

4-1-2021

William Lane Craig, ATONEMENT AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST: AN EXEGETICAL, HISTORICAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION

Christopher Woznicki

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Woznicki, Christopher (2021) "William Lane Craig, ATONEMENT AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST: AN EXEGETICAL, HISTORICAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 38: Iss. 3, Article 12.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.3.11

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol38/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Mysticism and mystical theology allow the disenfranchised to connect directly with God and to God's own authority in their love-filled striving to unsettle the unjust status quos of this world. (Think, for instance, of how Catherine of Siena, the twenty-fourth child of a Sieneese cloth-dyer, becomes an influential political figure as well as a spiritual teacher and a Doctor of the Catholic church.) Yet the chapters in this Handbook overwhelmingly present the impression that the people to whom God most often grants grace and authority are white men in positions of authority and power (bishops, monks, academic theologians, and church fathers). In the context of mysticism's broader role in Christian theology, this representation is not just misleading—it is actively harmful.

Perhaps the true value of this volume is that it demonstrates what the field of mystical theology looks like from a certain perspective—one whose privilege remains largely invisible to itself, and whose calls to transformation and new life often remain separated from meaningful engagement with the vast majority of the earth's population. Essays which fossilize existing debates are not likely to draw newcomers into the vital project of guiding people towards "a doorway into a living, transformative encounter with the divine reality" (3), even if they accurately capture the contours of a dominant part of the academic field's past. One is left hoping that the book demonstrates enough of the vibrant and inclusive work (both past and present) of mystical theology that it starts more fruitful conversations than it shuts down.

Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration, by William Lane Craig. Baylor University Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 318. \$24.95 (hardcover).

CHRISTOPHER WOZNICKI, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena

In recent years the penal substitutionary model of atonement has received much attention from philosophers and analytic theologians. Numerous articles and chapters have been dedicated to raising objective critiques of the model—that is, critiques that concern the problematic elements of the model itself rather than problematic effects that the model might have on individuals or on society. As with any philosophically significant theological doctrine there have also been attempts shore up this model against its objectors. Most of these defensive maneuvers have been confined to articles and chapters. Yet, William Lane Craig provides a comprehensive,



full-scale argument for and defense of penal substitutionary atonement (hereafter, PSA).

Strictly speaking, Craig's *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration* is not merely concerned with penal substitutionary models of atonement. The monograph concerns itself with the Christian doctrine of atonement, that is, how Christ's death facilitates reconciliation with God. Although, broadly speaking, the focus is on the doctrine of atonement, the emphasis certainly is on the theory—or more accurately the family of theories—labeled “penal substitution.” Using the analogy of a jewel, Craig explains that there is a multiplicity of metaphors and motifs throughout Scripture, and especially the New Testament, that describe the nature and significance of Christ's death. Like a jewel, each facet contributes to the beauty of the gem. However, a gemstone, he explains, has what gemologists call a “table” (15). The table anchors the stone. According to Craig, the “table” of atonement is “sacrifice,” which he argues is best understood in terms of PSA.

The multifaceted nature of atonement requires that philosophers and theologians carefully attend to the varied imagery used in scripture and historical theology. As such, Craig's study of atonement is divided into three parts: 1) an examination of biblical data concerning Christ's death, 2) a survey of historical accounts of atonement, and 3) Craig's attempt at articulating a biblical and philosophically coherent theory of atonement. In what follows I provide an overview of *Atonement and the Death of Christ* before critically analyzing Craig's arguments.

Part One, “Biblical Data Concerning Atonement,” addresses five biblical topics: sacrifice, Isaiah's “Servant of the Lord,” divine justice, representation, and redemption. Among other things, Craig suggests that while the Bible addresses the importance of sacrifices of thanksgiving, to reduce sacrifice merely to this notion is “implausible and fails to do justice to the biblical texts” (23). This is especially evident in the gesture of placing one's hand on the head of the animal which would be sacrificed. This ritual indicates identification of the worshipper and the sacrifice, demonstrating vicarious suffering. It is a ritual punishment, “a symbolic representation of what the offerer deserves,” and thus an image of penal substitutionary atonement (25). A similar notion of bearing the sins of another—bearing the punishment that others deserved and thus reconciling the offender to God—appears in Isaiah's imagery of “the Servant of the Lord” (Isaiah 53). Central to New Testament interpretations of the significance of Christ's death, the Servant of the Lord imagery—like Old Testament sacrificial rituals—points to the foundational nature of substitutionary punishment for understanding atonement. Lest atonement be thought of as merely a penal transaction between individuals, Craig stresses the legal and judicial context of atonement. “The heart of OT Judaism,” he says, “was the divine Torah (law) that governed all of life and man's relationship to God” (51). Furthermore, Paul's epistles pick up on the legal and judicial imagery of the Old Testament. Thus, scripturally, it is not enough to think

of atonement in terms of sacrifice; legal motifs are necessary for expressing a biblical doctrine of atonement. The final biblical facets of atonement that Craig examines are representation and redemption. Christ, he argues, represents every human being before God and thus his representation is universal in scope.

