
[93] Finlan 2005, 109.
[94] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 27.

missionary being killed as a result of taking the Gospel to a hostile country: it was, as Weaver says, 'the byproduct of carrying out his mission'[95] not the purpose of it. To stress this point, Weaver gives the example of Tom Fox of 'Christian Peacemaker Teams' who was killed while on a peace mission in Baghdad between November 2005 and March 2006. Like all the members of his team, says Weaver, Fox 'knew the risks' but he was 'willing to accept the risk of death in order to carry out a living mission of peace'.[96] However, he emphatically 'did not journey to Baghdad for the purpose of getting killed, and the directors of Christian Peacemaker Teams did not send [him] to Iraq for the purpose of dying'.[97]

In the same way, according to Weaver, God did not send Jesus to die but to live and, by so doing, 'to make the reign of God present in the world in his person and in his teaching and to invite people to experience the liberation it presented'.[98] However, this 'visible manifestation of the reign of God'[99] represented a direct challenge to 'the forces of evil that oppose'[100] God and His kingdom and so a violent backlash was 'inevitable'.[101] Thus, we can say that God willed the death of Christ inasmuch as Jesus could only have avoided death by 'abandoning and failing' his mission.[102] However, this is clearly very different from saying that God required the death of Jesus for His own purposes. As Weaver puts it, 'it was the circumstances of his mission, rather than a specific need for a divine death, that necessitated' Christ's death.[103]

From this perspective, we do not need to think in terms of 'multiple levels of causation' in order to explain the death of Jesus. As Jersak says: 'If [the] police [had been] called to the scene ['on Good Friday']… they would have found no evidence to suggest a "second shooter" [i.e. God]. There was a loud and clear series of events that led to the death of

[95] Ibid., 352.
[96] Ibid., 353.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., 346.
[99] Weaver 2001, 43.
[100] Ibid., 45.
[101] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 352.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.

Jesus. People were threatened by him. People betrayed him. People crucified him'.[104] God, for Jersak and Weaver, had nothing to do with it. Yet, there is another sense in which Weaver would want to talk of multiple levels of causation – or, at least, a multiplicity of agents.

As stated above, Weaver's answer to the question of who killed Jesus is that it was 'various figures… the mob, some religious authorities, Pilate and the Roman occupation force'.[105] However, he also says that Jesus was killed by the 'forces of evil that oppose[d] the reign of God'. Indeed, his murder was the unambiguous 'rejection of the rule of God by [the] forces opposed to that rule'.[106] Now, obviously, all of the above ('imperial Rome, [the] Jewish holiness code, the rabble' etc.) can be so described. However, Weaver insists that 'the blame for [Jesus'] execution should not be limited to specific persons or institutions'. For him, there is a 'supernatural' dimension to the 'forces of evil' – indeed, he goes so far as to say that the ultimate responsibility for the death of Jesus belongs to 'Satan'![107] What exactly does he mean by this?

Following Walter Wink, Weaver understands Satan as 'the locus of all power that does not recognize the rule of God'.[108] The devil and the 'principalities and powers' of Ephesians 6:12 (KJV) are not 'personified being[s]' or 'independent entities that inhabit a place'.[109] Rather, they are 'the "spiritual" dimension of material structures' – by which he means 'institutions' such as 'the state' or 'capitalism'.[110] While these structures are not (necessarily) evil in themselves, evil inevitably 'accumulates' in them if they do not 'recognize the rule of God'.[111] When this happens, the force of evil takes over the institution and 'shapes [its] adherents… in its own image, as a mob spirit leads people to commit acts they would never contemplate alone'.[112] Thus, in one sense, the human

[104] In fact, Jersak is quoting Andre Harden, a member of the *Agora* newsgroup. Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 28.
[105] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 338.
[106] Weaver 2001, 44-45.
[107] Ibid., 210.
[108] Ibid., 211.
[109] Ibid., 210.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid., 210-11.
[112] Ibid., 210.

architects of Jesus' death were merely the puppets of the demonic 'powers'. So, Weaver could say with the author of Ephesians 6:12 that 'our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh [such as Pilate or Caiaphas], but against… the cosmic powers of this present darkness… the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places'. Indeed, he suggests that this was why Jesus prayed 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'. He agrees with Jersak (quoted above) that 'People crucified him' but, ultimately, according to Weaver, 'It was the total accumulation of evil, the reign of Satan, that killed Jesus' – and when he says 'total', he means precisely that.[113]

As previously stated, Weaver believes that 'Jesus' mission was to make the reign of God *and the very presence of God* present on earth'.[114] The 'ultimate' nature of this manifestation of the reign of God, he suggests, provoked an equivalent ultimate response from the evil 'powers'.[115] '*All* dimensions of evil perceive[d] Jesus as a threat' and they '*collectively* attempt[ed] to eliminate him'.[116] This is why, as we saw, Weaver insists that 'the blame for [Jesus'] execution should not be limited to specific persons' (e.g. 'The Jews').[117] Meanwhile, it was this 'ultimate nature of the confrontation' that made the violent death of Jesus 'inevitable'.[118] Confronted by the 'whole fullness of deity' in bodily form (Colossians 2:9), the forces of evil could only respond by using their 'ultimate weapon': death.[119] They attempted to 'deny Jesus his existence' ('the worst [thing] that the powers of evil can do to a human being') and obviously, in a sense, they were successful: Jesus died on the cross in 'what appeared to be a triumph for the powers of evil'.[120] Of course, as Weaver says, this 'triumph' was 'limited and momentary': God raised Jesus from the dead and, in so doing, 'displayed his power over the ultimate enemy – death – and thus over the worst that evil could do'.[121] The resurrection was God's triumph over the powers of evil.

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[113] Ibid.
[114] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 346.
[115] Ibid., 352.
[116] Weaver 2001, 211.
[117] Ibid., 210-11.
[118] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 352.
[119] Ibid., 330.
[120] Ibid., 330-31; Weaver 2001, 40.
[121] Weaver 2001, 40-41.

This is why Weaver's theory is a form of the classic Christus Victor. For him, 'it is [not the] death that accomplishes the saving work'; rather, the 'saving event… the sine qua non' of his narrative Christus Victor is the resurrection.[122] In this 'eschatological event', he says, evil was definitively defeated and 'the true balance of power in the universe' revealed.[123] While he frequently describes the resurrection as either 'revealing' or 'demonstrating' the victory of the reign of God, Weaver is keen to stress that 'something has indeed changed in the cosmos' as a result of it – and this 'whether sinners perceive it or not'.[124] He argues that the resurrection was 'an advance sample of the reign of God that will become visible in its fullness when Jesus returns'.[125] However, even before that time, 'encountering the resurrected Jesus' has 'the capacity to transform lives' here and now – 'as displayed in the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus'.[126] The resurrection is thus 'integral' to the 'saving work' of Christ in narrative Christus Victor.[127] Meanwhile, so are his life and teaching: the resurrection vindicated the life of Jesus as 'the very life of God' and as the pattern 'which the Christian community is to follow' and as people follow in the way of Christ, they are further transformed.[128] This is why Weaver calls his 'new paradigm for non-violent atonement' 'narrative' Christus Victor: he wants to say that the entire career of Jesus (life, death and resurrection) was salvific and not just his death.[129]

