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Confrontation and the Crucifixion: Another Look at Sacrifice and Atonement

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An abstract of

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Abstract

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By: Rebecca L. Copeland

In this paper, I examine the elements of sacrifice and sacrificial festivals as contained in the Hebrew Bible and how these understandings of sacrifice affect both Christian worshop and understandings of the crucifixion. Then I look at the contributions that Rene′ Girard and modern anthropological studies have made to our understanding of the role of sacrifice, and use his hypothesis to reinterpret the stories behind the sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible. Finally, I synthesize this material in a theory of direct confrontation, holding that while the crucifixion can be understood to be a sacrifice, our understanding of sacrifice must change.

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Introduction

In his Orations, Gregory Nazianzus, the 4th-century bishop of Constantinople, invites his opponents to speculate about "gods and sacrifices… about the Resurrection, the judgment… or about the Sufferings of Christ" because "in these questions to hit the mark is not useless, to miss it is not dangerous."[1] When I first read this invitation, I was puzzled and intrigued. I had not yet encountered the multitude of speculations on the crucifixion or questioned the predominant theory of atonement. I disagreed about the importance of such speculation, thinking that to hit the mark is much more than "not useless," and suspecting that to miss it *is* dangerous. Nevertheless, in this discussion of atonement I take up his invitation in the hope of finding that which is useful, and praying to avoid the dangers that have become apparent when the mark is missed.

The core of Christian faith is that humanity has somehow been saved by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at once both God and human being. Accepting Christian doctrine about the incarnation, this statement raises the question of "What is meant by salvation?" and "How does the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ accomplish it?" There is a virtually limitless supply of theological reflection on both of these questions.

For the purposes of this discussion, I define sin as human action which is not in accordance with God's will. This belief stands in tension with an understanding that God is the root, source and being of all power. This tension—that God is all-powerful and yet there are things which are not in accordance with God's will—can be reconciled by understanding that God granted both free will and actual power to put the decisions of the

[1] Gregory of Nazianzus, "Oration 27," in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. by Frederick Williams (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 33-34.

free will into effect to human beings.[2] In Genesis' creation accounts God made human beings in God's own image and granted them dominion over the earth (Gen 1:27-30). Because we tend to understand power as a limited good, we usually equate the giving of power with a reduction in the power of the one giving it. In this framework, if God has 100% of the units of powers and shares 10% of those units with humanity, God's power is reduced to 90% of the units. However, God's ways are not our ways, nor is God's power a limited commodity. God grants actual creative power to human beings, and yet retains all sovereignty. In this discussion, I am defining "sovereign" as "independent of all others," similar in idea to "perfection" as completeness or wholeness.[3] God's power is not dependent on the actions, or even the existence, of any other entity. More like love than a quantifiable good, God's power is not diminished when it is shared. Nor is it diminished by free will, possibly the most remarkable aspect of the story of Adam and Eve. With the gift of free will came the ability to choose to work in concert with God, or to choose to work in some way contrary to God's plan, which is inherently in rebellion against God. Because God is not diminished or harmed when beings choose to work contrary to God's plan, God can choose to continue to providentially sustain even those who do not work in concert with God's plan.

To live without reference to God's plan is sin. To disobey, or rebel against God, brings disharmony and tension into the created order. So sin can also be seen to include the disharmony brought into the world when human beings exercise the power given to them without reference to God's will. This systemic sin is often referred to as "evil" in order to differentiate it from individual sin, although both terms—sin and evil—could

[2] This granting of free will and power may or may not have been made exclusively to human beings. I am making no claim to its exclusivity in recognizing that *is* given to human beings.
[3] *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. "Sovereign."

refer either to the actions of an individual or the unrighteous systems those actions create and maintain. Thus, one person abusing another is both and evil and a sinful act, and the system of oppression such an act brings into being and undergirds is also sin, or evil.[4]

The interplay of free will, power and sin is most easily illustrated by using the metaphor of music. On many Sundays, handbell choirs or orchestras perform in churches across the country. Playing the same songs together, under the direction of a conductor, these performances are a magnificent witness to what the world might be if we all utilized our power in accordance with God's will. But when a musician strays from the music and plays the wrong note the performance is somewhat marred. Imagine the cacophony that would result if at these performances, each musician played according to whatever song they selected, with no regard for any overarching theme! In this world, we have billions of human beings. Each human being has the same gift of and right to exercise their free will. They can choose to exercise that will together, in accordance with the sheet music provided by the Great Conductor, of they can choose to go their own ways. Either way, sounds will be produced.

Christian doctrines of original sin and the debasement of will can be an exercise in gross avoidance of responsibility. Human beings seem to want to blame someone else, anyone else, for the state of their world, their communities, and their lives. As Paul wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate… Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom 7:15-20). Although rarely stated, this desire to shift the responsibility for the state of the world has made a significant impact on the discussion of

[4] While both sin and evil have tragic consequences for human beings, in this discussion we are focusing on sin and evil as consequences of human actions. We are not discussing the simply tragic—disasters that we have not yet traced to human originators.

atonement theory through the centuries. Christians have characterized what happens in atonement most frequently as a change in God (most stereotypically from the wrathful God of the Old Testament to the loving and merciful Father of the New), or a change in human nature which enables human obedience to God's will (as though human nature had rendered the previous rebellion was unavoidable). Some theories opt for a compromise, holding that the atonement affected the relationship *between* God and humanity, thinking to absolve both parties for the original breach.

If, as many modern theologians hold, salvation is the restoration of right relationship between God and humanity, the question becomes: What is the right relationship? Friedrich Schleiermacher described the common element of all piety as "the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God."[5] Right relationship entails the recognition that human beings are not sovereign, but are in a state of dependence on God. This right relationship consists of human free will choosing to obey the sovereign will of God, of human power used in accordance with God's plan. Looking at the evidence of a broken world, filled with broken relationships and broken people, it would appear that such salvation has not been accomplished. However, there is more than one vantage-point for viewing the world, and it can also be seen to be filled with people still in relationship and that creation is in various stages of the process of healing. From this vantage point, it would seem that salvation is at work. Whether salvation is already accomplished, is at work in the world, or is yet to come, the very concept of salvation begets the question of how salvation is (or is to be) accomplished

[5] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), I §4.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks of the Christian faith is the idea that salvation comes about through the death of Jesus Christ, even if modern theologians make this doctrine more palatable by including the life and resurrection of Christ, as well as the death. Two out of three categories of atonement theories identified in Gustaf Aulen's classic typology (substitutionary theories and cosmic conflict theories) that have dominated western theological reflection for the past millennia hold that atonement was accomplished in the crucifixion. Many modern theologians have rejected the idea that there is anything salvific about the cross. This brings us to the purpose of this work: How should Christians think of the crucifixion? Is it a sacrifice to God effecting either expiation of human sin or propitiation of an angry deity? Is it a tragic accident? Is it a symptom of human sin? Or is it something more than any of these?

In pursuit of an answer to these questions, we will first examine the three categories of atonement theories that have dominated western theological reflection, as well as modern critiques of these theories from liberation, feminist and womanist theologians. In this examination, we find that, while the concept of sacrifice is present in a great deal of scripture and most theological reflection on the atonement, modern critiques have found such images of sacrifices to be dangerous in our contemporary society. In order to understand these images in their original context, we will examine the conceptual framework of sacrifice found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Both the writers of the New Testament and the early Church interpreted the crucifixion in terms of sacrifice from the very beginning of Christianity. In a society that has lost both the practice and the conceptual framework of sacrifice, we must try to understand sacrifice on its own terms in order to understand what role (if any) it has to play in theories of

atonement. Third, we will look at how the concept of sacrifice has been used in Christian understandings of the crucifixion, specifically in the New Testament, celebrations of Holy Week, and Eucharistic worship. Fourth, we will look at modern reappropriations of the term (and concept) "sacrifice." Here, we will examine insight provided by current theological use of the concept of sacrifice, as well as modern anthropological theories regarding sacrifice. A better understanding of the roles and functions of sacrifice, as well as how the crucifixion does (and does not) satisfy the elements of sacrifice will better inform our understanding of how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ saves human beings. With input of these modern reappropriations, we will examine the scriptural foundations of the Hebrew sacrificial cult, and their implications for our understanding of the meaning of sacrifice. Finally, we will examine how the crucifixion functions both as a sacrifice and as the final unmasking of sacrifice—how God directly confronts human beings at the cross in order to restore the relationship between God and human beings.

Chapter 1:

Atonement and Crucifixion in the Current Discussion

That Jesus Christ accomplished *something*, and that this something somehow reconciled God and humanity is a core belief of Christianity. However, it remains open to debate and interpretation whether that something was accomplished through Christ's incarnation as a human being, through his death on the cross, through the resurrection, or through some combination of any of these. What exactly was accomplished—a change in God's attitude towards humanity, human beings' attitude towards God, or the actual status of human beings—likewise remains a matter of disagreement. Although many early interpreters clearly understood the crucifixion in sacrificial terms, neither of the socio-cultural contexts in which it occurred—Greco-Roman or Jewish—engaged in the practice of human sacrifice in the first century. Neither did the socio-cultural context of Christian interpreters through the intervening years. Nevertheless, Christians have continued to use sacrificial paradigms in their theories of atonement. This has led to two major problems for orthodoxy: first, it leads to the idea of division within the Godhead, in which the First Person of the Trinity requires something humanity is incapable of giving, and that incapacity would lead to humanity's utter damnation but for the intervention of the Second Person of the Trinity who satisfies the requirement. Second, it impugns the character of the First Person of the Trinity as (at worst) bloodthirsty, and (at best) rigid and unmerciful.

There are several issues that must be addressed in a satisfactory explanation of atonement. Such a theory would portray the character of God consistently with the character revealed in the rest of Scripture. A satisfactory theory would entail a full understanding of humanity, respecting the free will and agency of human beings while

also recognizing their brokenness and sinfulness. A theory of atonement should have a coherent mechanism that explains who or what is changed in the atonement, who effects the change, and how the change occurs.[6] The many atonement theories expounded over the years can be roughly grouped into the three categories described by Gustaf Aulen in his work, *Christus Victor*.[7] Although each contains certain insights into the divine-human relationship, none of these dominant atonement theories satisfactorily answers all of these criteria.

I. Dominant Theories

A. Vicarious Satisfaction and Later Substitutionary Theories of Atonement

Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* raises (and attempts to answer) the question, "What reason or necessity was there for God to have been made Man, and by His death… to have restored life to the world; whereas He might have done this either by another person—an angel or a man—or by a mere act of His own will?"[8] Anselm's theory of vicarious satisfaction was propagated in a feudal framework of shame and honor. Vicarious satisfaction theory holds that human beings have dishonored (or shamed) God, and therefore owe God satisfaction. Unfortunately, human beings can never honor God enough to expiate the insult they have offered. Jesus' sinless life and voluntary sacrifice provides this satisfaction on behalf of humanity. [9]

While shame and honor are no longer such compelling concepts in our modern understanding, Anselm's influence can be seen in later substitutionary atonement

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[6] For a discussion of criteria for evaluating atonement theories, see Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 249-250.
[7] Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954).
[8] Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo, of Why God was Made Man*, Book I, Chapter I, (Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1858), 1-2.
[9] Tanner, 248.

theories. In substitutionary atonement theory, human beings have some duty or obligation to God that they fail to fulfill. This failure places them in the position of owing something to God. Here the problem arises, because human beings owe everything in their existence to God. Anything a created human being can offer to God already belongs to God, and so it cannot make up for that which they previously failed to fulfill. In substitutionary atonement theories, God solves this impasse by sending or allowing the Son to become incarnate as a sinless human being. As a sinless human being, Jesus Christ has no debt owing to God. As God, or God's son, Jesus Christ has infinite worth to God. Therefore, Jesus Christ's death, as a sacrifice, resets the scales, removing the unpayable debt.

Substitutionary atonement theory has been formulated using both penal and economic paradigms. In penal substitutionary theory, human rebellion does not simply violate some arrangement—it constitutes a crime. This treason against the Creator merits not just imprisonment, but death. However, the merciful Creator allows or causes the Second Person to suffer the death sentence on behalf of humanity. Since Jesus Christ is sinless and does not merit any punishment, his death is sufficient to release humanity from its death sentence. While this model has some Biblical support—"The wages of sin are death," (Rom 6:23), and "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn 2:2)—it does not logically cohere with the judicial framework it borrows. There is no modern concept of legal justice that allows the criminal to go free if someone else agrees to suffer the punishment in his or her stead. There is no judge, or victim's family, that would let the guilty go free just because *someone* is punished.[10]

[10] At least not officially—I make no claims about the perfections of our legal system.

The economic substitutionary model characterizes human obedience in financial terms. Humanity is under a contract in which God sustains life, and everything human beings produce belongs to God. At some point, humanity tries to withhold some of its "produce" (its obedience). Instead of accumulating a small amount of savings, or a little independence, human beings end up with nothing but a debt owing in the ledger. Because everything already belongs to God, there are no acts of superogation—human beings can never act in anyway, or do anything, that leaves God owing them something. Therefore, humanity will never have any coin with which to pay the debt. Once again, humanity is at an impasse, deserving nothing but imprisonment or destruction for its unpayable debt. At this point, the Second Person of the Trinity, one who does not owe anyone anything, freely pays humanity's debt out of the Second Person's unlimited purse. The crucifixion is the payment of humanity's debt to God by Jesus.