In part two, "Dogmatic History of the Doctrine of Atonement," Craig surveys Patristic, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation theories of atonement. He rightly recognizes that there is no single patristic theory of atonement and that the early Church Fathers adopted the variegated imagery of scripture to describe the meaning of Christ's death. Two themes run through the patristic accounts: first, the notion that Christ's death is a sacrificial offering to God for humanity's sins, and second, that God's justice ought to be thought of in retributive terms. With these two themes in place, he concludes that PSA is a significant aspect of patristic theories of atonement (111). Such a claim, though stated nonchalantly, is vigorously debated by patrologists and theologians. To establish this claim, he would need to explain how the presence of such motifs results in a full-fledged theory of atonement. In chapter eight, "Reformation and Post-Reformation Theories," Craig returns to the significance of legal imagery for thinking about atonement. He briefly treats Calvin and Luther's doctrine of atonement, concludes that PSA is intimately connected with forensic accounts of justification and then turns his attention to the writings of Faustus Socinus, Francis Turretin, and Hugo Grotius. Socinus raises significant objections to penal substitution. Socinus argues that punitive justice is not an essential property of God, that satisfaction is logically incompatible with the remission of sins, that penal substitution is immoral, that sins cannot be imputed, and that Christ did not actually render satisfaction because Christ could not have endured an eternal death. These objections, Craig explains, continue to be raised to this day—though it is significant that Turretin provides substantive replies to all the objections that Socinus raises. Craig rounds out his discussion of historical theories of atonement by examining Hugo Grotius's theory. Arguing that Grotius is misrepresented as holding to a penal non-substitutionary model of atonement, he argues that Grotius provides a penal substitutionary model that is unique in emphasizing God's rule as supreme judge and ruler over the universe.

The final part of the monograph is titled, "Philosophical Reflections on the Doctrine of Atonement." Here Craig draws upon the legal emphasis that has weaved its way throughout the book in order to put forth his penal substitutionary account of atonement. He defines penal substitution as "the doctrine that God inflicted upon Christ the suffering that we deserve as the punishment for our sins, as a result of which we no longer deserve punishment" (147). The arguments in this section defending penal substitution are too numerous to address in detail but I should note that he addresses some of the most significant recent critiques of the theory as well as some historical critiques. For example, he addresses Mark Murphy's *Incoherence Objection* ("Not Penal Substitution but Vicarious

Punishment," *Faith and Philosophy* 26 (2009): 253–273) as well as Eleonore Stump's *Theological Incoherence Objection (Atonement)* (Oxford University Press, 2018)). He provides several potential justifications for penal substitution but ultimately argues that God's justice is best thought of in terms of retributivism. Against the objection that PSA conflicts with the prima facie demands of negative retributivism, Craig argues that Christ could still be legally liable to punishment if our sins were imputed to him. Contra those who think that we are utterly bereft of analogies to imputation, he appeals to the notion of legal fictions and the legal doctrine of vicarious liability. According to this doctrine, in certain situations the liability of a subordinate can be imputed to his superior, and thus the superior is held legally liable for acts done by her servant or employee (188). This legal doctrine provides a counterexample to those who cannot fathom the imputation of legal liability. Against the objection that punishing Christ would not meet the demands of retributive justice because the person punished has not committed any wrong, Craig once again appeals to the legal notion of vicarious liability. If we consider justice to be satisfied in cases of vicarious liability, he wonders, why not think that justice can be satisfied through PSA? Craig also addresses the objection that PSA does not actually blot out humanity's guilt; because guilt can never be expunged, either by pardon or punishment, the demands of retributive justice still stand (229). Such an account of guilt, Craig says, is misguided. Atonement is more concerned with guilt as liability to punishment. Christ's death can remove the liability to punishment, even though it does not erase the immoral actions of sinners. Finally, Craig addresses the objection that, strictly speaking, God does not forgive our sins if he also meets the demands of justice. This objection, Craig says, is misguided. Legal cases demonstrate that "the vast majority of pardons are granted after the criminal's sentence has been fully served" (257). The reason why this objection seems initially plausible is because objectors tend to think of forgiveness in terms of personal forgiveness. When forgiveness is thought of in legal, as opposed to personal categories, the objection disappears.