Clearly, Weaver is rehearsing a standard objection to (particularly) penal substitution here: namely, that in the various satisfaction models, 'neither the life of Jesus nor his resurrection have much significance'.[130] Is this a legitimate objection? Jeffery, Ovey and Sach defend the doctrine from this charge pretty well, arguing that 'Christ's life on earth was [very much] part of his atoning work, for he lived in perfect obedience to the law of God' with the result that, just as our sin was imputed to him, so his perfect righteousness

[122] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 342, 347.
[123] Ibid., 346; Weaver 2001, 45.
[124] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 348; Weaver 2001, 45.
[125] Weaver 2001, 40.
[126] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 348.
[127] Ibid., 317.
[128] Ibid., 346-47.
[129] Ibid., 317.
[130] Stuart Murray Williams (speech) quoted in Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 212.

was imputed to us in order that 'we might be justified'.[131] They suggest that 'This is explained in any standard introduction to Reformed theology' and offer numerous examples to support their claim.[132] Meanwhile, the various reasons they give for why the resurrection was an essential part of God's plan of salvation (it was an '"open demonstration" of his victory over death', 'the culminating proof that Christ was a teacher sent from God')[133] sound very similar to those given by Weaver. Thus, Jeffery *et al*'s conclusion that the charge 'is simply not true'[134] is technically correct. However, I suggest that while the charge is not literally true, beneath the polemic, there is a valid point.

The life and resurrection of Jesus may still be important in satisfaction atonement but Weaver is surely correct when he says that the 'high point' in all versions of this model is Jesus' death: it is the death that 'satisfies whatever element is lacking in the divine economy' (whether that be the need for restoration of God's honour in the Anselmian model or for 'justice' – i.e. punishment – in the penal).[135] If, indeed, there is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood, then ultimately it was when Jesus died that the human race was saved and his life was effectively merely a prelude to that primary event – albeit a necessary one.[136] In the same way, the resurrection becomes, in a sense, an epilogue: the story may not be complete without it but there is no question that the climax of the story occurred in the previous chapter. In narrative Christus Victor on the other hand, 'the culmination [of the salvific process] is not the death but the resurrection of Jesus' since that was the event in which evil was defeated.[137]

At this point, we must note a possible contradiction in Weaver's thought. As we have seen, he generally wants to absolve God of any responsibility for the death of Jesus and at certain points he states explicitly that it is not his death that saves us. Yet, elsewhere he

[131] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 212.
[132] Ibid., 213.
[133] Ibid. They are quoting (respectively) Athanasius 1993, section 3, 60 and Berkhof 1959, 349.
[134] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 214.
[135] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 340.
[136] That some people really do think like this is powerfully illustrated in Chick's cartoon (B) in the appendix.
[137] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 340.

claims that the whole narrative of Jesus – life, death and resurrection – was salvific. So: is the death salvific or not in Weaver's understanding?

His answer to this question is rather subtle. On the one hand, he insists that death is not 'the means through which God enables reconciliation' since to say this would be to say that God 'uses or sanctions violence'.[138] Furthermore, it implies that 'those who kill Jesus are actually acting according to the will of God' or, at the very least, 'assisting God in providing the death needed to satisfy God's honor [or justice]'[139] – and in case there is any doubt that this is what is being said, we should bear in mind that Jeffery, Ovey and Sach literally refer to God as the 'perpetrator'(!) of Jesus' death on the cross, citing Isaiah 53:10 (NIV) as their authority for so doing: 'it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer'.[140] Yet, at the same time, Weaver stresses that he does not want 'to deny the significance of Jesus' death'.[141] However, for him this significance is directly related to Jesus' non-violent life and teaching.

Weaver argues that Jesus' death – or, more precisely, the way that he faced death – was just as much of a demonstration of the reign of God as his life before that had been:

> [When he] faced his accusers and confronted death without violence, Jesus was living out the way that the reign of God confronts evil… His submission to the powers of evil was consistent with the portrayal of God's rule that he proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount… and exhibited in numerous other ways.[142]

As Weaver says, this was not 'a mere passive submission' but 'a powerful, chosen act' which continued his 'activist' mission of 'confronting the social order and making the reign of God visible'.[143] Furthermore, by refusing 'to return evil for evil', Jesus exposed 'the [violent] nature of the forces of evil that opposed the rule of God' and again, by rising from the dead, he demonstrated that evil could 'do its worst' and still the reign of

[138] Ibid., 342.
[139] Ibid., 339.
[140] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 323.
[141] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 317.
[142] Weaver 2001, 39-40.
[143] Ibid., 40.

God would not be overcome.[144] The resurrection was thus precisely the triumph of non-violence over violence making it incongruous in the extreme to present it as an act of violence perpetrated by God. A related point is that although Weaver and Jeffery *et al*'s descriptions of the significance of the resurrection sound similar, from Weaver's perspective the latter completely and drastically misunderstand the implications of saying that the resurrection proved 'that Christ was a teacher sent from God'. He argues that because non-violence was integral to the story of Jesus, God's vindication of Jesus was at the same time a divine vindication of non-violence.

To sum up then: for Weaver, Christ's death is salvific in that it is part of the narrative of his life which is the narrative of salvation. However, he is unwilling to say that it is the death specifically that saves us. Indeed, at one point he goes so far as to suggest that the death 'accomplishes nothing for the salvation of sinners, nor does it accomplish anything for the divine economy'.[145] Clearly, for anyone who wants to affirm with Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3 that 'Christ died for our sins' – and, further, that this is 'of first importance' – this is a step too far. In the next section, then, we will look at criticisms of Weaver both by those who accept his fundamental point (that God is not violent) and by those who do not.

Criticism of Weaver

In fact, the Pauline passage just quoted is, on closer examination, not quite as problematic for Weaver as it might at first appear. In the subsequent verses (4-8), we discover that Christ having died for our sins is simply the first item in a list: also 'of first importance' (presumably) are the facts that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day and that he appeared to various people at various times. Effectively, then, what Paul is handing on here, what he himself received, is a narrative not a doctrine. Furthermore, while this narrative begins with the death of Jesus and omits any details of his life before that, his rising from the dead is clearly the high point of the story. Thus, Weaver is able to argue with some plausibility that this passage provides more support for his narrative Christus

[144] Ibid., 44, 41.
[145] Ibid., 72.

Victor than it does for the traditional/penal view.[146] But what about the fact that the death is described as being 'for our sins'?

Again, this is not necessarily fatal for Weaver's argument: the text does not actually say that 'Jesus died to pay the price for our sins' and Weaver and others would maintain that the idea of punishment or satisfaction ('to pay the price') has to be read into it. Certainly, this is not as unambiguous a statement as people like Jeffery, Ovey and Sach would, no doubt, like to imagine. The same applies to Jesus' words at the last supper. Weaver suggests that while, '[a]t first glance it might seem that [they] support satisfaction atonement… a careful reading supports' his non-violent understanding.[147] There are three steps in his argument:

1. Jesus claimed that 'God's unmerited forgiveness and the reconciliation of sinners to God'[148] were now available through him rather than through the Temple (which, like previous prophets, he regarded as being corrupt).

2. It was this claim and his symbolic enactment of it (the cleansing of the Temple) that led directly to his death. Thus:

3. Jesus died as a result of his (successful) attempt to make the forgiveness of sins freely available to all: in other words, his blood was shed 'for the forgiveness of sins'.

Weaver's exegesis here will certainly not convince everyone but, again, the point is that the institution passages do not demand a satisfaction-based reading even if they can be used to support one.