Vicarious satisfaction and substitutionary models of atonement do not do well under the criteria specified earlier. While they do recognize the hopelessly lost condition of human beings, they do not leave room for any human agency in the process of salvation. Human beings are simply under sentence and waiting for rescue. While the mechanism of atonement may have made sense in earlier times, only the economic substitutionary model has any "currency" in modern understanding. Our free market system recognizes the transferability of debt, and creditors are perfectly satisfied as long as they are paid—it does not matter who does the paying. However, even in the economic model, the mechanism is unsatisfactory in that God is the one changed in the atonement (satisfied and no longer eager to punish human beings) and the one who causes the change (Jesus, as God, making payment to God). This inconsistency is

insurmountable, and brings us to the greatest failing of substitutionary theories of atonement—their portrayal of the character of God. As we have just seen, substitutionary theories put Jesus and some aspect of the Godhead (usually assumed to be the Father) in conflict over the fate of humanity. Jesus wants human beings to be forgiven, and is willing to give his life, while the other aspect wants judgment, even if it means the destruction of humanity. While the character of Jesus is preserved as the loving and merciful Savior, this portrayal of the wrathful God of justice is suggestive of thinly-veiled Marcionism, treating the God of the justice (or the Old Testament God) as a separate entity with a separate will from Jesus of the New Testament. Not only is God portrayed as divided, but also one aspect of God is shown as unloving and unmerciful, incapable of practicing the ethic of love and forgiveness taught by Jesus in the gospels. Substitutionary theories of atonement are only partially satisfactory in their depiction of humanity, and they fail utterly in the descriptions of the mechanism of atonement and the character of God.

B. Abelard and Moral Exemplar Theory

In response to Anselm's vicarious satisfaction atonement theory, Abelard advanced what has come to be called the moral exemplar theory. In this theory of atonement, human beings were not so much morally debased as they were deficient in understanding. They did not know how to live a life obedient to God. The crucifixion demonstrates "the perfect manifestation in human form of God's self-sacrificial, condescending love, a helpful example for our imitation or morally powerful influence, spurring us to a similar love."[11] In this theory, Jesus Christ is not a payment or a victim,

[11] Tanner, 248.

but is rather the teacher. Jesus shows human beings how to be more truly, more fully human in the way they were meant to be.

The moral exemplar theory provides a satisfactory portrayal of the character of God. There is no division within the Godhead—Jesus' teaching ministry is simply a continuation of the loving instruction God has given throughout history. God desires the salvation of human beings, and provides the means for them to live righteous lives. The moral exemplar theory's problem is not with its portrayal of God, but with its lack of any mechanism for atonement. Jesus provides a model for human beings to emulate, placing all importance on the earthly teaching of Jesus and making the crucifixion simply an object lesson in obedience. The life and ministry of Jesus might inspire or instruct, but they do not fundamentally change humanity. Jesus just provides a pattern to follow. The following of that pattern is, and always was, something within human beings' own power. This theory certainly recognizes the free will and agency of humanity. According to the moral exemplar theory, human beings pretty much save themselves! The moral exemplar theory does not take either the crucifixion or human sin sufficiently seriously.

C. The Cosmic Conflict Atonement Theory

The third category of explanations of what was accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ posits that Jesus' actions did not change God's will towards humans or humans' will towards God, but that they defeated the powers of evil opposed to God's will. Gustaf Aulen terms this category the "classic idea of atonement," arguing that it is "the dominant idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period… in the New Testament… the ruling idea of the Atonement for the first thousand

years of Christian history...[and] in Martin Luther."[12] Drawing from many images and illustrations in the New Testament and patristic sources, this highly dualistic concept of salvation roughly argues that human beings are the rightful property of the powers of evil. One explanation for this state would be that humanity was captured by the powers of evil, won away from God in battle and Satan's rightful prisoners of war. Another explanation for how humanity came to belong to Satan would be that human beings sold themselves to Satan through their own free will. Their decisions to rebel against God made them the rightful property of Satan. In this model, Satan has not won ground against God in cosmic battle, but Satan has stolen God's precious possession through subterfuge. In either explanation, humanity now belongs to Satan, and God wants it back. In this model, the Incarnation can be seen as a rescue mission, with the crucifixion and the resurrection demonstrating the final defeat of those powers opposed to God. God ransoms back humanity by offering God's own Son, God and human being, in exchange. The devil cannot resist such a trade, and releases all of humanity in exchange for this one pearl of great worth. However, Jesus is a prize the devil can't hold on to, and God's final victory over the devil and all powers of evil is demonstrated in the resurrection.

The cosmic conflict theory better addresses the criteria for evaluation set forth earlier than do either of the other atonement theories. The mechanism of atonement is perfectly understandable in a world quite familiar with the use of hostage-taking as a negotiating tactic. No matter how slight an interest the devil actually has in human beings, the devil will take them hostage in order to strike at the prize he really wants—God's self. The devil is the one defeated, and Jesus effects the defeat. This mechanism of atonement is delightfully familiar to anyone who has read (or seen) C.S. Lewis' *The*

[12] Aulen, 6.

Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. The problems with the cosmic conflict theory arise with the nature of humanity and of God. First, in this theory, human beings lack agency. While there might be some idea that human sin has contributed to human beings' status as under the power of the devil, that idea is marginal at best. Human beings also lack agency in their salvation. As in substitutionary atonement theories, they do nothing but wait to be rescued. In addition to the absolute powerlessness of human beings in cosmic conflict theories, God's sovereignty is perceived as limited in that the devil has sufficient power that God must treat with him. While ultimately, God is *more* powerful than the devil, this theory treats God's power as simply being a larger quantity on a continuum with the power of the devil. It constrains God's ability to save by insinuating that God is bound by some rules of cosmic warfare. God *must* engage the devil, and play by certain rules, in the freeing of humanity. Ultimately, the cosmic conflict theory cannot satisfy the criteria set forth for evaluating theories of atonement.

None of the three major categories of atonement theory in discussion today meet all of the criteria used in evaluation of such theories. The models that portray God as being of the best character also portray God as being of the least power. In the moral exemplar theory, God is kind and gentle, but ultimately humans must save themselves. In the cosmic battle theory, God is a good and powerful savior, but must either negotiate or do battle with Satan for rightful control over humanity. Conversely, in substitutionary atonement theories, salvation and condemnation are entirely within God's control, but God is portrayed as an unforgiving deity who *will* receive his pound of flesh. The theories do not agree on who or what is changed via the cross, be it humanity, God or the devil. The mechanisms range from outside our experiential understanding to the

nonsensical. In addition to these models' failures to satisfy classic criteria for evaluation of atonement theories, modern critiques have pointed out the detrimental effects of substitutionary theories of atonement on the lives of marginalized people around the world. This criticism has led to renewed interest in what role the crucifixion might play in atonement in modern theological discussion.

II. Modern Critiques

Of the three major models that frame the current discussion of Christian atonement theory today, moral exemplar theories focus on the incarnational life of Jesus Christ, while both substitionary theories and the cosmic conflict theory focus primarily on the death of Jesus Christ. In each, the resurrection is evidence of the victory, a happy ending to a tragic story, but it carries nothing decisive about the relationship between human beings and God. In contradiction to Gregory of Nazianzus' theory that missing the mark in this speculation is not dangerous, at least three schools of theology have emerged in response to the damaging consequences these theories have had on different populations. Each criticizes the results of the lived-out praxis of earlier atonement theories, and each seeks a new praxis in which Christian faith can avoid these dangers and be the life-giving faith Christians believe it to be. Latin American Liberation theology focuses on the effects of the Christology of colonizers on those who have been colonized, while feminist and womanist theologies both examine the effects of Christian assertions on the lives of different marginalized populations.

A. Latin American Liberation Theology

When Spanish conquistadores landed in the New World, they brought their images of Christ and understandings of atonement with them. Some of the images of

Spanish Christology that were imported to the New World in the 15th-century include Christ the Defeated Victim, the Celestial-Monarch, and the Pacifist.[13] Each of these images has its roots in different theories of atonement, and each inculcated an impotence and resignation in those who suffered at the hands of the conquerors. Saul Trinidad describes the "dead or dying Spanish Christ" as seen in,

> his eight centuries of struggle, agony, and suffering under the oppressor. This Christology will win still more strength from the event of the Christ of Calvary, but it will have no part with the resurrected one. This is a Christology calculated to impel a human being to search out happiness in suffering.[14]

This image of Christ is based on the belief that the mission of the Second Person of the Trinity was to die. It finds its roots in substitutionary theories of atonement that hold that Jesus came to take humanity's place, to bear our punishment in our stead. This image of Christ, "produces feelings of pity and compassion, but…does not inspire with confidence and hope… reminds the sinner of his sins, but… does not make the average person want to identify himself with the suffering Savior."[15] The defeated victim Christ seems to have no power to save, or to inspire trust in any part of the Godhead.

The Pacifist Christ has deep roots in Biblical teachings. This Christ turns the other cheek and blesses those who persecute him. This is the Christ of moral exemplar theories of atonement, the Christ who shows the proper way of being human. The image of Christ as a pacifist carries no threat to those in power, to those committing abuses against their fellow human beings. Christ the Pacifist offers one way for those suffering

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[13] Saul Trinidad, "Christology, Conquista, Colonization," in *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, ed. by Jose Miquez Bonino (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 50-54.
[14] Trinidad, 50.
[15] Eugene Nida, "Mariology in Latin America," in *Readings in Missionary Anthropology*, ed. by William Smalley, (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974), 17.

abuses to live, but no hope for a change to the status quo. Once again, this image of Christ seems to lack the power to save human beings.

The image of Christ as a Celestial Monarch is the image of Christ who has "authority over all things, spiritual and temporal."[16] This Christ is the victor of the cosmic conflict. All things belong to the Celestial Monarch Christ, who has won them back from the powers of evil. Unfortunately, this image of Christ in Latin America allowed Christ to be "identified with the lord of the hacienda, with the *patron*, or landlord, with the *jefe*—'lords' every one of them, to whom one doffs one's sombrero."[17] In Latin American theology, Christ the Celestial Monarch authorizes both church and crown, and legitimizes the power of the conquerors, those who have abused the people. Like Christ the Pacifist, this image of Christ maintains the status quo. While this Christ certainly has the *power* to save, it is unclear whether he has the *desire* to save those suffering in this world.

Understandably, Latin American critiques of these images and their underlying theologies have not been positive. Trinidad concludes that "whatever the Christological image might be, it always amounted to a single function—the legitimation of exploitive domination."[18] The Protestant Church brought similarly defective images of "the beggar Christ," "the cosmic Christ alone," and the "middle-class Christ."[19] All of these images of Christ, traceable to different understandings of how Christ saves, influenced the indigenous people and the developing theology of Latin America. The indigenous tribes:

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[16] Trinidad, 52.
[17] Trinidad 52.
[18] Trinidad, 54.
[19] Saul Trinidad & Juan Stam, "Christ in Latin American Protestant Preaching," in *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, ed. by Joes Miquez Bonino (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 40-43.

> Did not adopt him [Christ] in a syncretistic way, but, of the Christ brought by the conquerors they adopted precisely what made them most like him: a Christ who had himself been annihilated and conquered. In this suffering Christ they recognized themselves, and from him they learned patience and resignation to enable them to survive with a minimum of feeling on the cross that was laid on them.[20]

It comes as no surprise that people who have suffered because of the sins of others for centuries, who have been impoverished so that others could become rich, would have no use for the substitutionary atonement theories predominant in Western Christianity. The penal model of substitutionary atonement—that human beings committed sins meriting death and Jesus died in their stead, thus earning them eternal life—lets those who conquered, murdered, abused and oppressed the people of Latin America off the hook, and provides no solace for those who have experienced lifetimes of oppression. The economic model of substitutionary atonement—that Jesus settles humanity's debt by paying the bill they never could afford—withholds justice from those who have seen their countries, their people, and themselves enslaved for the enrichment of others. In these models of atonement, the only means of social transformation are the feelings of guilt or gratitude felt by those who have power at the abstract idea of being forgiven. After five hundred years of evidence to the contrary, Liberation theology cannot expect the voluntary conversion of the oppressors to bring about social change.

The Jesus of Liberation theology bears no resemblance to either the dead and defeated victim on the cross or the Celestial Monarch who allows and upholds the worldly powers engaged in oppression. Rather, Liberation theology understands God as

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[20] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. by Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 11.

being in solidarity with the poor through Jesus' passion and death.[21] Jesus is the Liberator, not only from sin and death, but from self-interest and worldly oppression as well.[22] In this sense, he is seen as a subversive who speaks and acts in opposition to unjust power structures, and in solidarity with his brothers and sisters who are suffering under the yoke of oppression. Liberation encompasses the actualization of the Kingdom of God, a world of justice and liberty.[23] Christ on the cross is no longer an image of defeat, but of victory, for "Jesus took on oppression in order to set us free."[24] Jesus the Liberator is active, opposed to the status quo, angry at the oppression present in society, and filled with the power of God. Jesus the Liberator is an image of Christ whose actions can be emulated for the liberation of the oppressed in Latin America today.

In Liberation theology, the oppressed are offered a Jesus who wants them to be free and who died in opposition to their oppression. They are invited to make his struggle their own, just as he made their struggle his own. This model is more similar to Abelard's moral exemplar theory, in which the "conversion and amendment" that lead to reconciliation and atonement occurs within human beings.[25] Like Abelard's theory, Liberation theology presents a positive portrayal of God as loving and concerned for the welfare of humanity, particularly "the least of these." Liberation theology grants a great deal of importance to Jesus' earthly ministry, from his solidarity with the poor to his teachings of economic justice. However, like Abelard's theory, Liberation theology does not have a satisfactory mechanism of atonement. The people fight the battle, with at best

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[21] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. by Paul Burns, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 47.
[22] Boff & Boff, 49,
[23] Carlos R. Piar, *Jesus and Liberation: A Critical Analysis of the Christology of Latin American Liberation Theology*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 27-43.
[24] Boff & Boff, 53.
[25] Aulen, 146.

some inspiration and a basic game plan from God. This seems to be where Liberation theology has ended up—Christ can be seen in those who are suffering, and therefore we should work towards the ending of that oppression and suffering. Jesus himself lived in solidarity with the oppressed, he resisted injustice, and that is how we should live today. We are given a model to follow, but little or no empowerment from God. The Jesus of Liberation theology has the power to inspire us to save ourselves, but seems to lack any power himself. All of the power has been given to the people.