As previously stated, Craig's book presents a comprehensive argument for and defense of the philosophically controversial penal substitutionary theory of atonement. While comprehensive in scope, there are several areas which would have benefited from more attention. For example, Craig writes as if the way that Scripture uses metaphors for atonement is self-evident but does not address the fact that there is vigorous debate about how metaphors—biblical and historical—relate to one another and relate to the event of atonement itself (13–15). There are two principal approaches to relating the various atonement images and motifs throughout scripture. The pluralist approach takes it that a multiplicity of metaphors does not necessarily entail that there is one controlling metaphor or central model of atonement. The pluralist approach often assumes that there is cross-fertilization between theology and culture and that cultural assumptions and vocabularies affect theories and models (historical and

scriptural). This approach, exemplified by some theologians, draws its impetus from discussions about the epistemic significance of metaphors, especially by those engaged in science and philosophy of science that argue that our ways of describing the world are inherently metaphorical. If those who hold to this position are correct, i.e., our descriptions of the world are inherently metaphorical and all metaphors are deeply ingrained in their historical and social context, then there is nothing that could unify such metaphors from the event of atonement itself. It is not difficult to see how the pluralist approach would frustrate those who hold to the alternative “hierarchical approach.” Hierarchalists, which tend to hold to some version of PSA, though not necessarily, believe that there is either one controlling metaphor for atonement or that there is a conceptual or logical hierarchy among the motifs and models of atonement. Craig clearly falls into the hierarchalist camp. His lack of substantive engagement with the theological literature concerning the relation between models/metaphors/motifs of atonement and the event of atonement, however, does not undercut the significance of his overall proposal. Yet, some readers—including myself—would have liked to see Craig engage the topic in a more in-depth manner.

Another area which could have received more attention was the notion of vicarious liability and its relation to PSA. Craig argues that the legal doctrine of vicarious liability is analogous to PSA. In a footnote he writes, “A striking feature of the Genesis creation story is that God gives to the man and woman authority over creation to act on His behalf and delegates to them the responsibility of managing creation (Gen 1:27–28). Thus the analogy between God and the employer is unexpectedly close” (201). Should we limit ourselves to saying that vicarious liability is merely a concept which provides an analogy for PSA? Might it be the case that PSA is actually an instance of vicarious liability? In the space that remains let me gesture towards how we might argue for PSA being a case of vicarious liability.

Consider the fact that in order for vicarious liability to apply in legal cases one needs to show that the superior stands in a particular relationship to her subordinate or else imputing a punishment would be unjustified. This relationship requires that 1) there be a hierarchy in the relationship and 2) that an agent carry out his superior’s commands, in some sense representing his superior. The defender of penal substitution could appeal to the doctrine of the *imago Dei* in order to fulfill these criteria. Consider Richard Middleton’s description of the meaning of the *imago Dei*. He explains, “The *imago Dei* designates the royal office or calling of human beings as representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God’s rule or administration of earth’s resources and creatures” (*The Liberating Image* (Brazos, 2005), 27–28). How then does one move from saying that God is the superior in the *respondet superior* principle to saying that Christ is our penal substitute? The key to making this move is to recognize the Christological nature of the *imago Dei*. On

such a view, Christ is properly speaking the image of God. Christ is the one through whom God's rule is manifested on earth. The rest of humanity is made in his image, such that we image God insofar as we image Christ. We are therefore, properly speaking, vice-regents of God insofar as we are made according to the image of Christ, who is ruler over all creation. It is through this relationship that humanity relates to Christ—our penal substitute—as “servants” in a *respondeat superior* type relationship (Cf. Woznicki, “One Can’t Believe Impossible Things,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 37 (2019): 64–80).

The grounds for applying the *respondeat superior* principle to PSA might be further strengthened by appealing to the concept of union with Christ. In a curious statement about the principle, Oliver Wendel Holmes remarks,

It is hard to explain why a master is liable to the extent that he is for the negligent acts of one who at the time really is his servant, acting within the general scope of his employment. Probably master and servant are feigned to be all one person by a fiction. (Cited in C. B. Labatt, *Commentaries on the Law of Master and Servant Including Modern Laws on Workmen's Compensation, Arbitration, Employers' Liability, Etc., Etc.* (The Lawyers Co-operative, 1913), 6669).

If a case for vicarious liability can be made based on the concept that a master and servant are feigned to be one in virtue of a legal fiction, how much stronger would a case be for penal substitution by means of vicarious liability if in fact the superior and servant were metaphysically one in the eyes of God? If one could develop an account of the metaphysically real union between Christ and the redeemed, then one would have further reasons for supporting the claim that PSA is not merely analogous to vicarious liability in significant ways but that it actually is a case of vicarious liability in action.

On the whole, Craig has provided a well-rounded argument for and defense of penal substitution. He addresses the most important arguments against the theory by applying the insights of legal theory and legal history. Undoubtedly, *Atonement and the Death of Christ* will become a landmark text for debates about PSA going forward.