Finlan – who is no fan of penal substitution – has a different view on this matter. He grants that 'blood-atonement' does occur in these passages but suggests that the fact that

[146] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 343-44.
[147] Weaver 2001, 41.
[148] Ibid.

'these are the *only* passages in the Gospels' where this is so should cause us to be 'suspicious of their historicity'.[149] However, this is surely even less likely to persuade evangelicals such as Jeffery, Ovey and Sach of the legitimacy of non-penal theories than Weaver's approach (which, ironically, Finlan dismisses as 'exegetically unsatisfying').[150] Furthermore, his argument that the reason why the blood-atonement motif is in these key texts is that 'they came under pressure to conform to standard liturgical usage' is similarly problematic for those whose authority is Tradition rather than (or as well as) Scripture: can we really say that 'the early church grossly misunderstood and misrepresented the saving work of Christ'[151] and remain, in any sense, orthodox Christians?

This is, of course, the billion-dollar question and for Boersma the answer is clear: Weaver and other contemporary 'advocates of non-violent atonement theories' have 'abandon[ed] the broad consensus of the Christian tradition'.[152] Indeed, as far as he is concerned, 'We can only shield [or disassociate] God from the violence of the cross at the cost of parting ways with the tradition of the church'.[153] Boersma is unwilling to do this and so attempts to justify the idea of divine violence. Since even some of his opponents acknowledge that his work in this area is 'thoughtful'[154] and 'important'[155], it is worth looking at in detail.

Violence, Hospitality and the Cross

Boersma begins by suggesting that the reason why many Christians are 'embarrassed' by the idea of God being 'implicated' in violence is that they assume 'that violence is inherently evil and immoral'.[156] Boersma challenges this assumption, asking whether violence is always 'a morally negative thing'.[157] He goes on to say that it is not and the

[149] Finlan 2005, 114.
[150] Ibid., 99.
[151] Dintaman 2006, 5.
[152] Boersma in Sanders (ed.) 2006, 65-66. Quoted in Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 66.
[153] Boersma 2004, 43.
[154] Heim 2006, 253 n.21.
[155] Bartlett in Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 412.
[156] Boersma 2004, 43, 149.
[157] Ibid., 43.

reason that he is able to do this is that his definition of violence is significantly broader than that used by Weaver and other non-violent theologians.

Weaver defines violence as 'harm or damage', acknowledging that this can be psychological or sociological ('systemic violence' such as 'racism, sexism and poverty') as well as physical[158] and, at first glance, Boersma's definition (borrowed from Donald Burt) is simply an expanded version of this: a violent act is any 'which contravenes the rights of another… [or] which causes injury to the life, property, or person of a human being, [whether] oneself, or others'.[159] However, his addition of the phrase 'contravenes the rights of' means that where Weaver does not regard 'positive physical… coercion' (e.g. 'physically restraining children from running into the street, knocking a person out of the path of a vehicle, [or] physically restraining a person attempting suicide') as violence, Boersma does. 'By what standard', he asks 'would one term physical resistance to an enemy violent but physical interference to stop a person from committing suicide non-violent? If my interference with a suicide takes the form of a physical encounter, is this not a form of violence?'[160]

Anticipating a possible answer to this question, he suggests that most people would consider any physical harm inflicted during such an interference as 'justifiable'. However, his argument is that 'that doesn't make it non-violent'.[161] Of course, it is 'good violence' rather than bad and what distinguishes the two, according to Boersma, is that 'the person performing the violent act must have in mind the lessening of violence'.[162] It is a short step from here to his justification of divine violence: 'God's violence on the cross [which is, unambiguously, 'the violence of punishment'] is a redemptive violence' which He uses to bring about 'an eschatological situation of pure hospitality… in which

[158] Weaver 2001, 8.
[159] Burt 1999, 62. Quoted in Boersma 2004, 44.
[160] Boersma 2004, 46.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid., 238, 47.

violence will no longer have a place'. [163] The violence of the cross is, thus, 'justifiable' but only because it leads to the 'absolute non-violence of God's eschaton'.[164]

Boersma anticipates the objection that this argument boils down to 'the end justifies the means' and stresses that there must be 'some kind of correspondence between the eschatological pure hospitality that beckons us and the divine means to get there'.[165] His attempt to demonstrate such a correspondence consists of three points. Firstly, he suggests, 'For God not to get angry when he is rejected… would demonstrate indifference not love'.[166] Thus, it was precisely His love that required the punishment, the violence, of the cross.

Secondly, 'God does not delight in punishment' and while his love requires it, there is 'an absolute primacy' of love over wrath: 'God *is* love, not wrath; he *is* a God of hospitality, not of violence' and it is 'hospitality rather than violence that characterizes the heart of all his actions' – including the cross.[167] Thus, the penal or judicial aspect of the cross is 'subservient to the hospitality that God extends in Jesus' and Boersma recognises 'in the outstretched arms on the cross the arms of the [prodigal's] Father running down the road'.[168]

Finally, 'The cross is not… an arbitrary divine punishment… that could have taken place at any time'.[169] Following Wright, Boersma argues that Jesus was 'the representative Messiah… taking on himself the curse which hung over Israel'[170] as a result of her 'consistent rejection of divine hospitality'.[171] Boersma thus prefers to describe 'the penal aspect of the cross as "penal representation" [rather than] "penal substitution"'[172] and, like Wright, he sees it as simply one aspect of a larger narrative. For Wright, this is

[163] Ibid., 50, 177, 49.
[164] Ibid., 238, 50.
[165] Ibid., 170.
[166] Ibid., 49.
[167] Ibid., 175, 49, 93.
[168] Ibid., 174, 170.
[169] Ibid., 171.
[170] Wright 1993, 151. Quoted in ibid., 176.
[171] Boersma 2004, 176.
[172] Ibid., 177.

classic Christus Victor;[173] for Boersma, it is the Irenaean concept of recapitulation.[174] Very simply, this means that 'By retracing the creation, temptation and death of Adam, Christ as the new humanity reversed the effects of the Fall and restored humanity'.[175] However, there is no need to explore this idea further here since, as Boersma himself acknowledges, it 'still leaves open the question of punishment'[176] or the satisfaction of the divine honour with which we are concerned. What are we to make, then, of Boersma's efforts to show that the divine violence of the cross is compatible with the divine hospitality of the eschaton?

Jersak suggests that, given that Boersma occupies the chair of the twentieth century's most ardent penal theoretician' (he is the J.I. Packer Professor of Theology at Regent College, Vancouver), his work represents 'a huge step beyond'[177] the classic defence of penal substitution by his predecessor.[178] This may be true: for Jeffery, Ovey and Sach (who are, in effect, Packer's *ideological* successors), penal substitution is 'the hub from which… other doctrines [such as 'Christ's victory over evil powers'] fan out'; it is 'central' to the story of salvation and not just an 'aspect' of it as it is for Boersma and Wright. In the same way, Jeffery *et al* explicitly reject the alleged primacy of God's love over His wrath (Boersma's second point) in their discussion of Chalke and Mann. Responding to the latter's assertion that God's love is the 'primary lens' through which all His other attributes must be viewed (because 'God is love'),[179] they thunder: 'This will not do. God's attributes cannot be pitted against one another, neither ought one to be elevated above the others to a primary position. All of God's attributes have equal significance in determining his actions'.[180] (Presumably it follows from this, reversing Boersma, that God *is* wrath just as much as He *is* love…)

[173] 'I regard the "Christus Victor" theme as the overarching one within which substitution makes its proper point'. Wright 2007 [online].
[174] Boersma 2004, 177.
[175] Ibid., 125.
[176] Ibid., 126.
[177] Jersak 2006 [online].
[178] Packer 1974.
[179] Chalke & Mann 2003, 63.
[180] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 293.