B. Divine Abuse and Feminist Criticism

Like Latin American Liberation theology, Feminist theology has focused on the intersection of theology and practice. Darby Kathleen Ray argues that "While theological warrants, logical consistency, historical continuity, and other traditional criteria by which theologies are typically judged are legitimate, their significance pales in comparison to the actual impact of such ideas and criteria on the real lives of particular people."[26] These commitments lead Feminist scholars to raise the questions: "What is the impact of atonement theories on the lived experience of women? And more specifically, What is the relationship between violence against women… and traditional understandings of sin and evil?"[27] Using these questions as a touchstone, Ray re-examines issues of sin, God and atonement, paying particular attention to their effect on victims of domestic violence.

Ray argues that categorizing sin as "disobedience, rebellion, and willfulness" does not accurately reflect the full range of human sin.[28] As Liberation theology also found,

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[26] Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998), 21.
[27] Ray, 21.
[28] Ray, 28-29.

such categorization tends to maintain the status quo, allowing those with power to maintain it at the expense of their victims. However, Ray goes on to argue that such categorization also deprives victims who do not engage in the dominant sin of pride of the gift of grace and forgiveness. It does not recognize different types of sin, and thus fails to recognize different needs for grace. While Ray is unwilling to reject all talk of sin, she recognizes a need to define it in such a way that recognizes individual guilt as well as systemic evil, and offers grace to both perpetrators of violence and victims. These concerns are addressed by defining sin "as distortion of the self's boundaries," holding abusers accountable for violation of other "selves", and also recognizing a complicity of victims in their own victimization, led by a lack of self-love.[29] This concept of sin is held alongside an "understanding of evil as systemic,"[30] in order to account for the full breadth of sin and evil.

In addressing understandings of God from a Feminist perspective, Ray first criticizes any ideas of God as omniscient because perpetrators of domestic abuse often engage in surveillance of their victims. [31] I must admit that I can't quite grasp why the destructive and imperfect attempts of human beings to grasp at powers ascribed to God means that God must not be thought to have those powers. God is understood as loving, but the concept of love has been twisted by perpetrators of domestic abuse so that it becomes one more chain binding their victims to them; yet I have not heard any critiques arguing that we should no longer think of God as love. Feminist criticism does an excellent job of pointing out when pale imitations of God's characteristics have been used to further oppression and other sinful behaviors. The proper response, however, is

[29] Ray, 32.
[30] Ray, 33.
[31] Ray, 44-45.

differentiation between the characteristic as ascribed to God and its abuse in the human realm of domestic violence, not forbidding the use of that characteristic altogether.

Ray goes on to critique Anselm's shame and honor understanding of vicarious satisfaction theory. Using modern studies of shame and honor societies, Ray explains that when a party of higher standing is addressed by one of lower standing, the party of higher standing can shame the offender either by pointing out the *faux pas*, or by absolutely ignoring the infraction. In either response, the honor of the first party is maintained, while the second party is shamed and thus loses standing. However, Ray points out a third option, dismissed by Anselm out of hand: the offended party can respond to the offending party as though they were equals, thus increasing the honor of all involved.[32] Scripture provides support for claiming that God responds in each of the three manners at different times and with different people. In the final critique, Ray describes the character of God as portrayed by Anselm's theory to be "a status-paranoid power-monger who deliberately humiliates and infantilizes human beings under the guise of justice."[33]

Finally, Ray turns to Feminist critiques of atonement theories. Having already dispatched Anselm's vicarious satisfaction theory, Ray also states that Abelard's moral exemplar theory is "too narrowly concerned with the individual and/or the human soul."[34] According to Ray, Feminist theologians join Liberation theologians "by defining salvation primarily in terms of 'liberation,'" of individuals, communities, and systems.[35] In Feminist theology, salvation consists of two steps: first a freedom from sin and evil,

[32] Ray, 50.
[33] Ray, 51.
[34] Ray, 54.
[35] Ray, 54.

and then a positive step towards wholeness. Whatever mechanism enacts these two steps, they must be consistent with each other. Ray joins other Feminist scholars in critiquing theories of atonement that focus on the crucifixion as the operative moment in atonement by citing how "a martyred Savior functions in many cases to keep victims of abuse in their death-dealing situations… Jesus' death becomes the example of perfect self-sacrifice that believers ought to emulate; and … can perpetuate cycles of victimization."[36] In response, Ray attempts to re-appropriate the cosmic conflict theory, while addressing certain concerns the theory raises for Feminists.

Ray criticizes the cosmic conflict theory's dualism, lack of human agency, and apparent belief in the finality of the cosmic triumph over evil.[37] Ray points out that, "contemporary Christians who do theology in a postmodern, tragic context may find claims about the 'defeat' of evil to be naïve and counterproductive."[38] Instead of seeing the crucifixion and resurrection as God's definitive victory over evil, Ray interprets them in light of the ongoing struggle against sin and evil. By using the cosmic conflict theory as a starting point, Ray emphasizes the reality of evil and characterizes God, "not as a triumphant superhero who squashes evil in one fell swoop but as One who circumvents convention in surprising ways. Jesus' life and death become revelations of how to respond to evil without becoming it."[39] Ray views sin as being directed "not against God but against creation, against concrete others."[40] In a persuasive rejection of substitutionary theories, Ray combines the cosmic conflict and moral exemplar theories,

[36] Ray, 57.
[37] Ray, 126-128.
[38] Ray, 132.
[39] Ray, 137.
[40] Ray, 140.

representing Jesus' life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection as God's participation in the resistance of evil, while inviting human beings to join in that struggle as well.

While Ray's understanding of atonement recognizes the continued presence of evil in the world and the seriousness of human sins (of all types), it strips away what the cosmic conflict theory best preserved: the power of God. Because tragedy and suffering still exist in the world, Ray characterizes idea that God has won a victory against evil as naïve and counterproductive. In her combination of the cosmic conflict and moral exemplar theories, the moral exemplar theory gets much more weight, as Jesus reveals how Christians should resist evil, rather than doing anything decisive about it himself.

C. Surrogacy and the Womanist Perspective

Writing from a Womanist perspective, Delores Williams writes a scathing critique of the sacred surrogacy of substitutionary atonement theories. She summarizes this surrogacy, saying, "sinful humankind has been redeemed because Jesus died on the cross in the place of humans, thereby taking human sin upon himself. In this sense Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure standing in the place of someone else: sinful humankind."[41] Williams is concerned that this sacralizing of surrogacy encourages systems of surrogacy, either voluntary or coerced, like those that have inflicted African-American women throughout history.

Rather than viewing atonement as salvation from sin, Williams characterizes it as an invitation to life. In order to do that, Williams insists that the "redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate role Jesus was reputed to have played

[41] Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed by Marit Trelstad, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 27.

in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil."[42] Like Ray, Williams argues that it is implausible to argue that the cross represents a final victory over sin and evil. Instead, she views redemption as God giving humanity a "new vision" for life.[43] Williams views the cross as the revelation of human sin at its worst. She argues that the salvation of African American women "does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by human understandings of God."[44] Williams' understanding of atonement rejects the notion of redemption through the cross by focusing on redemption as life.

JoAnne Marie Terrell urges another Womanist perspective on the cross. Disagreeing with Williams' statement that "there is nothing of God in the blood of the cross,"[45] Terrell asserts that "anyone's death has salvific significance if we learn continuously from the life that preceded it."[46] Surveying both Feminist and Womanist critiques of (mainly substitutionary) atonement theories, Terrell argues that "there is nothing of God's *sanction* in violence."[47] In speaking to those who have suffered (or are suffering) under the surrogacy that Williams critiqued, Terrell demonstrates that the cross does not make suffering redemptive. Rather it shows that "suffering and merit are unrelated, just as love and merit are, and that we who suffer can be redeemed."[48] Through this reading, Terrell views the crucifixion and resurrection together as evidence

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[42] Williams, 30.
[43] Williams, 30-31.
[44] Williams, 29.
[45] Williams, 32.
[46] JoAnne Marie Terrell, "Our Mother's Gardens: Rethinking Sacrifice," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed by Marit Trelstad, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 37-38.
[47] Terrell, 45.
[48] Terrell, 45.

of God's empowerment of human beings that makes their self-love (rather than self-sacrifice) possible.[49]

Terrell agrees with Williams that the crucifixion was not the objective of Jesus' life, but rather a "tragic, if foreseeable, result of his confrontation with evil."[50] However, by viewing it in the context of Jesus' life and teaching, Terrell argues that it is nevertheless vital to God's "ending sanction for sacred violence, *once for all*" and "a scandal, that something, anything, good could come out of such an event."[51] Drawing from the many images of Christ contained in the New Testament, Terrell seems to agree with Williams that the primary importance in redemption is the human commitment to join the divine struggle against violence, sin and evil.

While Liberation, Feminist and Womanist Theologies do an excellent job of highlighting the dangerous consequences of traditional interpretations of the crucifixion as some sort of substitutionary atonement, they are not able to provide a coherent mechanism by which the crucifixion operates in the human story. They draw heavily on the moral exemplar theory of atonement, focusing on the life-giving teaching and healing ministry of Jesus and its implications for human life. However, the power to save remains with human beings, even if the "vision" or pattern for that salvation is understood as coming from God. If the crucifixion is understood as having any role to play, it is either to force sin and evil into visibility or to demonstrate that God suffers with humanity under these forces and inspire human opposition to them. Rather than discarding the crucifixion as a tragic occurrence with no significance for the salvation of

[49] Terrell, 46-47.
[50] Terrell, 48.
[51] Terrell, 48.

humanity, let us now better inform our discussion by examining the Hebrew sacrificial cult.

Chapter 2:

Sacrifice and the Hebrew Bible

Sacrifice has long played an important role in human affairs. Evidence indicates that it was practiced widely throughout most civilizations before the advent of Christianity, and it continues to be practiced in various communities and religions today. Before we turn our attention to the common roles and functions sacrifice has played across civilizations, we will first examine the textual evidence of Jewish self-understanding of the Hebrew sacrificial cult, and how Christianity has appropriated that understanding in its own interpretation of the crucifixion.

I. Types of Sacrifice

The book of Leviticus provides guidelines for the Hebrew sacrificial cult. It provides for voluntary sacrifices (the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and fellowship offerings), mandatory sacrifices (the sin/purification and guilt/reparation offerings), and describes the proper performance of those rites. Although Christian interpretation of Jesus' death as sacrifice has focused almost entirely on the idea of expiation from sin, it is important to note that the meanings of sacrifice for the Hebrew people were not limited to expiation of sin or propitiation of the Deity. The sacrifices were a concrete apparatus for living life together in community.

Leviticus prescribes several sacrifices for the atonement of sin, whether it is unintentional or intentional. Burnt offerings of meat may be made for atonement: "You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as an atonement for you" (Lev 1:4). For sins that harm another in the community, Leviticus requires restitution, the equivalent of a fine, and a guilt offering (Lev 6:5). The

restitution makes the victim whole, and one-fifth is added to the restitution either as a penalty, or perhaps as compensation for pain and suffering. Through the sacrifice of the ram "the priest shall make atonement on your behalf before the Lord, and you shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and incur guilt thereby" (Lev 6:7). This provision provides several insights into the Israelite understanding of their communal life. The first is that the Law not only mediates human relations with the divine, but also governs human relations within the community. Deceiving or defrauding a neighbor is a cultic matter, not simply a secular one. This demonstrates that God is involved in all human affairs. A person incurs guilt before the Deity not only from sins committed in "holy" things, but also through dishonorable dealings with other human beings. Also, sin involves a harm that cannot simply be undone. Making the victim whole is not enough. Neither is making atonement to the Lord. When a person has been harmed, the one who trespassed is required to add one-fifth to the restitution paid. This practice recognizes the damage done to the community by violation of the communal covenant, while still providing for the restoration of community.

In addition to offerings for atonement, Leviticus describes two other offerings: the grain offering and the offering of well-being (Lev 2:1-3:16). These offerings are voluntary sacrifices of grain, bread and livestock. Leviticus does *not* specify that these sacrifices are atonements. They may be made for thanksgiving, or as a votive or freewill offering (Lev 7:12, 16). Portions of the offering are consumed by fire, and portions are consumed by the priests. Interestingly, portions of these voluntary offerings are to be eaten by the person bringing the offering. Thanksgiving offerings must be consumed on the day they are offered, and votive or freewill offerings may be eaten that day and the

next (Lev 7:15-17). Anything not eaten within the prescribed period must be consumed by fire (Lev 7:17-18). Thus, these sacrifices would involve at least some sort of communal feasting in addition to thanksgiving and worship.

II. Elements of Sacrifice in Atonement Offerings

Christian interpretations of the crucifixion as sacrifice have consistently focused on sacrifice as atonement rather than as thanksgiving or worship. Recent theological reflections have taken steps to reclaim other aspects of sacrifice, and one such reappropriation will be examined in the next chapter. For now, we will look at the elements of atonement sacrifices within the Hebrew tradition. First, in order for a volitional sacrifice to occur, the people had to recognize the trespass, the sin or guilt that had been incurred. This is significant, because offerings were required for unintentional sins or trespasses. Leviticus provides for this recognition even in cases when the trespass had to be volitional—"When any of you sin and commit a trespass… by deceiving a neighbor… or by robbery… when you have sinned and *realize* your guilt, and would restore what you took" (Lev 6:2-4). So how does one become aware of a sin committed unknowingly? It seems that there are two, or perhaps three, avenues for such awareness. First, the individual could reflect upon all of their actions during quiet times, and in that reflection realize that something they had done violated a communal or ritual law. Second, another member of the community—a priest, prophet, or simply a neighbor—who observed the sin could make the person aware of the sin. However, this correction might increase tensions between those two people and thus put a strain on the community. Finally, and perhaps underlying the first two, the sinfulness of the action

could be revealed by God to the individual. However such awareness comes, this awareness of guilt is the first element of the volitional sacrifices for atonement.

Next, the person must bring the appropriate sacrifice to the altar. The Hebraic sacrificial cult centralized all offerings, first at the altar of the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple. Sacrifices were not private affairs—there was nothing secret about bringing a bull to the temple to sacrifice. By requiring that all sacrifices occur in one central location, the Hebrew sacrificial practices created an unspoken confession of sin.