Ultimately, however, Boersma upholds and defends precisely that aspect of penal substitution (God's supposed use of violence) to which its critics most object and, furthermore, he does so in ways that are virtually indistinguishable from those of its more traditional apologists. His first point in particular, (If God does not get angry when he is rejected, He is indifferent not loving) is standard conservative evangelical rhetoric (cf. Jeffery *et al*: 'He cannot merely overlook sin'),[181] but there seems to be an unwarranted assumption here: why does God have to be 'angry' about rejection? Could He not be sad instead? Even if He is – rightly – angry about sin in general, why does He have to express this anger through violent punishment? Why not 'channel' His anger in a more positive way?

Boersma has no new answers to these questions. Meanwhile, his second point (that punishment is subservient to hospitality) begs the question somewhat: effectively, his argument is 'the means must be acceptable because we know that the end is'. At this point, we realise that Jersak was simply being generous when he talked of Boersma's 'huge step' and, ultimately, Jersak is nothing less than damning in his criticism, describing Boersma's thesis (that a little bit of violence is justified if it establishes a non-violent eschatological future) as 'more akin to American foreign policy than to Christ's sermon on the mount'.[182] He goes on: 'In [Boersma's] claims, I hear President Bush's inaugural promises to forcibly spread democracy throughout the earth and violently displace evil tyrants. But I don't hear Christ'.[183]

Jersak finds Boersma's argument 'alarming'[184] and so do I. Even more alarming, however, is the fact that, as well as defending God's violence on the cross (which, as we saw earlier, could at least be regarded as an act of – as it were – 'self-harm'), Boersma also defends the divinely-mandated 'destruction of women and children in a holy war'.[185] In a spectacular piece of understatement he writes, '[God's] violence against the Canaanites may seem harsh to us [!], but we need to remember that it [was] enacted in a

[181] Ibid., 105.
[182] Jersak 2006 [online].
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Boersma 2004, 88.

judicial, penal context' (i.e. they were idolaters).[186] Furthermore, God's violence towards the Canaanites was the necessary prelude to His hospitality towards the Israelites: the former had to be 'uprooted' so that the latter could enter the Promised Land.[187] Thus, it is 'conceivable', according to Boersma, that the slaughter of the Canaanites (and all other instances of divine violence) 'will one day prove to be… justified by the eschatological hospitality that awaits us'.[188]

To be fair to Boersma, he does, at least, acknowledge that 'the conflict between this apparent barbarity and our cultural sensitivities is nearly unbearable'.[189] This is in marked contrast to Jeffery, Ovey and Sach who seem entirely unperturbed by the idea of God personally 'striking people down' – even in the New Testament era.[190] However, in the final analysis, Boersma's conclusion is the same as theirs: 'The God who appears to us in the biblical text does not allow himself to be molded and shaped according to our sense of morality'.[191] In one sense, of course, this is true: as Isaiah (55:8-9) tells us, His ways are not ours. Equally, however, if we believe, with Weaver and David Jenkins, that 'God *is* as he is in Jesus', then we have been shown definitively what His ways are and they most certainly do not include lethal violence towards women and children.

Of course, as previously stated, not everyone will accept Weaver's assumptions. To recap, these are: 1) that Jesus was the definitive revelation of God; 2) that the narrative of Jesus is, thus, 'the norm for theology' and 3) that the rejection of violence was intrinsic to that narrative. From these it follows, says Weaver, that we cannot ascribe violent behaviour to God. Of course, as we have just seen, there are several points at which Scripture does precisely that. Therefore, some (such as Jeffery, Ovey and Sach) would simply reject 2): Jesus may reveal God but so does the rest of the Bible and we cannot simply dismiss the bits that we dislike as 'legendary'.[192]

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[186] Ibid., 84.
[187] Ibid., 83-84.
[188] Ibid., 37-38.
[189] Ibid., 87.
[190] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2007, 237.
[191] Boersma 2004, 88.
[192] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2004, 237, 290.

This is effectively Boersma's position too. He condemns those who want to reject or ignore texts of which they disapprove as 'neo-Marcionite[s]' and is himself unwilling to pay such a high 'hermeneutical price' in order to 'solve the problem of [divine] violence'.[193] However, for Weaver and others who are committed to non-violence, the opposite is true: as Jersak puts it, one cannot simply 'sweep away' Jesus' 'very strong statements'[194] on the subject of violence/non-violence in order to preserve what Jeffery *et al* call 'an evangelical doctrine of Scripture'[195] – by which, of course, they actually mean an inerrantist view. Recalling what Hardin said earlier, such people may quote the Bible, but they are 'out of sync' with the narrative of Jesus – which, for Weaver *et al*, is the lens through which 'the entire biblical text is read… and interpreted'.[196]

There is, thus, a fundamental difference of opinion between the two sides in the 'atonement and violence' debate over a) the correct way to interpret Scripture and b) the character of God. Indeed, one could almost say that the difference between the two sides is whether they are willing to revise a) in the light of b) or vice versa! To clarify this: Weaver *et al* allow the developing picture of God that they see in Scripture (and which 'comes into focus' in Jesus) to control how they read Scripture in general while Jeffery *et al* are prepared to live with a God that they themselves find 'terrifying' because they want to give equal weight to every part of the canon.[197] Having said that, there are, as previously stated, people on the 'non-violent side' who agree with Boersma *et al* that Weaver does not do justice to Scripture. It is to two such critics of Weaver (Marshall and Heim) and their alternatives to his narrative Christus Victor that we now turn.

Marshall's defence of divine intentionality in the death of Jesus

Marshall suggests that 'Weaver is correct in what he affirms but wrong in what he denies'.[198] Like Weaver, he is convinced that 'our understanding of atonement must square with and make sense of the New Testament narratives of Jesus' proclamation and

[193] Boersma 2004, 56, 140.
[194] Jersak 2006 [online].
[195] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2004, 237.
[196] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 320.
[197] Jeffery, Ovey & Sach 2004, 293.
[198] Marshall 2003, 82.

embodiment of God's kingdom' and, thus, that 'the violent presuppositions of satisfaction atonement' must be rejected.[199] However, he also feels that Weaver's claims that 'Jesus' death was not willed by God and that it was not a saving necessity… fly in the face of the accumulated weight of New Testament evidence' (giving Acts 2: 23 as an example: 'this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God').[200]

One thing that Weaver and Boersma agree on is that 'we can only exclude all [divine] violence from [atonement theology] if we categorically exclude any divine involvement in the crucifixion';[201] but Marshall questions this. He suggests that, 'To accept that God *did* will or need the death of Jesus is not to say that God wanted or required it to satisfy his own holiness, as satisfaction atonement maintains'.[202] He then goes on to argue that 'God willed it for a different reason': namely, that 'he willed our salvation and the only way to achieve [this] was for Jesus to tread the path of suffering and death, for only thus could sin's power be broken'.[203]

Marshall regards violence as 'the foremost social manifestation of sin… the most potent evidence of sin's grip over humanity'.[204] Therefore, he argues, the defeat of sin required the defeat of violence. Obviously, this could only have been achieved non-violently otherwise the 'cycle of violence' would have been perpetuated – and, indeed, given a divine imprimatur – rather than being broken.[205] Thus, Marshall conceives of the cross as 'a final and definitive showdown with the power of sin, its power to inflict violent death on the innocent' from which the risen Jesus emerged victorious.[206]

[199] Ibid., 80, 82.
[200] Ibid., 81, 88.
[201] Boersma 2004, 117.
[202] Marshall 2003, 90.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid., 90-91.
[205] Ibid., 91.
[206] Ibid., 82.

While this is very similar to Weaver's account of Jesus' non-violent victory over 'the powers', Marshall (who also uses this 'Winkian' terminology),[207] posits a 'specific divine intentionality in the death of Jesus'.[208] Weaver is prepared to grant that God was willing for Jesus to die in the course of carrying out his non-death-related mission, but in Marshall's scenario submitting to death in order to then overcome it was an essential and indispensable part of Jesus' mission. For Weaver, this is 'uncomfortably close to a God who had a purpose in divinely intended violence'.[209] However, Marshall is just as committed to divine non-violence as Weaver is. Indeed, he arguably places an even greater emphasis on the necessarily non-violent nature of Christ's victory.

According to Marshall, 'The most terrifying characteristic of sin's lordship' is 'its pernicious power to turn those who have been sinned against into sinners in their own right, to suck victims into a pattern of imitative behaviour that allows violence to spiral on forever'.[210] Thus, for his victory over sin and violence to be complete, Jesus had to 'withstand the temptation to hit back'.[211] The only way to break 'the cycle of violence and revenge' was to 'endure violence himself… without seeking or desiring retaliation'.[212] Clearly, Jesus' dying prayer for his executioners ('Father, forgive them') was part of this program. However, as both Hardin and Heim say, it was when he rose from the dead and still did not seek revenge on his murderers that his work of non-retaliation was completed. Meanwhile, since the resurrection was, as Weaver says, a divine vindication of Jesus and his message, then it was also, as Hardin puts it, an announcement of 'the good news that God does not retaliate… If God were retributive, then the resurrection would have been the terrible apocalypse of Jewish eschatology, the place of reciprocal retaliation for killing Jesus'.[213] Instead, says Heim, it was 'an assurance of forgiveness' – for both the literal executioners of Jesus and, by extension, all people.[214]

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[207] Ibid., 81.
[208] Weaver in Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 352 n.47.
[209] Ibid., 352.
[210] Marshall 2003, 91.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 71.
[214] Heim 2006, 145.

A possible criticism of Marshall at this point is that he is somewhat vague about how Jesus actually broke the 'cycle of violence', the 'pay-back mechanism that lies at the heart of sin's power'.[215] Certainly, one suspects that Michael Winter (who has levelled similar criticisms at Gustaf Aulen, Colin Gunton, Martin Hengel and Thomas Torrance) might say this.[216] Would it be fair in this case?

To some extent it may be but I would say four things in Marshall's defence: firstly, there is presumably an element of mystery in any and every attempt to explain the work of Christ. Secondly, Marshall's comments are made in the context of a 'sympathetic response' to Weaver so it can be safely assumed that, like Weaver, he sees the resurrection as God's very literal victory over the power of sin and death – indeed, he says precisely this in his conclusion.[217] Furthermore, he goes on to say that 'those who by faith are united with Christ in his death share also in his liberation' and thus have 'freedom from the fear of death, on which violence feeds'.[218] To me, this sounds like quite a detailed account of how the cycle of violence was (and is) broken. Thirdly, penal substitution and other satisfaction theories leave far more unexplained than Marshall does: a frequent objection to penal substitution in particular is that it deals with the penalty for sin not sin itself (and, clearly, something similar applies to any satisfaction model). This leads to the fourth and final point: Marshall, like all non-violent atonement theorists, is primarily concerned to show that traditional satisfaction-based models are unacceptable and that a non-violent alternative is possible. To say that he has not yet described that alternative in its fullness is to miss the point.

Thus, it seems to me that Marshall succeeds in what he sets out to do: namely, talking about the cross in a way that both 'stands in continuity' with the New Testament's unembarrassed presentation of 'Jesus' death as God's will for the salvation of all' and, at the same time, does 'not depend on discreditable views of God [or] sanction violence'.[219] As stated above, Weaver is concerned that by saying that there was any divine intent at

[215] Marshall 2003, 91.
[216] Winter 1995, 35-37. Quoted in Finlan 2005, 96-97.
[217] Marshall 2003, 69, 92.
[218] Ibid., 92.
[219] Ibid., 75, 82.

all in the death of Jesus, Marshall has allowed 'the idea of a God who uses or sanctions violence in through the back door'.[220] However, apart from the fact that this seems unwarranted given the unequivocal commitment to divine non-violence that undergirds Marshall's argument, it is also somewhat ironic since, at certain points, Weaver's language is just as 'intentional' as Marshall's. Having established that death is 'the worst that the powers of evil can do', he goes on:

> *In order for the victory of the reign of God to be complete* [my emphasis], the forces of evil must have free rein to do their worst… The powers of evil are [thus] afforded the freedom to deny Jesus his existence. It is this denial of existence that resurrection vanquishes, a victory complete precisely because evil was allowed to do its worst.[221]

It is hard to see how this is any different from Marshall's suggestion that 'Christ's victory… required him to absorb the worst that the powers could do'.[222] If, indeed, the victory would only have been complete if Jesus died, then surely his death was very much a 'requirement', something that 'had' to happen in God's economy? Of course, God merely 'allowed' the powers to kill Jesus and can in no way be said to have killed him Himself. However, He did still allow it – in order to defeat evil and so save humanity. Thus, in spite of himself, Weaver seems compelled to say that God's will and purpose were that Jesus should die – and rise again – for the salvation of all.

To some extent, Weaver acknowledges this, granting that the difference between his view and that of people like Marshall is merely 'one of emphasis'.[223] Marshall believes that 'Jesus' work was to face death non-violently'[224] and Weaver agrees that this was part of it. However, rather than focussing on the death of Jesus, he prefers to emphasise his life and resurrection – and given all that has been said about the theological problems involved in imagining the God and father of Jesus Christ as the author of violence, this is understandable. Yet, the death must have been part of God's plan in at least one sense

[220] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 351.
[221] Ibid., 330.
[222] Marshall 2003, 81.
[223] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 346.
[224] This is, in fact, Weaver's summary in ibid., 347.

otherwise Weaver's earlier claim that the resurrection is 'the saving event, the sine qua non' of narrative Christus Victor is undermined: clearly, there could not have been a resurrection without an initial death. Thus, to whatever extent the resurrection was necessary in God's economy, so was the death.

Ultimately, Weaver accepts this. He deals with the discomfort he clearly feels about it by saying that Jesus' death was not '*intrinsically* necessary to the divine will [my emphasis]'; rather, his death was the 'inevitable' 'byproduct' of his mission.[225] The potential danger of this statement is that since Weaver frequently defines Jesus' mission in terms of 'witnessing to the reign of God',[226] it can sound as if he thinks that the death was 'an unfortunate accident' (as it was when the afore-mentioned Tom Fox was killed in Baghdad) and the resurrection nothing more than a response to it – and, thus, an equally contingent event. Clearly, this will not do for, as Bartlett says, 'it's hard to conceive such a transcendent event' as the resurrection without a robust concept of divine intentionality behind it.[227] However, if we remember that Weaver also defines Jesus' mission as allowing evil to do its worst (i.e. kill him) in order to defeat evil, then the idea of the death being a byproduct becomes less problematic: Jesus had to die in order to defeat evil, but the point was to defeat evil not to die.