The sacrifice itself was something of worth, yet the monetary value of the offering required varied with the wealth of the individual making the offering. Sacrifices ranged from whole bulls to sheep and even to pigeons for the very poor. This sliding scale indicates that the sacrifice's value is not inherent in the actual cost of the animal itself. Rather, the value is found in what it represents to the person making the sacrifice. David made this point when he was offered a gift to sacrifice to the Lord. David insisted on buying it instead, saying, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing" (2 Sam 24:24).[52] The sacrifice had to represent some value to the person making the offering.

The sacrifice was performed by the priests. Not just anyone could perform the acts of sacrificial worship. Saul learned this lesson to his great chagrin when Samuel was late for a sacrifice. Rather than wait, Saul offered the burnt offering himself. Because of this, Samuel tells Saul that "The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue… because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you" (1 Sam 13:8-14). The consequences for the unconsecrated

[52] See Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim & David Petersen, "The Structures of Covenant Life," in *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 155-157.

engaging in ritual practices have always been severe. The priests themselves were descendents of Aaron, chosen by God to carry on the sacrificial worship of the people. They were not necessarily the best of the people, or the wisest, or the smartest, although they did undergo specific education to be able to carry out their duties. What was significant about them was not any individual qualification they had for the job of priest, but that they were chosen by God for that role. They underwent specific consecration and elaborate ordination which defined their status as holy. These were the people authorized to perform sacrifices.

The sacrifice was killed. As we have seen, the killing of the sacrifice is far from the only element in the Hebrew sacrificial cult, in spite of the focus placed on the death in modern understandings of sacrifice. The sacrifice was killed in a specified manner, and was divided in a specified manner. Certain portions (the blood and the fat) were never consumed by the people, but belonged to the Lord. The blood was put on the horns of the altar and poured at the base of the altar (and on the Day of Atonement, also within the curtain on the mercy seat). The importance of the blood in atonement is emphasized: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement" (Lev 16:11). This focus on the blood in sacrifice contributes to modern perceptions of sacrifice as something foreign, primitive, and aberrant.

Finally, the sacrifice was disposed of. In some cases, the entire sacrifice was consumed by fire. In others, portions were reserved for the priests. In still others, tokens were taken for the fire and the priest, but the majority of the sacrifice was consumed by the people making the offering. Modern theological reappropriation of sacrifice has

focused on the fact that, in all three cases, the offering had to do with meal fellowship—restoring the people to table fellowship with God.

In the Ancient Near East, sacrifices were understood in several different ways. In many religions, the focus was on propitiation of the gods. The sacrifices were something the gods wanted or needed, and human beings engaged in sacrifice to either ward off the gods' anger or win their favor. Many people thought of the practice of sacrifice "as a way of feeding the gods."[53] However, this does not appear to have been the Israelite view. In their understanding, God did not need sacrifices for sustenance. Rather, Hebrew sacrifice was an expression of gratitude for what God had already done, or an act of apology for the sins of the people.[54] Even in their search for expiation (rather than propitiation), the Hebrew sacrificial cult has often been mischaracterized as the appeasement of an angry God. Instead, "The object of the verb *kipper* ('expiate, make atonement') is sin; it is never God. The action effects forgiveness of sin, not divine appeasement… God himself provides the key element in the sacrifice… the God-centeredness of the rite becomes apparent."[55] Modern interpreters agree with the Israelite understanding of sacrifice—it is a means of grace, a way that God has provided for human beings to return to relationship, not something that God particularly needs.

III. Festivals

The Hebrew sacrificial cult, as described in Leviticus, highlights the importance of sacrifice not only in relation to the Deity, but also in the maintenance of the community. This is done through the communal festivals mandated in Torah as well as through provisions for specific sacrifices. Although Torah specifies any number of

[53] John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, p. 141.
[54] See Collins, p. 141.
[55] Birch, et al., p. 156.

sacred festivals to be observed annually, Christian interpretations of the Passion have focused almost exclusively on two: the Day of Atonement and the Passover.

Leviticus specifies one day a year in which the high priest makes atonement for the priests and all the people of the assembly (Lev 16:33). Only on that day can the priest go "inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark" (Lev 16:2). On the Day of Atonement, the priest casts lots on two goats. One goat is killed as a sin offering for the people, while the other "shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel" (Lev 16:7-10). After making sin offerings for himself and the people, the priest,

> Shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness… The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness (Lev 16:20-22).

On the tenth day of the seventh month, "atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord" (Lev 16:30). From this description, it appears that the burnt offerings, sin offerings and guilt offerings sacrificed throughout the year were not sufficient to rectify the human-divine relationship. In a yearly festival, an animal was *not* killed, but was set free in, or expelled into, the wilderness, in order to cleanse the people of their sin. All of the sins of the people, all that separated them from God and from one another, was symbolically placed on the head of this animal, who carried these sins away into the wilderness.

In a lively contrast to the Day of Atonement, the festival of the Passover is a celebration described in numerous places in Torah. The etiology of this festival is found in Exodus, chapter 12, in the story of the tenth plague and how the Israelites escaped the death of the firstborn. In this story, each Hebrew family was commanded to take a year-

old lamb and slaughter it at twilight (Ex 12:5-6). They were to place the blood on the doorway of their house and to eat the lamb roasted that evening (Ex 12:9). It was all to be consumed that night—any leftover was to be burned (Ex 12:10). The blood on the doorway was an identifying mark, when the Lord came to kill all the firstborn in Egypt, "The blood shall be a sign for you… when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the Land of Egypt" (Ex 12:13). After this specific description of the Passover, the Lord commands Moses, and Moses commands the people:

> You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you "What do you mean by this observance?" you shall say, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses" (Ex 12:24-27).

The Passover sacrifice was not understood as a sacrifice for sin. It was a feast, a celebration and a remembrance of the Lord's mighty acts in liberating the people from Egypt. At the first anniversary of that fateful night, people who were ceremonially unclean (and therefore unable to participate in the celebration of the Passover) came to Moses, asking, "Why must we be kept from presenting the Lord's offering at its appointed time among the Israelites?" (Nu 9:7). This question reflects an understanding of the Passover as a privilege that was being withheld, rather than an obligation escaped by those who were excluded. Somewhere between the first Passover recorded in Exodus, and the ceremonial remembrance of it specified in Deuteronomy, the celebration transitioned from a family feast to a ritualized sacrifice. In Deuteronomy, the people are commanded to "offer the Passover sacrifice to the Lord your God… at the place that the Lord shall choose as a dwelling place for his name… You shall cook and eat it at the

place that the Lord your God will choose; the next morning you may go back to your tents" (Dt 16:2, 7). Over time, the Passover was transformed from a family celebration to a Temple-oriented ritual.

Both Passover and the Day of Atonement were observed through sacrifices and communal gatherings. However, their similarities seem to end there. One is a solemn assembly of repentance and seeking atonement for previous sins, while the other is a celebration of deliverance and a remembrance of the power of God. Nevertheless, Christians have used both in their understanding of the meaning of the crucifixion.

Now that we have re-examined the key features of sacrifice as depicted in the Old Testament, as well as two sacrificial festivals celebrated in Israel and used by Christians to interpret the crucifixion, we are ready to examine how this sacrificial framework has influenced Christian understandings of the crucifixion. By looking at the elements and understandings of the Hebrew sacrificial cult, we can better understand the conceptual framework in place at the time of the crucifixion that led to a sacrificial interpretation. Realization of guilt and a confession of sin through corporate worship were both necessary elements of volitional atonement sacrifices. A sacrificial victim of value in proportion to the penitent's wealth, a consecrated priesthood to carry out the sacrifices, the death of the victim and distribution of its blood, and the consumption of the sacrifice were common elements of both volitional and mandated atonement sacrifices. Examining the roots and purposes of Jewish annual observances of Passover and the Day of Atonement, reveals how Christian interpreters have woven these two very different festivals together in their understandings of the crucifixion. By understanding both the elements of sacrifice and these sacrificial festivals, we can better understand how

Christianity has appropriated them in Christian self-understanding and worship, as well as how they are—and are not—present in the story of the crucifixion.

Chapter 3:

Sacrifice and Festivals in Christian Understandings of the Crucifixion

We have specifically examined the Day of Atonement and the Passover because Christian interpretations of the crucifixion as sacrifice have typically drawn on the understandings of these two sacrifices. The gospel writers agree in setting the crucifixion at the time of the Passover. There is some disagreement as to whether the last meal Jesus shared with the disciples before his crucifixion was the Passover or not, but each of the gospels sets the betrayal, arrest and crucifixion of Jesus within days of the Passover Festival. Clearly, all the gospel writers associated Jesus' death with the Passover. As early as the gospel of John, Church tradition has referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29). In Eucharistic rituals celebrated each Sunday, the connection to Passover is reinforced as priests and congregants around the world proclaim in the breaking of the bread, "Christ our *Passover* is sacrificed for us; Therefore let us keep the feast" (1 Cor 5:7).[56] The Hebrew Passover idea of a celebratory meal of abundance is certainly maintained in this ritual. Christian *practice* upholds the connection between the crucifixion and Passover in Eucharistic celebrations today. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the Day of Atonement has been much more prevalent in Christian *understanding* of what happened during the crucifixion.

From the writings of Paul to the majority of Christian hymnody and liturgy today, Christians have argued that there is power in the blood of Jesus to atone for the sins of human beings and restore humanity to right relationship with God. Paul wrote that human beings are justified "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Rom 3:24-25).

[56] Book of Common Prayer, Holy Eucharist I, p. 337.

The author of Hebrews connects Christ explicitly to the Day of Atonement, stating that "Christ …entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world" (Heb 9:24-26). For the author of Hebrews, Christ's death is the fulfillment of that which the annual celebrations of the Day of Atonement merely foreshadowed. The author of Hebrews argues that although the high priest had to make annual sacrifices and to present new blood from these sacrifices on the Day of Atonement each year in order to enter the Holy Place, Christ's sacrifice of himself was the perfect and unrepeatable atonement. By the offering of his own blood, Christ appears in the presence of God without need of further sacrifices. Hebrews goes on to say that "He appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26). The author of Hebrews understands Jesus as the perfection of Temple worship—the perfect priest who needs no atonement himself, able to enter heaven and make the perfect (and unrepeatable) atonement for humanity "by the sacrifice of himself."

The popular Christian understanding expressed in hymns, prayers and other liturgy, is that human beings deserved the penalty of death. Jesus suffered that penalty in our stead, and now we are "washed in the blood," and able to stand in relationship with God. While Hebrew understanding of guilt focused on expiation of sin, Christian interpretation fluctuates between concepts of expiation and propitiation. As detailed in Chapter One, in one view, human beings should pay a penalty for their sins, and Jesus pays that penalty for them, thus settling the account of sin. In another, God is angry with

the people because of their sins, but Jesus changes God's attitude towards humanity, thus reconciling God and humanity. At times these views seem to merge (as in penal substitutionary atonement theory), while sometimes either propitiation or expiation is emphasized to the devaluation of the other.

Christian appropriation of the images and understandings of sacrifice from the Hebrew sacrificial cult is problematic. Of the elements examined above—recognition of guilt, confession of guilt, offering something of proportionate value, relegation of sacrifice to a consecrated priesthood, the killing of the victim, the distribution of the blood and the consumption of the sacrifice—the death of the victim is the only element of sacrifice explicitly present in the Passion story. While Christian ritual remembrances of the crucifixion, both in Holy Week and the Eucharist, reclaim many of the missing elements, they also lack some of the elements present in the Hebrew sacrificial practices.

The crucifixion clearly does not comply with the requirements of the Hebrew sacrificial cult. It was not done with the intent of reconciling the people and God. The people who "offered" Jesus neither recognized nor confessed any guilt. While Christianity holds that Jesus is the Son of God and of infinite value, he had no value to the people who offered him to death. While priests might have orchestrated his death, they took no part in the actual killing. That was left for the "unclean" Roman soldiers to do. Jesus was not killed in the Temple, nor even the city, but outside the city gates. The author of Hebrews relates this to the disposal of the sacrifice for sin, which was burned outside the community: "the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood"

(Heb 13:11-12; Lev 4:12). In spite of this interpretation, the crucifixion remains different from the sacrifice for sin, for then the animal is killed at the tent of meeting, and the blood and certain portions are offered on the altar, *before* "all the rest of the bull—he shall carry out to a *clean place* outside the camp, to the ash heap, and shall burn it on a wood fire" (Lev 4:12). The political execution of a Jewish citizen in the Roman world did not conform in any way to sacrifice as it was practiced by the Israelites.

However, from the very beginning, Christians have understood the Passion as a sacrifice. In Eucharistic worship, Christian's reappropriate the elements of sacrifice, and lay them over the story of the Passion. Christian worship involves corporate confession of sins and recognition of guilt. Priests are called (chosen) by God and consecrated for the proper administration of the sacraments, including the Eucharist. It is usually celebrated within the community, not in private. Finally, the Eucharist is generally shared as a communal meal, and what is left is returned to the earth in a specified manner.

The Christian worship celebration lacks three of the elements of sacrifice discussed above, although they are arguably present symbolically. The first is the provision by those realizing their guilt of a sacrificial victim of proportionate value. The congregation makes no actual offering during Christian worship. The foundational assumption of this practice is that the original sacrificial victim was one of infinite worth, and that he has already been offered. While Jesus was not valued by those who orchestrated his death during the first century, Christians believe that what Christ has done for humanity makes him infinitely valuable to Christians after the atonement has been achieved. Another possible assumption is that in Christian worship, Christians are

making an offering, *of themselves*, to God. Rather than a token that indicates a proportional value of their being, Christians present their whole beings as "a holy and living sacrifice." The World Council of Churches includes this interpretation in their multivalent understanding of Eucharist, stating that "The eucharist is the great sacrifice of praise by which the Church speaks on behalf of the whole creation."[57] However, this argument places Christians themselves (or their praise) as sacrificial offerings, possibly muddying the finality of Jesus' sacrifice as expressed in Hebrews. This confusion of symbolism indicates the difficulty that arises when one community attempts to utilize the conceptual frameworks that supported another community's practices, when those practices are not also shared.