This, I think, is what Weaver means when he says that the death was not 'intrinsically' necessary. His concern is not so much with the fact that Jesus' death was necessary, but rather with 'the object or direction or target'[228] of the death. As he puts it:

> As long as the death of Jesus is aimed God-ward, one cannot avoid the implication that death is the means through which God enables reconciliation, and thus God uses or sanctions a violent death, nor the implication that the powers which killed Jesus perform a service for God and are thus functioning within God's will.[229]

[225] Ibid., 351-52.
[226] Ibid., 352.
[227] Ibid., 419.
[228] Ibid., 337.
[229] Ibid., 342.

Clearly, the death is aimed 'God-ward' in penal substitution or any other kind of satisfaction atonement: it is God's justice that must be satisfied or His honour that must be restored. However, God is emphatically not the 'target' of the death in Marshall's understanding. As he said, God 'required' the death of Jesus, but not in order to satisfy Himself in any way; He required it for a different reason (to defeat sin and death).[230] It seems to me that Weaver's statement about 'God-wardness' quoted above is making the same point. Thus, as Weaver himself said, the difference between his position and Marshall's is ultimately one of emphasis. Meanwhile, the two are united in their rejection of what Heim too calls the 'key error' in atonement theology: namely, understanding Jesus' death as 'an offering to God' of some kind.[231]Yet Heim is still prepared to describe the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. In this next and final section, we will explore how this can be.

The sacrifice to end sacrifice

Although Heim is 'unequivocally' opposed to the idea of Christ's death as a human sacrifice offered to God, he believes that it is a mistake to attempt 'to purge Christianity' of the sacrificial language and imagery that remain 'inextricably lodged in Bible, liturgy, sacrament and hymnody'.[232] The effect of so doing, he argues, is to reinforce 'the perception that substitutionary views are more biblical and more inclusively Christian, since they… include positive readings of the central sacrificial texts… that are cast aside by those who reject substitutionary theology'.[233] 'What is needed', he concludes, 'is an interpretive path *through* the problematic texts and not around them, a theological vision that… provides the most convincing account of their true significance'[234] – and he believes that he has found such an account in the Girardian understanding of the cross as the simultaneous revelation and condemnation of 'the practice of sacrificial scapegoating'.[235]

[230] Marshall 2003, 90.
[231] Heim 2006, 300.
[232] Ibid., 320, 300, 6-7.
[233] Ibid., 7.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Ibid., 15, 10-11.

Like Wink,[236] Heim does not endorse every single aspect of Girard's thought (which is as ambitious in scope as it is cross-disciplinary in nature, being read by his 'more extreme devotees' as a complete metanarrative comparable to those advanced by Freud and Marx).[237] However, he does believe that 'Girard offers us crucial insights precisely relevant to the questions most sharply raised about atonement today'.[238] Following Girard, Heim suggests that, at some point in our history, we discovered that all-out war between rival factions in a community could be averted by 'uniting against a chosen victim'. [239] The choice of this victim was made on the bases of distinctiveness and of powerlessness: that is, it needed to be 'an outsider' of some kind, someone who could conceivably be blamed for the crisis in society (for example, a blasphemer). More importantly, it needed to be someone whose death no-one else would attempt to avenge – the whole point, after all, was to end the cycle of vengeance.

Bizarrely, these (in one sense) random acts of violence had the desired effect and succeeded in establishing a temporary peace. This served to confirm, in the minds of the community, that the scapegoat had, indeed, been the source of their problems. Furthermore, it led them to believe that what they had done had been 'divinely approved' as well as 'completely justified, entirely necessary… and powerfully beneficent'.[240] Thus, an evil act was transformed into a sacred one – and Girard believes that the sacrificial rituals found in all ancient societies were re-enactments of these original 'sacred murders'. At times, these re-enactments would have been literal, involving new human victims – e.g. the sacrifice of 'captives and criminals' in fifth-century (B.C) Athens.[241] Alternatively, the original murders were remembered 'mythically', in the ritual sacrifice of an animal or, indeed, in an unbloody sacrifice of some kind. However, in all three of these scenarios, the horrific reality, the injustice of the original murder was disguised. The evil of the original act was 'swallowed up in sacred awe'.[242] In this way, Heim says, 'sacrifice is like a magic trick' involving significant sleight of hand: 'violence is the

[236] Wink 1992, 155. Quoted in ibid., 12.
[237] Heim 2006, 11-12.
[238] Ibid., 13.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid., 52.
[241] Ibid., 44-45.
[242] Ibid., 16.

essential act, but in the representation of the event [or, indeed, in the literal event itself] one's eyes are always directed elsewhere at the moment the ax falls. Above all, what is typically hidden is the view and voice of the victim as a victim'.[243]

Heim's thesis is that the 'sacrifice' of Jesus described in the passion narratives both conforms to this 'invisible' pattern of the murder of the scapegoat for the good of the community and, at the same time, exposes it as a 'sinful human construct for peacemaking' and not a 'divine institution'.[244] Extending his analogy of the magic trick, he suggests that the Gospels 'describe the trick with all its moving parts' and, in so doing, make it impossible (or, at least, harder) to repeat it.[245] So, for example, Caiaphas' statement to the council in John 11:50 ('it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed') is an unambiguous reference to scapegoating as far as Heim is concerned – and, certainly, Jesus was an ideal scapegoat in many ways: 'a Galilean outsider', charged with 'sedition and blasphemy'.[246]

Meanwhile, in Luke 23:12, we are told that the 'scapegoating' of Jesus did, indeed, have the effect of bringing warring parties together: 'That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies'. Heim finds this particularly significant: not only do the Gospels show how sacrifice works, they show that it does work. However, they also show that it is wrong and for the simple reason that the victim – who is visible for the first time – is clearly innocent. Of course, this was probably true of all previous victims but it is even more true of Jesus whose guiltlessness is proclaimed almost as a refrain throughout the story: by Judas Iscariot in Matthew 27:4 ('I have sinned by betraying innocent blood'); by the 'criminal' in Luke 23:41 ('this man has done nothing wrong') and by the centurion at the end of the same chapter ('Certainly this man was innocent').

[243] Ibid., 116, 16.
[244] Ibid., 17.
[245] Ibid., 116.
[246] Ibid., 117.

For Heim, this 'extraordinary clarity with which the Gospels paint the sacrificial mechanism' cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence: clearly, the exposure of sacrifice is the point.[247] Indeed, for Heim, as for Girard, this exposure is part of what constitutes the 'objective revelation' contained in Scripture.[248] Furthermore, recalling our earlier discussion of the developing anti-sacrificial project in the Bible, Heim sees the same 'unveiling' and condemnation of scapegoating sacrifice in the Old Testament as well as in the New. He suggests that it 'is no accident… that many of Israel's greatest prophets linked their outspoken rebuke of violence and exploitation in society with a critique of sacrifice'.[249] The prophetic message was, essentially, 'To know God is to know the cause of the victim'[250] and Heim argues that these prophets saw 'a direct connection between the social victim and the ritual victim'; [251] they discerned the invisible or forgotten victims behind the Temple sacrificial system.

If this seems somewhat fanciful (a possibility which Heim acknowledges several times)[252] his reading of Isaiah 53 is, perhaps, less so. For him, the fourth servant song is not so much 'a mystical job description for a unique messiah' but 'an anthropological account of a repeated reality' – and, as with John 11:50 and Luke 23:12, the scapegoating theme really does seem to be present in the text. Verses 4 and 5 describe how 'the servant' was not 'struck down by God' as 'we' would like to believe but, rather, 'he was wounded for our transgressions' – i.e. we killed him because this is how we, historically, deal with our problems. As always, this sinful strategy worked (the punishment that was upon him 'made us whole') but there is no doubt that what happened was 'a perversion of justice' (verse 8). As Heim says, 'This is about as clear as it can be about religious scapegoating violence. It is an unequivocally bad thing, with undeniably good results'.[253]

Verse 10 ('Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain') is, admittedly, something of a problem for this interpretation. As Heim says, it appears 'to turn around

[247] Ibid., 125.
[248] Ibid., 213.
[249] Ibid., 93.
[250] Williams 1991, 155. Quoted in ibid., 95.
[251] Heim 2006, 95.
[252] Ibid., 134, 165.
[253] Ibid., 99.

and say it is all God's idea after all' – but this simply cannot be what it means, he maintains.[254] If it is, then, as Timothy Gorringe puts its, 'the suffering of scapegoats' is 'ultimately endorsed'.[255] Similarly, Heim says that a God who accepted 'the evil killing of an innocent' would be 'a God who has read Nietzsche, and agrees'![256] Of course, as we saw earlier, Jeffery, Ovey and Sach are happy to read the text in precisely this way: for them, there is no problem saying that God used something of which He also disapproved. Meanwhile, from one perspective, Heim says the same thing.

As we saw earlier, Jeffery *et al* believe that while the execution of Jesus was an 'unjust act of violence', nonetheless 'God worked through *those same actions* for his good purposes'. In the same way, Heim has what he calls a 'stereoscopic' perspective of the cross: 'Jesus' death saves the world, and it ought not happen. It's God's plan and an evil act. It is a good bad thing'.[257] However, like Marshall, Heim thinks in terms of Jesus submitting to human violence in order to overcome it as opposed to him enduring human violence in order to satisfy God as *per* Jeffery *et al*. (For Heim as for Weaver and Marshall, this is, effectively, 'divine violence'). Clearly, the particular violence to which Jesus submitted in Heim's understanding was sacrificial scapegoating. By allowing himself to be sacrificed, Jesus exposed the sinful mechanism 'at the deep intersection of our religion and our politics'[258] – although, of course, it was when he rose from the dead that his innocence was definitively established, the injustice of the mechanism definitively exposed and its power broken. Scapegoating still occurs, of course, but when it does, it is now likely to be named as such and – in societies touched by the Gospel, at least – 'victims have become visible'.[259] This, says Heim, is the objective achievement of the cross. It is not 'the sum total of Jesus' saving work' but it is its 'distinctive focus'.[260]

At this point, Heim is acknowledging a possible objection to his (and Girard's) thesis (which, as we saw earlier, could equally be levelled at both Weaver and Marshall):

[254] Ibid.
[255] Gorringe 1996, 49.
[256] Heim 2006, 99.
[257] Ibid., 17, 108.
[258] Ibid., 306.
[259] Ibid., 261.
[260] Ibid., 305.

namely, that it tends 'toward the impression that all that is needed in Christ's work is a particularly dramatic demonstration of a truth we need to learn, as opposed to a divine act by whose power we are transformed'.[261] To correct this impression, Heim stresses that 'Christ's death and resurrection… objectively alter our bondage to the specific sin of scapegoating'.[262] As with Marshall, it could be argued that he does not really explain how this works. However, his 'confession' is 'grounded' in 'the general claim that in Christ God has acted to change us objectively and subjectively across many dimensions of life' and, like Weaver and Marshall, Heim also sees the resurrection as an objective victory over all the powers of evil including death.[263]

A second possible objection to his/Girard's thesis (which, again, Heim anticipates) is that it could be read as implying that 'once we have seen the things Girard describes, we don't need the Gospels themselves', as if 'Christian tradition' were a mere 'adjunct to Girard's theory' rather than Girard's theory being something which 'illuminat[es] an aspect of biblical truth'.[264] Like Girard himself, Heim is keen to stress that 'the proper relation here is the second'.[265] Furthermore, Heim suggests that 'Girard has in some respects overstated his case'.[266] Nonetheless, he is convinced that Girard 'has seen something crucially important and offered us a genuinely new perspective to bring to some of our traditional problems'[267] – a conclusion with which Hardin, Alison, Rohr, Bartlett, Daly and Gorringe all agree, to a greater or lesser extent.[268]

My own conclusion is that what Heim says of Girard's writing is true of his own: 'it points insistently to things lying in plain sight' – such as Luke's almost throwaway comment that Herod and Pilate who had previously been enemies became friends as a result of their involvement in the execution/scapegoating of Jesus. At points like this, his case is compelling and the obvious strength of his approach is that it provides a (non-

[261] Ibid., 13.
[262] Ibid., 320.
[263] Ibid., 321-24.
[264] Ibid., 12.
[265] Ibid. Heim does not specify where Girard says this.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 75, 173, 210, 419-20; Daly 2007, 38; Gorringe 1996, 26.

violent) reason why, paraphrasing Luke 24:26, it was 'necessary that the Messiah should suffer *these* [specific] things'. Heim is obviously correct in saying that for other purposes (such as 'sharing the promise of eternal life through resurrection') 'another kind of death would have served as well'.[269] Meanwhile, he is not 'afraid' of the sacrificial language used about Christ's death in the Scriptures. As he puts it, such passages 'refer both to the sacrificial practice that claimed Jesus and to the redemptive power that worked against it'.[270] He even applies this to Romans 3:25a ('God put [Jesus] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood') suggesting that it means only that 'God steps forward in Jesus to be… subject to the human practice of atonement in blood, not because that is God's preferred logic… but because this is the very site where human bondage and sin are enacted'.[271]

This is certainly an appealing piece of exegesis but I suspect that Jeffery *et al* would not find it convincing. Quite possibly, they would see a reference to punishment in verses 25b-26 ('He did this to show his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed' – i.e. God had to punish sin eventually). However, even if they would be right to do that, I agree with Hardin (and Weaver) that a few pro-sacrificial/penal proof-texts should not carry more weight than the clearly anti-sacrificial and non-violent trajectory of the Bible as a whole. As Heim himself says, we cannot pattern our theology of the cross 'on the mechanism that is revealed to have killed Jesus' – although, of course, this is precisely what we often have done.[272]

Heim describes the death of Jesus as the 'sacrifice to end sacrifice' and people such as Jeffery, Ovey and Sach would, no doubt, be happy to say the same – after all, Hebrews 10:8-10 tells us that 'sacrifices and offerings' have been 'abolished' as a result of 'the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all'. However, Heim suggests that proponents of penal substitution/satisfaction drastically misinterpret what this means. In their version of the sacrifice to end sacrifice (he says):

[269] Ibid., 305, 10.
[270] Ibid., 308.
[271] Ibid., 143.
[272] Ibid., 293.