The second missing element in Christian worship is the sacrificial killing. No one and nothing is killed in the celebration of Eucharist. However, the argument can be made that the Eucharist is an actual representation of the death of Christ. In this view, the congregation is symbolically engaged in the sacrificial killing with each celebration. This understanding does not require adherents to believe that Christ is actually re-crucified with each celebration, but it does incorporate an element of sacrificial killing back into the Eucharist. This interpretation was strongly criticized during the Reformation and in its aftermath. However, the World Council of Churches embraces this understanding, stating that, "The eucharist is the memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, i.e. the living and effective sign of his sacrifice, accomplished once and for all on

[57] World Council of Churches, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," at www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry.html#c10499, accessed March 3, 2011.

the cross and still operative on behalf of all humankind."[58] The WCC goes on to affirm that there is only one expiation, but encourages churches to examine the idea of the Eucharist as a propitiatory sacrifice and to "review the old controversies about 'sacrifice' and deepen their understanding of the reasons why other traditions than their own have either used or rejected this term."[59] Once again, Christian interpretation attempts to draw on the theological understanding of the Hebrew sacrificial cult without necessarily appropriating it entirely.

The final missing element is the blood, upon which Leviticus placed so much emphasis. This element is definitely addressed symbolically, and has been since earliest Christianity. The synoptic accounts of the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples, as well as Paul's testimony in 1 Corinthians, describe Jesus' command regarding the cup: that the wine it contains is his blood, the blood of the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). However, his command to drink of the cup completely contradicts all Israelite understandings of the role of blood in sacrifice. The blood belonged to God; it was absolutely forbidden to human beings—it was never consumed by priest or penitent.

By examining the Hebrew sacrificial cult, we are able to see that the practice of sacrifice in place during the crucifixion included many elements wholly missing from Jesus' execution. We can also see how those elements have been reappropriated in Christian practices. But most importantly, we have seen the theological understanding that sacrifice was one more means God provided for healing the relationship between God and humanity.

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[58] WCC, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry."
[59] WCC, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry."

Chapter 4:

Modern Thinkers Re-Imagining Sacrifice

Now that we have seen how the Jewish people understood and how Christians have traditionally appropriated the language of sacrifice, we can turn our attention to modern sociological contributions to understanding the roles and functions of sacrifice in human communities. First, we will look at a Kathryn Tanner's modern theological reappropriation of the concept of sacrifice (in contrast to its rejection by many Liberation, Feminist and Womanist theologians), and then examine the contribution of Rene′ Girard to a modern understanding of the function and role of sacrifice in the development and maintenance of communities.

Sacrifice is a rather foreign concept in the developed world of the 21st century.[60] The word itself has come to mean "giving up… something valued for the sake of something having a more pressing claim" or "selling…something at less than its supposed value."[61] Modern U.S. citizens tend to associate the practice of sacrifice with cults and religions from less-developed parts of the world. Yet Christians continue to use sacrificial language in their interpretation of the Passion, Holy Communion, and Atonement. On an apologetic level, this causes enormous problems when trying to explain notions of God and salvation to a population that has never seen, and certainly cannot relate to, a sacrificial system like the one practiced by the Hebrew people (and many other civilizations) a few millennia ago. On a dogmatic level, the further in time we have get from the actual practice of sacrifice, the less helpful such sacrificial language is for understanding theological claims about God. Rather than evoking images of people

[60] In American parlance, the word sacrifice is probably used more frequently in conjunction with bunts and flys in American Baseball than in any religious setting.
[61] *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. "Sacrifice."

overcoming conflict and tensions to live together, our sacrificial language paints the picture of an angry God demanding blood as the price of forgiveness.

I. Modern theological interpretation of sacrifice- Kathryn Tanner

In *Christ the Key*, Kathryn Tanner addresses the feminist and womanist concerns about the abuses to which sacrificial understandings of the crucifixion are liable by reclaiming a focus on the Incarnation. By focusing on Christ as the Incarnation of "a God who works unswervingly for our good, who puts no value on death and suffering, and no ultimate value on self-sacrifice for the good, a God of gift-giving abundance struggling against the forces of sin and death in the greatest possible solidarity with us," she discards the notion that there could possibly be anything "saving about suffering, death, or victimhood, in and of itself."[62] She also argues that no individual features of the crucifixion can be anything to be emulated (or required to be emulated) in an abusive way, stating that "nothing of the human character of Christ's going to the cross… is a condition in any strong sense of its being saving."[63] That being said, Tanner also turns to examine the sacrificial language and imagery of the scriptures.

Tanner observes that in the New Testament, the crucifixion is most frequently discussed in terms of expiation, but that it is also has "suggestions of a non-cultic sacrifice of a moral sort… martyrs… who lay their own lives of self-sacrificial service before God as a pointed reminder of and appeal to God's steadfast love of God's people."[64] By drawing on the historical Jewish and Christian understandings of sacrifice, she critiques the substitutionary theories of atonement, pointing out that in Hebrew sacrificial practice "there is no legal connotation of the sacrificial act as a satisfaction or

[62] Tanner, 261.
[63] Tanner, 262.
[64] Tanner, 263.

payment of a penalty."[65] Rather, Tanner emphasizes the character of God revealed in these understandings of sacrifice as "a God already desirous of communion with us" who "simply wants to reinstate God's people to full communion with God."[66] Tanner goes on to examine similarities and differences between the Hebrew sacrificial practices and the crucifixion in order to see how the two can inform one another.

Examining the crucifixion through the lens of Incarnation, Tanner focuses on the identity of the parties involved—the one offering the sacrifice, the one who is the object of the sacrifice, and the one being sacrificed. In Tanner's view, "God is both the one sacrificing and the one being sacrificed."[67] In this way, she avoids the dangerous idea highlighted by feminist and womanist concerns that there is anything salvific in a human being accepting such abuse from another. She identifies the object of the sacrifice as "human existence in its plight of sin and death. The sacrifice is not directed here to God but from God to human beings."[68] This avoids the implication of division within the Godhead. God wishes the salvation of human beings, and God acts to bring this about. There is no confusion about the Second Person propitiating the First Person—God acts as one. It also avoids any maligning of God's character as a bloodthirsty or unmerciful God. In Tanner's view, God does not desire death (of anyone). Rather, God is willing to undergo death for the salvation of humanity.

Tanner is somewhat less clear when she addresses the mechanism of atonement, what actually happens to human beings "in the plight of sin and death." As she observes,

[65] Tanner, 264.
[66] Tanner 264.
[67] Tanner, 268.
[68] Tanner, 268.

"to sacrifice, literally, is to make sacred or holy."[69] Tanner argues that through the Incarnation, death, sin, rejection and conflict are transferred to God. In the sacrifice, "death is what is being sanctified or transformed in the passage from death to life."[70] Any sanctification of death, even as a passage-way to life, carries with it the danger of glorifying death, and leading to self-abnegation. If the crucifixion can sanctify the process of torture that killed Jesus, this theory *could* lead to the same issues of subjugation and oppression that Liberation, Feminist and Womanist critics raise against the traditional theories of atonement. However, Tanner forestalls any such abuse of her theory by arguing that "The cross makes clear that the holy simply cannot be contaminated by contact with sin or impurity."[71] She does not seem to be to saying that sin, rejection and death become holy and salvific, but rather that they cannot infect the holy in any way. The conflict of power between the holy and the unclean can be seen in Leviticus, which says of sacrifices both that "anything that touches them shall become holy" (Lev 6:18, 27) and that "Those who eat flesh from the Lord's sacrifice… while being in a state of uncleanness shall be cut off from their kin" (Lev 7:20). It is appears that both uncleanness and holiness were considered contagious, and the Israelites strove to keep the two apart. In Tanner's view, this is unnecessary. The holy can cleanse what it comes into contact with, and need fear no defilement.

In examining ancient practices of sacrifice, Tanner focuses on the idea that sacrifices were intended to "reinstate meal fellowship" and that the "joy of God's presence is their presupposition and end."[72] The importance of the Eucharistic in

[69] Tanner, 268.
[70] Tanner, 269.
[71] Tanner, 271.
[72] Tanner, 266.

Christian worship supports this interpretation of sacrifice. The synoptic gospel accounts of Jesus' last meal before his crucifixion, and John's account of Jesus' discourse on the "bread of life" indicates an early understanding that, in some way, Jesus was (and is) the meal shared in celebrations of the Eucharist. However, taking the reinstatement of meal fellowship as the purpose of the crucifixion seems a bit gruesome. Instead, Tanner suggests drawing that lesson from the sacrificial imagery surrounding the crucifixion, but interpreting atonement more in light of the Incarnation.

Finally, Tanner focuses on the "sacrifice of incarnation" and its purpose of reconciling human beings to God. She holds that God has given forgiveness before any confession and before the performance of any rites.[73] Indeed, God had to have already forgiven human beings (or at least decided to) in order for God to have specified any such rites in the first place. All sacrifices "should therefore be understood to reinstate meal fellowship… establishing and maintaining community between God and human beings by their eating together."[74] Tanner takes this restoration of communion as the starting place for human beings to build constructive practices from the foundation of the crucifixion, for humanity to learn to "make a proper sacrifice in life-enhancing use… of what God gives them in sacrifice—the life enhancing powers of the word… toward the satisfaction of human needs, the reversal of the effects of sin on human life."[75] While Tanner offers excellent lessons to be drawn from the Passion accounts, she seems to view the sacrificial aspects of the crucifixion as a sign of restoration to right relationship already accomplished, rather than as playing any active part in that achieving that restoration.

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[73] Tanner, 270.
[74] Tanner, 266-267.
[75] Tanner, 272.

Tanner's view is helpful in reclaiming some of the historical idea of sacrifice and forming an argument that respects God's unity, character and power. However, this perspective is not clear as to who or what is transformed through the atonement. Tanner clearly states that God is not changed, but maintains the same beneficent attitude towards human beings throughout. She states that death is sanctified, but does not clearly express what that means. Does suffering become holy? Or are human beings simply no longer tarnished by it? And if it is that human beings are no longer tarnished by suffering, sin or death, what does that mean to human beings still living in suffering, oppressed by the sins of others, eking out a living at the edge of death? Like the other modern critiques examined earlier, Tanner manages to avoid the dangers inherent in speculation on atonement, but what she proposes might be much more useful.

II. An Anthropological View of Sacrifice- Rene′ Girard

Rene′ Girard's book, *Violence and the Sacred*, offers modern anthropological insight into the role that sacrifice plays in human communities across cultures and times. Although based primarily on anthropological studies and analysis of Greek tragedies, and written from an anthropological perspective that dismisses any belief in God or the devil as unreasonable, Girard's book does provide a starting point for a theological re-understanding of sacrifice and of what happened in the crucifixion. Girard hypothesizes that the role of ritual, sacrifice, and even religion itself is the diversion of the community's internal, reciprocal violence to a form of violence that carries no threat of vengeance or retribution.[76] The greatest threat to community survival is intra-group violence. In communities that practice vengeance, every act of violence requires an act

[76] Rene′ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 55.

of vengeance. This could lead to ever-more-destructive blood feuds destroying a community if some method of coping with violence is not found. According to Girard, sacrifice "protects the community from [the vicious and destructive cycle of] violence and allows culture to flourish."[77]

Girard posits that violence is a fundamental trait of human beings. Citing metaphors of fire, tempest, flood, earthquake, and plague, Girard argues that,

> The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them… Far outranking these… stands human violence—violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as a part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.[78]

This penchant for violence made the formation of, and makes the preservation of, human communities very difficult. Girard notes that human beings tend to externalize their violence, envisioning it as a force outside of themselves. Human beings find their violence much more palatable when it is performed at the behest of a deity. This desire to externalize violence can still be seen in modern societies. While the concept of a deity demanding blood sacrifices is foreign to modern societies, our citizens find violence much more palatable when done at the behest of the government—in defense of country or defense of others. However, this externalization of violence does nothing to reduce the threat of violence to communities. According to Girard, the purpose of religion is the restraint of this violence.

This restraint is accomplished through ritualized sacrifice. According to Girard, sacrifice is founded on the cultural remembrance of a formational act of violence, in

[77] Girard, 93.
[78] Girard, 31.

which the community joined together in a unanimous act of violence against one party.[79] In sacrifice, the community is able to direct all of their interpersonal tensions towards one victim that society has sanctioned as "sacrificeable." This sacrificial victim is generally one considered outside of the society: a foreigner, someone "outside" society's castes, or an animal. Girard notes two important traits of the sacrificial victim: that they resemble members of society enough that the violence expended in sacrifice can satisfy the society's appetite for violence, and that they be of a caste that no one will avenge. This victim acts as a surrogate for the violence felt against members of the community, friends and family. According to Girard, based on earlier anthropological research, it is important that the victim *not* be the actual object of anger. If the victim were, then this would simply be an act of reciprocal violence, striking out at the one who struck first. The focus is on sacrifice, not justice. All of the aggression of the community is united in an act of unanimous violence against the surrogate. By relieving the tensions and rivalries of the community, sacrifice enables members to live together harmoniously. The violence of the community has an outlet which does not lead to the destructive cycle of vengeance.