> God has taken over a human scapegoating sacrifice (the execution of Jesus) and turned it into a unique scapegoating sacrifice of unimaginable magnitude. God is doing what human sacrifice does, but on a much larger scale, and one time only. God has not stepped into the process to oppose it, but to perfect it… Instead of God throwing a wrench into the gears of human sacrifice… [He] has endorsed that machinery, borrowing it to perform the biggest and most effective sacrifice of all.[273]

Alison, Rohr, Daly and Gorringe all say very much the same thing[274] but one does not have to be a Girardian to accept Heim's conclusion here. Weaver has the same issue with Heim and Girard that he does with Marshall: for him, 'sending Jesus on a mission of dying to expose the scapegoat mechanism' is (again) 'uncomfortably close to… divinely intended violence'.[275] However, he fully agrees with Heim's statement above, suggesting that all satisfaction-based atonement theories turn God into 'the ultimate practitioner of scapegoating'[276] and this is why I agree with Hardin that 'the deconstructive work of [Weaver, Heim, and others] regarding exchange theories [i.e. all satisfaction-based theories including and especially penal substitution] is complete'.[277] There may still be a debate within the non-violent camp over the issue of divine intentionality (although, as we have seen, this is arguably just a difference of emphasis) but there is also a clear consensus that whatever was happening when Jesus died, it was not about satisfying – and particularly not about 'pacifying' – God. All these theologians agree with Weaver that God was not the 'target' of the death of Jesus; that the death was not aimed 'God-ward'.

Conclusion

As I have indicated throughout, I stand firmly within this 'non-violent camp' myself. Remembering Weaver's statement quoted at the beginning that 'atonement theology is actually a discussion of our image of God',[278] I am convinced that the 'bloodthirsty' god of penal substitution – who demands what is in effect a human sacrifice – is not

[273] Ibid., 300.
[274] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 172, 210; Daly 2007, 39; Gorringe 1996, 68.
[275] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 352. Finlan has similar concerns (with Girard). Finlan 2005, 93-95.
[276] Jersak & Hardin (eds.) 2007, 350.
[277] Ibid., 73.
[278] Ibid., 340.

compatible with the non-violent God revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus. Furthermore, I agree with Hardin that all satisfaction-based atonement theories are 'sacrificial' in this negative sense and, thus, problematic. [279] Again, the issue is the 'direction' of Christ's death: whether Jesus died to satisfy God's justice (as in the penal theory) or His honour (as in Anselm's), the message is that only a death can satisfy Him, that He 'needs blood' – and, thus, that He is violent.

Although this terminology (the 'direction' of Jesus' death) is his own, Weaver is often reluctant to say that God willed the death of Christ in any sense, as we have seen. Indeed, at one point he even goes so far as to state explicitly that Jesus' death was not willed by God.[280] Like Marshall, I believe that such a claim '[flies] in the face of the accumulated weight of New Testament evidence'.[281] I also agree with Marshall that there is a world of difference between saying that 'God wanted or required [the death of Christ] to satisfy his own holiness, as satisfaction atonement maintains' and saying that He 'willed it for a different reason'[282] – and, again, so does Weaver in the final analysis: this is the very point that he is making (I suggest) with his distinction of 'violent' theories in which the death is aimed God-ward and non-violent ones in which it is not.

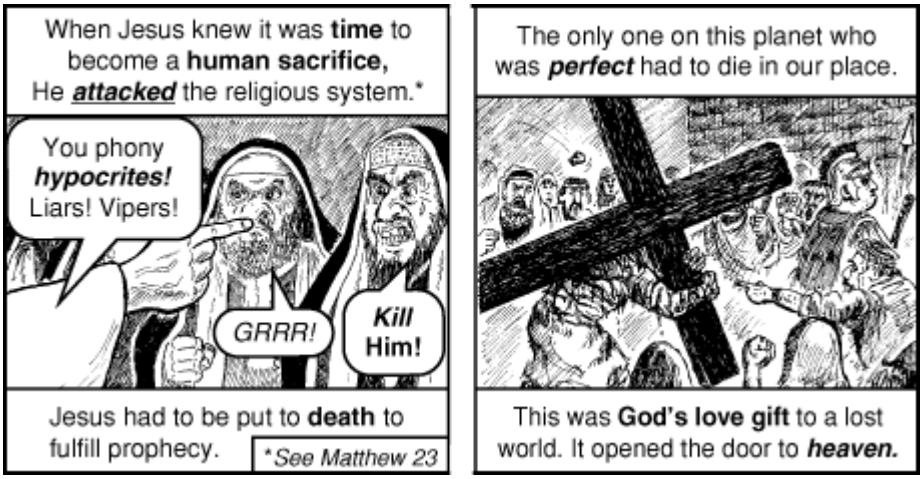
Thus, in their own ways, Weaver, Marshall, and Heim are all attempting to provide non-violent explanations of why Jesus had to die – and in the particular way that he did. Of the three, I find Marshall's most satisfactory since he neither downplays the divine intentionality in the death of Jesus (as Weaver sometimes does) nor depends too much on Girard (as, arguably, Heim does). Indeed, it could be said that Marshall occupies the centre of the theological ground on which all three are standing: his description of the cross as the place where God-in-Christ allowed sin to 'do its worst' in order to break its power by rising again is, effectively, a more general version of Heim's thesis; meanwhile, as we saw earlier, Weaver is not averse to using the very same language at times – even if he subsequently retreats from the implications of it.

[279] Ibid., 76.
[280] Weaver 2001, 211.
[281] Marshall 2003, 81.
[282] Ibid., 90.

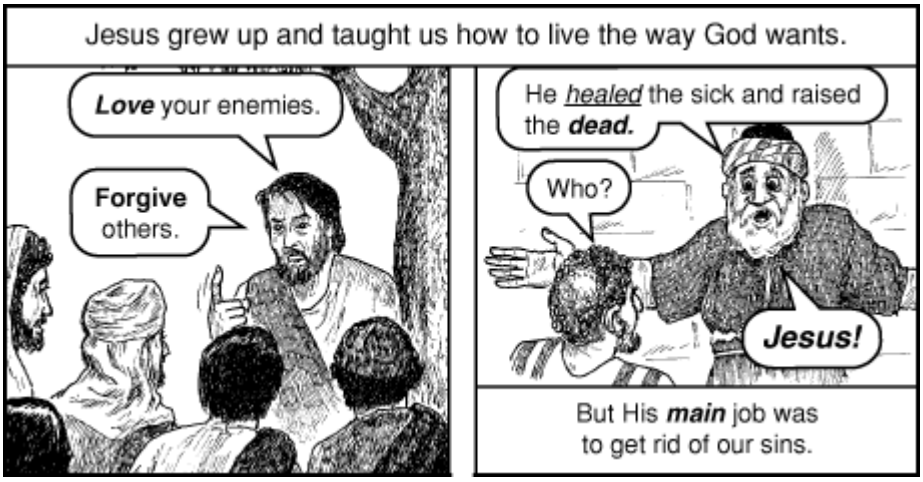
As previously acknowledged, the very generality of Marshall's language may be a problem for some, but again I suggest that this is not a fatal flaw in his position or the non-violent position generally. Certainly, the problems with all the traditional models are far more significant and, as Hardin said, the deconstructive work of the non-violent theorists is complete. No doubt there is more 'constructive' work to be done in this area, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Appendix

A.



B.



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