Based on this understanding of violence and sacrifice, Girard posits that while violence is ubiquitous, there is a distinction between "bad" violence which threatens a society, and "good" violence which can help to strengthen a society. Sacrifice is a good form of violence so long as it serves its purpose of appeasing violent impulses without threatening the fabric of the society. A "sacrificial crisis" occurs "with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious reciprocal

[79] Girard, 102.

violence spreads throughout the community."[80] Girard argues that sacrificial crises arise with the loss of distinctions, and that "wherever differences are lacking, violence threatens."[81] In the cultural breakdown of a sacrificial crisis, the ritual no longer serves to appease the violent appetite, and there is a real possibility of the society disintegrating into reciprocal violence even within close sub-groups. However, this disintegration can be prevented by "unanimous violence directed against the surrogate victim," and if this stops the crisis "clearly this violence must be the origin of a new sacrificial system."[82] Although real, this foundational violence will become shrouded in ritual, myth and religion. In fact, Girard notes time and again the myth and mystery that surround sacrificial practices. He argues that a clear examination of the practices of sacrifice renders them ineffective, unable to quell violence in the community. Girard's hypothesis claims that "the sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding. The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act. The theological basis of the sacrifice has a crucial role in fostering this misunderstanding."[83] Thus, although Girard argues that sacrificial rites are founded in historical acts of violence, he also explains that the historicity of any such act will be covered with myth. Girard notes that "The extraordinary number of commemorative rites that have to do with killing leads us to imagine that the original event must have been a murder."[84] He also notes the number of foundational or creation myths that have to do with murders of gods or heroes out of which great good was drawn.

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[80] Girard, 49.
[81] Girard, 57.
[82] Girard, 93.
[83] Girard, 7.
[84] Girard, 92.

Girard argues that "The books of the Old Testament are rooted in sacrificial crises."[85] This theory, that the community found the sacrifices less and less effective as it slowly failed to fulfill its cathartic function, is supported by critiques of the sacrificial cult in both the writings and the prophets. Girard argues that sacrifice is "capable of perpetrating a very good or very bad action, according to the circumstances and the dosage… administration had best be left by ordinary men in the hands of those who enjoy special knowledge and exceptional powers."[86] The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles record the centralization of the sacrificial cult in Jerusalem, and shifts between decentralization and re-centralization over hundreds of years. As different kings allowed the people to sacrifice when and where they wished, the land suffered and the people "displeased God." When the necessary distinctions were ignored, the society suffered. In addition to fluctuations between proper regulation of sacrifice and times of laxity, the sacrificial cult was repeatedly criticized for misunderstanding the nature of the people's relationship to God. Psalm 51 declares, "You have no delight in sacrifice;/ if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased./ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;/ a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (51:16-17). Similarly, the prophets often criticized the sacrificial cult, either for corrupt practices, or for treating the rituals of sacrifice as more important than the moral law (Is 1:11-14; 66:3; Hos 6:6; Amos 4:4-5; Mic 3:9-12; 6:6-11; Zeph 3:4; Mal 1:6-2:9). The community neither unanimously supported nor condemned the sacrificial cult throughout the history of Israel, but it may have gone through several sacrificial crises.

[85] Girard, 66.
[86] Girard, 95.

If we were to apply Girard's hypothesis wholesale to the crucifixion, we would determine that Israel was in a sacrificial crisis during the first century. Although sacrifices continued to be performed, the people were divided into numerous religious sects. Through occupation and Diaspora, the distinctions between Israelites and outsiders were blurred, while factions existed even within the community in Palestine. These factions and divisions within the community were so great that it was devolving into intra-tribal violence, as the Sicarii attacked Jews who cooperated with Roman occupiers. It was into this setting of sacrificial crisis that Jesus came, preaching the eradication of divisions of culture, gender and status in his claims of the universal Fatherhood of God. Jesus was erasing distinctions in an already-crumbling community, and as such, posed a threat to those struggling to hold on to the way things had been.

Applying Girard's hypothesis, Jesus became the surrogate towards which the community directed its frustration as a subjugated nation and its anger with rival factions within the community. The Passion accounts in each of the gospels record the "unanimous" violence of the crowds calling for Pilate to "Crucify him!" (Mt 27:22-25; Mk 15:13-14; Lk 23:21-23; Jn 19:6-16). Jesus was not a criminal deserving of punishment—Pilate finds nothing with which to charge him, and his trial before the Jewish council is filled with inconsistencies. As an "innocent" then, Jesus was qualified to be a surrogate victim according to Girard's hypothesis. He was not punished for any crime of his own, but served as a release of the violence brewing within the community. According to this analysis, the Passion would be the initial act of violence in the face of a sacrificial crisis. The emergence of a sacrificial system based on that death would imply that the Passion successfully ended the sacrificial crisis—and such a new sacrificial

system can be seen in the annual observation of Holy Week and the more frequent celebrations of Holy Communion.

While Girard's hypothesis provides a neat formula for interpreting the crucifixion, it cannot speak to the theological foundations of sacrifice. Girard posits that the sole purpose of religion is to stifle violence. His description of how sacrifice functions in Greek tragedies sheds a great deal of insight into the benefits it provides to humanity. However, just as we examined the Hebrew sacrificial cult, noting where the Passion agreed and where it did not fit, it is important to examine Girard's hypothesis for what it can and cannot explain about the crucifixion.

While Jesus was certainly outside the mainstream of his society, he was by no means casteless. The gospels report crowds following him during his ministry. In fact, his popularity was one of the things that caused the leaders to conspire against him. In the Gospel according to John, the chief priests and the Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus, asking, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation" (Jn 11:47-48). In Luke, Jesus' popularity is the reason for the plot: "The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people" (Lk 22:2). In Matthew and Mark, the priests look for a way to kill Jesus, but "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people" (Mt 26:5; Mk 14:2). According to the gospels, Jesus is not a "safe" victim—he has supporters and followers that his opponents fear will rise up in violence. For this reason, Jesus does not fit in the category of proper sacrificial victim. Jesus also fails as a surrogate because he is undifferentiated from the society around him—Jesus was an

observant Jew active in the religious life of his community. Violence directed towards him would be likely to become confused with generalized violence within the community. Again, Jesus was not a member of a recognized sacrificial category. Neither the Roman government nor the Israelite religion sanctioned human sacrifice at this time. And while the gospels record that the priests and religious leaders helped to mastermind the crucifixion, the actual killing of Jesus was done by Roman soldiers. The violence was perpetrated by those outside the community, thus taking away the ostensible purpose of sacrifice as a release of the community's violence. Although one faction of the Jewish community (the Christians) undertook the ritual observances that commemorated the Passion, the rest of the Jewish community (those who were supposedly undergoing the sacrificial crisis) did not. In fact, the non-Christian Jewish community took as little notice of the event as possible. The tensions of the community were not resolved through the crucifixion, and the factions within the Jewish community continued fighting until the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem.

Although the Passion accounts do not conform to many aspects of Girard's hypothesis, it is interesting to note where the hypothesis ostensibly succeeds. Both the crucifixion and Christian rituals memorializing it seem to prove Girard's theory that the sacred must remain shrouded in mystery in order to remain effective. For all of our theories of atonement, what actually occurred at the cross remains veiled. For all of the study by anthropologists and theologians, our theories remain incomplete. Girard might claim that we can look directly at sacrificial systems from our modern perspective because of our powerful and abstract judicial system, but we fail to do so time and again. Because it is so difficult to understand the crucifixion directly, perhaps we could attempt

to pierce the veil around the crucifixion by starting first with the sacrificial practices of the Israelites, examining both Passover and the Day of Atonement using Girard's hypothesis of violence and the sacred.

Chapter 5:

The Stories Behind the Sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible

The Jewish Passover claims to be founded in the overwhelming violence of one historical night. During the Israelites' captivity in Egypt, the Lord sent Moses to demand that Pharaoh release the Israelites. In spite of nine powerful signs, or plagues, Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go. Finally, Moses warned Pharaoh that "Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock" (Ex 11:4-5). On that night, the Israelites sacrificed a lamb per household and marked their houses with the blood so that "the Lord will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down" (Ex 12:23). Every Egyptian firstborn was struck down that night, and in response, Pharaoh told Moses, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites!" (Ex 12:31). In this story, the people of Israel were in bondage. Their freedom came about through catastrophic violence against the Egyptians, and Pharaoh expelled the people from Egypt.

While Exodus records the expulsion of the Hebrews from Egypt, Genesis recounts the story of how they got to Egypt in the first place—and the story has a strange resonance with the Passover. Jacob's clan, comprised of four wives and twelve sons, experienced escalating tensions after Joseph, the favored-but-far-from-eldest son, told on his brothers and later received prophetic dreams that indicated he would rule over the family. In response, his brothers, "hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him" (Gen 37:4). Their jealousy led them to plot Joseph's murder. Only Reuben (the eldest

son) spoke against the plot, suggesting that they "not take his life…Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness" (Gen 37:22). In the end, Joseph's life was spared, although his brothers did kill a goat and use its blood to feign Joseph's death. (In accordance with to Girard's theory, a proper category of sacrificial victim replaced Joseph, the actual object of the brothers' anger.) At the same time, Joseph was expelled from his homeland, sold as a slave to the Midianites, and taken down to Egypt. By the conclusion of the cycle of Joseph stories, Joseph's position in Egypt allowed him to save his clan when famine came (like violence, famine is one of those sacred forces beyond the control of human beings). Joseph's brothers sought his forgiveness, the family was reconciled in tears, and Joseph ascribed all to God's providence, saying that "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people" (Gen 50:20). The tensions were resolved and the clan was preserved by this combined sacrifice and expulsion.

There are intriguing parallels between Joseph's story and the tale of the tenth plague and first Passover. The Hebrew people are preserved: in Exodus they are freed from slavery, while in the Joseph cycle they are preserved from famine. This preservation involves violence and primogeniture: in Exodus, the firstborn of all the Egyptians is killed, while in the Joseph cycle, a younger son is chosen over the eldest, and violence is directed at this favored son, although the eldest opposed it. Granted, in the Joseph cycle, the brothers ultimately kill a surrogate, rather than the object of their anger, Joseph. But the same could be argued for the Passover as well—Pharaoh is the one who refused to release the Israelites, but Pharaoh's son is killed. Finally, both stories involve expulsion: the Israelites are expelled from Egypt in the Passover, and Joseph is

sold into slavery and shipped down to Egypt. These three elements—preservation, violence and expulsion—can be found in the stories of each of the patriarchs. Each story also upends the ideas of primogeniture, as God consistently chooses the younger brother to carry the fulfillment of God's promises.

In the stories of Jacob and Esau, the elder twin sells his birthright and is tricked out of his blessing by his younger brother. This is somewhat explained by the Lord's prophecy to Rebekah when she was carrying the boys that "Two nations are in your womb,/ and two peoples born of you shall be divided;/ the one shall be stronger than the other,/ the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23). The Lord is clearly no respecter of primogeniture, as time after time God chooses the younger brother. This leads to dangerous tensions, as "Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob'" (Gen 27:41). To avoid the murder of her favorite son, Rebekah sends Jacob away to Paddanaram, "until your brother's anger against you turns away" (Gen 27:45). In this sending, Jacob obtains four wives, wealth, and many children before returning to his father's land. Thus Jacob, and Jacob's line, is preserved through an expulsion of sorts. The violence in these stories is more subtle. First, Jacob obtains his father's blessing through the killing of two choice kids from the flocks. However, these kids are not a surrogate for anyone's anger. Then, Esau wants to kill Jacob, but never acts on that violent urge. Finally, when Jacob is returning to his homeland, he must wrestle with a man throughout the night before receiving an injury and a new name: "Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen 32:28). In the stories of Jacob and Esau, there is certainly anger directed

at Jacob, but the violence in these stories does not seem directly related to that anger. However, like Joseph, Jacob is preserved by being sent away, and the Israelite people trace their heritage through the one sent away.

These elements are more clearly present in the stories of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac. Early in Israelite history, Abraham's little clan experienced tension when he found himself with two sons in his old age. Believing that she would never bear a son, Sarah had Abraham father a child with Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden. That son, Ishmael, was Abraham's eldest child. However, Sarah did eventually have a child in her old age—Isaac. When Isaac was weaned, Sarah demanded the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar, telling Abraham to "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with *my* son Isaac" (Gen 21:10). In her request, Sarah seems concerned only with the welfare of her own son. She disregards any affection Abraham might have had for his eldest son (who had been with them for at least thirteen years, see Gen 17:25), and shows no basic human compassion for the woman or child, as they are sent to wander in the wilderness with nothing but some bread and a skin of water (Gen 21:14). Abraham is not as nonchalant about discarding his eldest son: "The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son" (Gen 21:11). But when he consults with the Lord, God tells him to do what Sarah suggests, "for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you" (Gen 21:12). Abraham obeys, but in the next chapter after sending *his* eldest son into the desert, Abraham takes *Sarah's* only son up to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him. In the end, Isaac is spared as a proper sacrificial victim (a ram) is killed in his stead. Nevertheless, the violence of this episode is chilling.

This text does not give explanations of the characters' emotions or motives, but three details in this story are very suspicious. The first is that Abraham is described as "distressed" about sending his eldest son away, and only consents after being urged by Sarah and reassured by the Lord. Then, almost the next thing Abraham does is take away Sarah's son, the one indirectly responsible for Ishmael's expulsion, with the intention of killing him. Girard's caution that human beings like to blame the commands of the deity for their own violent impulses seems particularly apt when one reads that God said, "Take you son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering" (Gen 22:2). Isaac is not Abraham's only son. From the earlier story, it can easily be inferred that Abraham loved Ishmael (although he could have loved both sons, his distress at sending Ishmael away indicates affection that would be natural towards his firstborn). Finally, in the expulsion of Ishmael, Sarah referred to Isaac as "my son Isaac"—not our son, nor your son. All of these things amount to reasons that Abraham might be angry, angry at God, angry at Sarah, or even angry at himself for not protecting Ishmael. Whoever Abraham might be angry with, his violence is directed at Isaac, the one who took no active part in the expulsion of Ishmael. While this anger is speculative, it would be perfectly justified by the text.[87] Whether the text is read to acknowledge Abraham's anger or not, these stories contain the three elements discussed before: violence, expulsion, and preservation of God's chosen.

Having examined these three stories of jealousy, violence, expulsion and preservation among the patriarchs, it is natural to turn our attention next to the first murder, the primeval fratricide recorded in the scriptures. In the story of Cain and Abel,

[87] Note well that I am not arguing that killing Isaac is justified by that anger, but rather that a certain amount of anger is to be expected for a father in Abraham's situation.

the Lord "had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard" (Gen 4:4-5). Like Reuben, Esau, and Ishmael, Cain was the elder brother. But like Joseph, Jacob and Isaac, the Lord had regard for Abel instead. The violence is swift and direct—Cain killed Abel. In this tale, there is no proper sacrificial substitute, Cain actually murders his own brother. The expulsion follows when the Lord makes Cain a "fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (Gen 4:12). And preservation is found in two forms: first, in the Lord's mark that preserved Cain in his wanderings, and then in the birth of Seth, "God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him" (Gen 4:25).

Looking at these stories, and the patterns common to them all, we can begin to see a deeper connection between Passover and the Day of Atonement. While the Passover is clearly tied to the etiological story of the plagues and the Exodus, there is no specific story linked to the Day of Atonement. However, on the Day of Atonement, one goat is killed in an act of sacred violence, one is expelled into the wilderness, and the people find reconciliation with God and each other. The stories of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers all carry elements similar to those present in the Day of Atonement—violence, expulsion, and reconciliation. The Passover is the celebration of one more event in which the people were rescued by a combination of sacred violence and expulsion.

Having recognized these commonalities, we need to understand what theological significance they have in the sacrificial practices of the Israelites. By reading the story of Cain and Abel through Girard's hypothesis, we find a new hermeneutical lens for examining the other stories of Genesis. Unlike Abraham and Joseph's brothers, Cain did

not substitute any animal for his brother—Cain killed Abel. Cain was the one driven out as "a fugitive and wanderer on the earth" (Gen 4:12). But if Girard's hypothesis is correct, then the victim cannot be the true object of anger. Cain killed Abel, but at whom was Cain's anger really directed? Genesis states that "the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry and his countenance fell" (Gen 4:4-5). In this formative act of violence, there was no surrogate for Abel, because Abel was the surrogate. Cain was angry with God, for having regard for Abel's offering but none for Cain's. But how do you strike down God? So Cain directed his anger at one within his reach. Instead of striking at God, he killed Abel—the one for whom God had regard. In doing so, Cain established a pattern for human rebellion against God that has been followed ever since.

Chapter 6:

A Theory of Direct Confrontation and the Crucifixion

Cain, Abraham, Esau, and Joseph's brothers all directed their violence against "God's chosen": against Abel, for whom God had regard, against Isaac, through whom God's promise would be kept, against Jacob, whom God said Esau would serve, and against Joseph, to whom God sent prophetic dreams. The characters in these stories grow angry when God expresses God's sovereign choices without regard to our human agency. Not when God imposes God's will on human beings, *but when God does not allow human beings to impose their wills on God*. God did not force Cain to become a tender of flocks rather than a tiller of the ground, nor did God require that all sacrifices be made of animals. God simply had regard for Abel's offering. Cain wanted God to have regard for his offering, and Cain's desire was frustrated. In this frustration of desire, Cain's anger became murderous. But rather than express that anger or frustration towards an invincible deity, Cain tried to hurt God by striking down God's chosen instead. For all of the failures of words such as "pride" or "rebellion" to describe this state, it does seem to be the root of all brokenness in the relationship between God and human beings. It is not that God requires us to do or be something that we are not. It is that human beings insist that God be less than God is. Violence may find its root in human frustration that the world is not as we expect it to be. This is a difficult point, because many will argue that they do not expect a perfect world, but they *do* expect X, Y or Z. Because these expectations are modest, people think that the anger they experience when these expectations are not fulfilled is justified. However modest their expectations might be, it is still anger that the world is not as they think it should be.

God's regard for Abel's offering did not harm Cain in any way. It did not impinge on Cain's free will or agency. But the fact that God was choosing to regard Abel and not Cain, without so much as consulting Cain in the matter, angered Cain to such an extent that he struck down the one for whom God had regard. The sin certainly seems to be a desire to have control over all things, including God. It has rarely been expressed that way. But it is when we are faced with our own inability to control the behavior of others, of the world, or of the choices of God, that we become infuriated. So the question becomes, is this anger the sin, or is it what is done with this anger?

In the Hebrew Bible, there seems to be a certain righteousness to fighting with God. Jacob embarked on a supernatural, all-night wrestling match with the deity. Even when his hip was put out of joint, Jacob would not let go until he received a new name and a blessing (Gen 32:23-30). Abraham disputed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, bargaining with God to save Lot and his family (Gen 18:16-33). Yet later Abraham obeyed when told to expel one son, and fell silent when commanded to sacrifice the other. Conversely, Job bore his tragedy in silence for as long as he could, but eventually lashed out *at God*.

Apart from Jesus, Job is the one character who Scripture explicitly states is "blameless and upright… who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Made up of nearly forty chapters of poetry, bracketed by three chapters of prose, Job is unique in Scripture. Although known for his "patience" in enduring severe trials in the loss of his wealth, his children, and his health (as that story is told in the prologue), Job is most interesting not for any quietism, but for the angry accusations he directs at God (in the poetry section). Interpreters have been too ready to separate the poetry from the prose,

viewing the three sections as separate works written by different authors from different perspectives. This tendency leads to a view that the book is primarily concerned with issues of theodicy, of why God permits innocent suffering. However, the prologue raises a different theological issue: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). Job is healthy, wealthy and wise, and so Satan questions whether his faithfulness is real, or simply *quid pro quo* for the benefits he has received. As Carol Newsom points out, "The initial question of the book is whether truly disinterested piety exists."[88] After disaster befalls him, Job is primarily interested in justifying himself, "He only wants the evidence against him… He wants to know what charges there are. He is prepared to submit, but he will not blindly submit."[89] The book seems primarily interested in the disconnect between human understanding of the divine/human relationship and what that relationship actually is.

Job and his friends are all grounded in the wisdom tradition of Proverbs—that the righteous will prosper and the wicked are punished. Both the narrator and Job himself recite Job's righteousness. As John Collins observes, "He plays by the rules in life. *But he also expects life to keep to the rules as he understands them*."[90] Similarly, Newsom notes that, "Job's mounting frustration with God comes from his expectation that God should behave toward him as Job behaves toward his own dependents. Job had envisioned God *in his own image*, as a sort of divine patriarch."[91] Neither Job nor his friends are able to understand a God who does not keep the rules *as they understand*

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[88] Carol A. Newsom, "Job," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 139.
[89] Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim & David L. Petersen, A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 406.
[90] John J. Collins, Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 514.
[91] Newsom, 143.

them. In this, Job resembles the rest of humanity: he does not understand why the world does not operate according to his understanding of it.

In his suffering, Job grows angry with God. Unlike Cain, or Joseph's brothers, Job does not seek a surrogate for this anger. As he sat among the ashes, Job's wife challenged him: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). While the comment of Job's wife has often been taken as a somewhat callous response to the suffering they have both undergone, Newsom points out that it can also be understood as: "Do you still persist in your integrity (=honesty)? If so, stand by it and say what is truly in your heart. Curse God before you die."[92] It takes Job seven days and seven nights to resolve this tension between his piety and his honesty.

When Job does speak, he immediately shatters the mythic image of a man who suffers in patient silence. "After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth" (Job 3:1). It takes a whole chapter for him to properly curse the day of his birth and wish for death. Gone are his wisdom sayings of, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away," and "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" (Job 1:21; 2:10). Having taken the time to think about his situation, Job expresses his anger at what he perceives as injustice. He demands a court, a judge before whom he can stand, and a prosecutor to read his charges to him. Through the fight with his friends, Job comes to realize that "his argument is not with his friends… It is God whom he must meet, who is his real adversary. God is absent and silent, so that Job is left without an adversary with

[92] Newsom, 140.

whom he can engage in disputation."[93] However, unlike Cain, Job does not strike out at those around him when he realizes his anger is against a God he cannot reach. Instead,

> Job waits… And then he waits some more. Israel is accustomed to waiting for an answer from God, for God cannot be rushed or produced on demand. He waits because he is the lesser party in the exchange for which he hopes, an exchange that will happen only when God chooses. And then, finally, God answers.[94]

When God answers, he absolutely ignores every one of Job's accusations and justifications. God's answer is notable in that it does not respond to Job's accusations in any way, and this is, "Astonishing: *God is not interested in the primal human question… that haunts the human heart, and that has preoccupied Job*. All such moral calculations are here treated as irrelevant and uninteresting. Attention is given only to God's sovereign power."[95] By not answering any of Job's complaint, God discloses the inadequacy of Job's understanding of the divine.

God's answer focuses entirely on the sovereignty of God. God reveals God's delight in all of creation, not just in human beings. God speaks of God's providence which brings the rain not only on the wicked and the righteous alike, but even "on a land where no one lives,/ on the desert, which is empty of human life,/ to satisfy the waste and desolate land,/ and to make the ground put forth grass" (Job 38:26-27). In this response, God does not tell Job why he has suffered. God does not disclose God's plan. God does not answer Job in any way. In God's answer, God reveals God's self as under no obligation to Job or any other human being, but rather as one who is free of all constraints. Nevertheless, God answers Job. Under no obligation to engage in Job's

[93] Birch, et al., 407.
[94] Birch, et al., 411.
[95] Birch, et al., 412.

contest of wills, God freely chooses to reach out and communicate with one of God's creatures who is suffering.

Finally, and perhaps most interesting for our purposes, in the epilogue God chastises those who had defended God's "justice" earlier. Job's friends had put up a spirited defense of the idea that the righteous would prosper and the wicked suffer. They argued that justice required God to work that way. To these friends, God says, "My wrath is kindled against you… for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7). In this response, it is clear that Job's "near-blasphemous candor is preferred to the piety of those who would lie for God."[96] Job sought and God provided the honest interaction necessary for genuine relationship to occur. Job substituted no surrogate for his anger towards God, but waited for the opportunity to direct that anger in its proper direction.

The story of Job, the blameless and upright man, is the story of a man who was willing to confront God. It is the mirror story of the Incarnation, in which God comes to confront humanity. It demonstrates that human conceptions of God have long been inadequate. It reveals that peace and atonement are to be attained through direct interaction, perhaps even direct confrontation, with the divine.

In contrast with Job's honest challenge to God, his friends clutched tightly to the protective blanket of their belief that God was constrained by their notions of justice. Sometimes, piety may be the most insidious cloak of human rebellion. Doubt and anger are deemed off-limits to the faithful. This perspective is pervasive, as Christians who are suffering say, "Sometimes I get frustrated, *but I know I shouldn't*," or "I've had my doubts, *but I know I shouldn't*," as though God's feelings would be hurt by human doubts

[96] Collins, 517.

or frustrations. Sometimes the honesty of a Job must be like a vivifying breath of fresh air. In the end, though, God clearly states that Job's friends were in the wrong, and that Job spoke as he ought.

God's desire for honest interaction can be seen in his confrontation with Cain. In Genesis, Cain and God spoke with each other. Yet Cain never expressed his anger *at* God. God gave him the opportunity, asking "Why are you angry and why has your countenance fallen?" (Gen 4:6). Instead of expressing his anger at God, Cain suppressed that anger and went on to murder his brother, *who had done nothing to him*. The relationship between God and human beings may or may not be damaged by human anger, but it is definitely broken when human beings will not express that anger towards God but strike out around them instead. God is whole, complete, perfect, and sovereign in such a way that is beyond our comprehension. This perfection means that God cannot be changed, harmed or diminished in anyway by our anger, our doubt, or our violence. God is the one being against whom we can direct our anger and our violence without causing irreversible damage. But this perfection once again underlines the fact that we are not sovereign over God—we cannot force God to change even with our violence. So we do not direct our destructive impulses in that one safe direction. Rather, we aim at one another. We know that our attacks will hit home on other human beings, that they will be changed, harmed and diminished by our power. We also believe that harming those God loves might cause God to suffer as well. This surrogacy may be the "original" sin.

In the Joseph cycle, the brothers are angry with their father for favoring Joseph. They are unhappy that this younger brother received prophetic dreams indicating his

future status as higher than their own. But Joseph has not harmed them. Nevertheless, in their anger with God's sovereign choice of Joseph and with their father's doting preference that disregards their worth, they strike out at Joseph, the chosen one of both God and their father.

In these stories, the true object of the community's anger is God, for exercising God's sovereign will to choose. But each time, the anger is directed in violence not at God, but at the object of God's choice. Throughout the history of Jewish and Christian faith, the people have struggled to express their independent wills over against the sovereign will of God. This struggle recognizes the presence of "God's chosen" as a trigger for communal violence. This struggle made being a prophet a dangerous profession. It may have led to the codification of a system of sacrifices designed to mediate the divine-human relationship according to rules that human beings understood, and founded on the mythic memories of the murder or expulsion of God's chosen from the community in years past.

Looking forward to the final "perfect sacrifice" of Christian faith, we can now examine the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. As a human being who has committed no violation worthy of death, Jesus fulfills Girard's hypothesis that the surrogate victim must not be the actual criminal, to avoid entry into the cycle of vengeance. To those who orchestrate his killing, the people who cry for his crucifixion, the rulers who consent and the soldiers that carry it out, Jesus is just another in a long line of surrogates, individuals chosen by God without consulting the community. To them, he is another surrogate for their anger rooted in a need to have God acknowledge *their* will. However, Christian doctrine states that Jesus Christ is both human being and the Second Person of the

Trinity. This time, Christians hold, the people actually killed the object of their anger. As God, Jesus Christ is *no surrogate*. And yet there is no reciprocal violence: "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). God is not bound in our human cycles of vengeance. By accepting without retribution the violence inflicted upon Jesus Christ, both God's chosen and God's self, God makes it possible to end the cycles of vengeance humanity has been engaged in for millennia.

Throughout the scriptures, God has sought direct relationship with human beings. After Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, God confronted each of them directly. First when Cain became angry and again after he murdered his brother, God confronted him directly, seeking honest relationship with this wayward son. Abraham and God walked and talked together. When Jacob would return to his homeland after being sent across the desert, God engaged him in a night-long conflict. Job demanded a hearing with the God he thought had failed him. Those considered the most pious, the models of faith in scripture, are not those who never fought with or never doubted God. They are the ones that took their anger directly to its source and dealt with it there. Jacob wrestled with God. Abraham fought for Lot. Moses refused God's first invitation. Job challenged and accused God. David fasted and prayed and wept.

God seeks authentic communion, and this requires honest handling of anger and violence. Jesus issued his indictment of humanity's handling of anger in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33-44; Mk 12:1-11; Lk 20:9-18). In this parable, the tenants strike down the landowner's servants time and again. They even kill the son of the owner of their vineyard when he comes to collect their rent. This parable ends with Jesus' statement that the owner "will come and destroy the tenants" (Mk 12:9; Lk 20:16; see

also Mt 21:40-41). In each version, it is clear that the audience expects reciprocal violence in response to the crimes of the wicked tenants. Jesus warns his followers that the people have always struck down God's chosen, and that it will be the same for them (Mt 5:12). He laments over Jerusalem: "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Mt 23:37-39; see also Lk 12:34-35). Not only does Jesus criticize the behavior of the people who strike down the prophets, but he also offers alternatives for his community. In Matthew, Jesus commands direct confrontation: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault" (Mt 18:15). The fact that Jesus also identifies the greatest commandments as loving the Lord and loving the neighbor indicates that any such confrontation must be rooted in love. God's desire for authentic communion, and God's willingness to engage in direct confrontation to achieve it, is exhibited in the accounts of the Old Testament and the teachings of the New Testament.

This interpretation gives an interesting twist to what has been described as the more vulgar of the cosmic conflict metaphors. In one version of this theory, God wins the battle against the devil with deception, luring the devil into giving up humanity in exchange for a victim of inestimable value. Writing in the 4th century, Gregory of Nyssa advanced the bait-and-hook metaphor, in which God is disguised as a human being: "under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Diety might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh."[97] Jesus puts on the disguise of human flesh to trick the devil into swallowing the hook. I would take this illustration, but turn it from the cosmic battle between God and the devil to address the ongoing conflict between

[97] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 24, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 5 (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1893), 494, cited in Ray, 124.

humanity and God. As we have seen, humanity's anger with God can be seen throughout the scriptures: the people strike down God's chosen and God's messengers, from Cain's first murder through the crucifixion. However, apart from Job, that anger is rarely addressed to God. Christian interpreters throughout the centuries encounter the narratives of the gospels knowing the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. However, Mark, and to a lesser extent Matthew, preserved the idea that this identity was unknown during Jesus' lifetime in the so-called "Messianic secret." Jesus instructs the demons that have been exorcised and the disciples who have been instructed not to reveal his identity until after the resurrection. In the crucifixion, the Second Person of the Trinity has disguised God's self in human flesh.

If Jesus was successfully disguised, then the crowds and those who conspired in his crucifixion might have considered him God's chosen, but certainly would not have understood him to be God's self. In the wake of the crucifixion, it would seem that the people had once again struck down a prophet, the one who had been sent to them. But in the resurrection, Jesus' identity as the Risen Lord is revealed. The people learn that for the first time they struck not a surrogate, but the actual object of their violence. This realization would make that first Easter morning a very different experience than the joyful Christian celebrations we have observed through the years. This theory reclaims the sheer terror of that early morning visitation, and the news that this time, the people had struck God directly. With this revelation comes the realization that for once in history, human beings actually engaged the fight with the object of their anger, God's self. This explains why in Mark "they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid"

(16:8). The fear, trembling and wonder of the resurrection can be understood as the first realization of Jesus' identity with God, and the magnitude of what had been done in the crucifixion. If violence begets reciprocal violence capable of destroying a community, what might violence against the deity beget?

The miracle is that this violence brings on no violence. God seeks no vengeance. Although the destruction of the wicked tenants is presupposed in the parable, God's justice is not human justice. In the crucifixion, Jesus accepted all of the abuse humanity had directed towards God's chosen, and allowed it to pass over him and through him without provoking him to retribution. When human anger is directed at God, God's perfection allows it to be forgiven, rather than reciprocated. It is not so very amazing that human actions could not finally eradicate God's self. But it is humanly incomprehensible that anyone could allow such an assault to occur without responding in kind. In allowing humanity to rail against the divine, and in the human realization that no amount of anger or violence can diminish the perfection of God, the crucifixion and resurrection open a path for humanity to wrestle with its own limitations without severing its relationship with God.

This model of understanding the crucifixion draws from each of the traditional atonement theories we have examined, while adopting none of them. It agrees with the oft-maligned substitutionary theory that by human notions of justice, human sin merits death. In fact, in holding that God is complete with or without human beings, it goes further by assuming that human beings have never *deserved* life—it has always been a gift from the good Creator. However, this model departs from substitutionary theories by arguing that no part of God desires the death of God's creatures. It also departs by

holding that debt (whether of honor, justice or currency) is a completely inadequate description of the relationship between human beings and God. Finally, by recognizing God's radical sovereignty, this model rejects any external constraints on God—even of justice or fair play.

With the moral exemplar theories of atonement, this model lifts up the life and ministry of Jesus as integral to the story of human salvation. In that life and ministry, Jesus dispensed healing and wholeness through direct encounters with those in need. Ultimately, Jesus sought direct confrontation with the powers of evil, and resisted them without using violent means himself. Through both his life and death, Jesus taught and modeled direct confrontation, but never coercion. This model also agrees with moral exemplar theories in holding that human agency is a necessary part of salvation. Although God has opened the way for authentic communion, human beings must also engage for the relationship to be finally healed. In the face of Liberation, Feminist and Womanist critiques, this model still holds that repentance, submission to God's will, is necessary for salvation. Neither submission in general, nor submission to any other entity is required, but submission to God. This model holds that such submission is necessary, not because of God's "honor" or need for dominance, but because God is the only entity that can know how the whole plan, the whole song, fits together. If our creativity is to function harmoniously in the world, it must be practiced under the direction of God.

With the cosmic conflict theory, this model understands the crucifixion as the locus of God's definitive response to sin and evil. At the cross, God took all of the abuse humanity is capable of offering, even deicide, without being provoked to retaliation.

God's response to this abuse was acceptance and forgiveness, unequivocally demonstrating that the worst evil imaginable cannot change God. Like the cosmic conflict theory, this model understands God to be a bit of a trickster when necessary, and the Incarnation to be an example of that trickery. Unlike the cosmic conflict theory, this model holds that the object of this trickery was humanity, not the devil.

Now let us examine this interpretation according to the criteria set forth earlier. In this understanding of the crucifixion, God's character is revealed as sovereign, perfect, complete and loving. God's attitude towards humanity is always one of love and the seeking of communion, yet without any lessening of God's power or sovereignty. Jesus is strongly identified as God, and there is no division of will within the Godhead. Jesus' teaching and healing ministry involved loving, but direct, confrontation. He responded in love to those who came seeking honest interaction. The direct confrontation theory portrays a satisfactory character of God.

Human beings remain free agents throughout this theory. Humanity's rejection of God and violence towards God's chosen cannot be laid at God's feet. In this theory, God never violates the freedom of human will. The crucifixion occurred because human beings chose to strike down God's beloved. While God provides the only way for the relationship to be restored, that restoration requires human participation. Human agency is respected.

In this theory, Jesus' ministry is honored as part of God's ongoing revelation. In Jesus' earthly ministry, Jesus both taught and lived the way God intends human beings to live. He broke down divisions between races, classes and genders, and taught his followers to do the same. Jesus' ministry is also seen as the proximate cause of the

crucifixion. Humanity would not tolerate this eradication of division, and so struck (for once) at the true cause of its anger. The mechanism of atonement is once again revelation.

According to this direct conflict theory, God has always and will always pursue communion with God's creatures. The crucifixion was one more avenue of pursuing that communion. However, God has not simply opened the pathways for direct communication. In the crucifixion, God substituted God's self, the actual object of the people's anger, for the supposed surrogate of God's chosen. In the crucifixion, God grappled with humanity, challenging us to see the futility of taking our anger at the Divine and directing it in violence at the finite. God invites humanity to direct our anger, our doubt and abuse at God, the one being who can absorb all our malevolence without being contaminated. By wearing the disguise of humanity, God was able to place God's self in the way of humanity's destructive violence. In doing so, God destroyed the subterfuge of the system of surrogate victimhood. God engaged the conflict face-to-face, and accepted our blows. Through this action, God unmasks the root of humanity's rebellion. Because God is truly and completely sovereign, our violence cannot finally change God's love for us. It cannot inspire reciprocal violence from the One to whom all things belong, and from whom nothing can diminish. In fact, if we cast our doubt and anger and abuse on the Lord, rather than on each other, then it just might be made holy, a transformed part of the divine human relationship. Tanner described the possibility of the sanctification of death. Girard posits that sacrificial blood might have the power of transforming destructive violence into constructive violence. Leviticus suggests that anything touching the holy might become holy. Violence does not take on a sacred

quality, but perhaps when directed at the holy, the holy might transform it into another avenue for the building up of the relationship between human beings and God.

If this line of reasoning is to be pursued, it must be made explicitly clear that any sacralizing of violence could only occur when it was properly directed at the holy. Violence in itself is not a holy thing, and has no power to make anything else holy. This requirement for violence to be directed towards God forestalls any arguments for self-sacrifice or continued scapegoating. There is no one for whom anyone or anything can play the role of surrogate anymore. God has confronted us face to face, and we must stop trying to forget that fact. This theory also undermines any arguments for holy violence. Violence seems to be rooted in human frustration that we are not sovereign. God is sovereign, and thus has no need for violence. God's character as revealed in scripture is one seeking relationship with God's people. Because of frequent references to Old Testament concepts of holy war to justify ongoing military conflicts today, this is an important field for further reflection. Does a direct confrontation model of atonement, and the understandings of sin, sovereignty and relationship it entails, provide any help in interpreting passages regarding holy war?

The direct confrontation model treats the crucifixion as God's decisive engagement in relationship with God's creation. This engagement does two things. First, it frees human beings to express anger towards God, venting feelings of rage and frustration that would normally lead to destructive cycles of reciprocal violence. Second, it demonstrates the absolute respect God has (and God's creatures should have) for the inviolability of the free will of God's creatures. This frees human beings from the guilt of responsibility for the actions of any other equally free creature. The victim can no

longer take on responsibility for the attacker's actions. While it frees human beings *from* responsibility for the deeds of others, it also frees them *for* responsible action in the world. As creatures that do have the power to affect the world around us, we are responsible for acting in a way that heals, rather than harms. This theory affirms the absolute dignity of all God's creatures. It also allows those creatures to freely engage in creatively addressing the needs of the world. The direct conflict theory models constructive, nonviolence conflict resolution, and encourages people to use this model in the resolution of their own conflicts. By viewing power in similar terms as love (which increases as it is shared) rather than as a limited good (which can only be depleted by sharing) it explains how God can remain the root, source and locus of all power while also recognizing the very real consequences of human actions. By unconditionally affirming the free will of human beings, it supports the idea of human rights.[98] It also resolves the never-ending blame game which attempts to place responsibility for human ills on God, who "could have stopped it if he wanted to."[99] When we blame God for the evil deeds of other human beings—murders, wars, and other crimes—we are really blaming God for not violating the freedom of those creatures. We are blaming God for not coercing their wills, or for not withdrawing God's providential life-support, before they did the damage they do. This theory makes it clear that the blame for human actions lies at the feet of human actors, and cannot be shifted to God, who truly permits the

[98] Human beings are too apt to focus on their own free will, while ignoring the equally free wills of other human beings. In the direct confrontation theory, it is clear that even God will not violate the free will of one of God's creatures. This should lead human beings to reevaluate the ways in which we relate to one another.

[99] Theological reflection on why things are the way they are is speculative enough. When we begin speculating on what God "could have done," we have entered the theater of the absurd. We do not stand outside of the realm of what is, and so have no ground on which to build hypotheses of what could have been.

exercise of free will. By understanding the crucifixion as God "tricking" human beings into addressing their anger at God instead of at God's chosen ones, we properly recognize God's sovereignty as something untouchable by human actions, and we acknowledge human wills to be truly free.

Conclusion

The direct confrontation theory of atonement preserves God's sovereign character, implies neither internal nor external constraints on God's ability to save, and yet allows for human agency as well. God has revealed that the shadow at which we have been swinging for millennia is indeed God's self. God has revealed our own violence-filled hearts. God has revealed God's mercy. It is all there for the human being willing to see. However, God has not forced a right relationship onto human beings. God's grace is revealed as necessary, but not ultimately sufficient, for salvation. But that is the nature of relationship. One party cannot singlehandedly create or sustain a relationship. Unless human beings are willing to look past our myths of a justice-bound or unmerciful God, beyond a God of vengeance and damageable honor, then we cannot engage in genuine relationship with God. While recognition that God's plan is ultimately better than our own, I'm not sure it's actually necessary. My closest friends and I do not always agree. In fact, because we are secure in our relationship with each other, we often have fights much more serious than any I would ever consider engaging in with one with whom I was not in relationship. By realizing that nothing we think or say can damage God's love for us, human beings are free to fight with God. We are free to tell God that sometimes, God's plan seems like a pretty poor one to us. We are free to cast their doubts and frustrations upon God. As long as when we realize that we do not have power over God we direct our frustrations at their root cause and not at one another, the relationship with God will be real. Authentic communion can be restored.

The veil has been torn, and the sacred is exposed to those willing to look. The violence of the human race is rooted in our resentment that we are not the sovereigns of this world. In the crucifixion, God accepted our abuse without retaliation. In the

resurrection, God demonstrated that nevertheless, God remains sovereign. So long as we continue to shroud these truths in myths about a deity who craves sacrifice or who seeks vengeance, we remain in fruitless denial. When we try to disguise it as a morality tale, we fail to look at it directly. But if we can see that sacrifice was always about our human anger towards God and not about God's anger towards humans, then God's action can, and just might, free us from ourselves.

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