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YHWH, Batman, Popeye, and Jerry Falwell:
Questioning the Myth of Redemptive Violence,
An Exploration of Nonviolent Atonement Motifs throughout the Biblical Text

by
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As a result of the influx over the last 60 years of material discussing the role violence *should* or should *not* play in the Christian life,¹ one might be inclined to believe that this particular subject is a conversation found predominantly on the lips of individuals living in the second half of the 20th century. This, of course, is not the case. The topic of violence has been on the minds and in the hearts of Christ-followers since the climactic birth of the Christian movement: the violent death of Christ on a Roman cross. One of the earliest Christian groups, guided by Marcion of Sinope (c. 144 CE), was intensely involved in discussions surrounding violence. Marcion simply could not reconcile YHWH, the sectarian deity of the Hebrew people, the progenitor of the material world (cf. Genesis 1), the murderer of humankind (cf. Genesis 7), the destroyer of great cities (cf. Genesis 19), the conqueror of nations (cf. 1 and 2 Samuel), etc., with the God of Jesus, the *Spirit One* (cf. John 4:24), the *lover* of humankind (cf. John 3), the *creator* of new cities (cf. Revelation 21), the *healer* of nations (cf. Revelation 22). How

¹ Walter Wink, in a short survey chapter regarding the recent interest in non-violent confrontation within the realm of Christian ethics, points out that the accumulation of material specific to the topic of religious violence (and non-violence) has increased ten-fold in the years directly following WWII. See Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 243-257.

does one reconcile, Marcion questioned, the tribal YHWH (the archetypal image of violence), with Jesus' God the Father (the prototypical image of loving goodness)? Marcion eventually concluded that the two images simply could not be harmonized. He truncated his canon, expunged the "pagan" Jewish Bible, and drew open a sharp mythological gash between YHWH (violence) and God the Father (nonviolence/love). While I may not agree with Marcion's methodology (i.e the dissection of YHWH/God), I am immensely sympathetic to his theological dilemma. It is this dilemma I wish to explore with you today. But instead of examining Marcion's violence/nonviolence question through the lens of his YHWH/God distinction, I wish to frame this dilemma within different theological scaffolding: atonement theology.

It is, of course, no secret that since its 16th century reassessment,² Substitutionary Atonement Theory³ has been, to virtually *every denomination* of Protestant Christians,⁴ the most popular and pervasive theory of atonement ever proposed. Requisite, however, in this version of Christ's Atonement, is the notion of

² After Calvin's treatment of this theory in his *Institutes*, the application of strict legal language began being employed by Protestant Christians regarding the discussion of atonement, and was the time the prefix "penal" gained general usage in Protestant circles. See, Brad Jersak, "Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, 18-53 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 23.

³ This atonement theory has its roots in the theological work of St. Anselm in the late 11th century. A few contemporary Reform theologians, however, argue for an earlier date of inception, and some contend a date even as early as Justin Martyr and Augustine of Hippo; see J.I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," *The Tyndale Bulletin*, no. 25 (1974): 3-45. Also, for the most advanced and theologically sophisticated treatment of Penal Substitutionary Atonement by proponents of this theory, see Richard J. Mouw, "Violence and the Atonement," in *Must Christianity be Violent: Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology*, ed. Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs, 159-171 (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003); or Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

⁴ This also includes Free Church institutions. I want to note however, the one principal exception to this trend: the Anabaptists. Given the Anabaptist's general nonviolent commitments and sensibilities, Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory has never fully captured their doctrinal admirations.

compensatory violence: induced by God (as a *penal* payment for gross human sin perpetrated against a perfectly holy God), and levied upon Jesus (as the sinless and *substitutionary* God-man sacrifice). Yet, if God required a *violent death* as retribution for humanity's sin against him, why, then, did Jesus (the comprehensive image of the fullness of the Godhead, cf. Colossians 1:19) live a life *committed to nonviolence*? If God's modus operandi for accomplishing his Holy Will could be characterized by either acute or generalized violence, why were Jesus' words and actions so strongly opposed to violence (i.e. enemy love, prayer for persecutors, repayment of evil with good, turning the other cheek, those who live by the sword die by the sword, etc.)? Why would God use violence as the central technique for redeeming his Creation, if the fullest image we have of this God (i.e. Jesus) abhorred violence? This conversation will be an exploration of nonviolent motifs of atonement as they are modeled throughout the arc of the biblical text. My hope for this time, in the end, is for us to be lead to a place regarding the dilemma of violence and atonement that is a bit less dislocated, and a little more graceful, than our brother Marcion's.

In his seminal work, *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink begins his study of "the Powers"⁵ by contending "whoever controls the cosmogony controls the children."⁶ He argues that whoever possesses the authority to dictate the "truth" regarding the nature

⁵ By "Powers," Wink means "the simultaneity of an outer, visible structure and an inner, spiritual reality. The Powers, properly speaking, are not just the spirituality of institutions, but their outer manifestations as well." Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 3. Basically, "the Powers" are any spiritual or material force that exerts control or power over an individual, people group, institution, etc.

⁶ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 18.

of the universe also inherently holds the power to form humanity's collective consciousness in that "truth's" image. In other words, if the "Powers" in control espouse that the mechanism intrinsic to the formation of the cosmos is *creation out of violence* (as we see in the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*⁷), it is only logical that *violence* will result as the primary method for humanity to *also participate in the goodness of creation*.

This is the origin, Wink believes, of the "myth of redemptive violence."⁸ If humanity is taught from childhood that violence is the normative character of the universe, violence will automatically and inevitably be embedded in the mentality of the world's psyche. It is this cosmogony, this "myth of redemptive violence," Wink argues, "has inundated humanity on every side, and functions as the world's dominant narrative."⁹ One need only to examine the images and personalities broadcast to us by our culture to begin to understand how deeply ingrained this violent myth is. Think to yourself: when was the last time you saw an action film¹⁰ wherein the main protagonist is able to "defeat" the primary villain without the use of "justifiable" violence? Or, another example, when can you remember a time a television show highlighted a hero who combated evil with goodness; violence with nonviolence; hate with love?

⁷ For a scholarly, elegant, and in-depth treatment of this subject, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967), 175-210.

⁸ For an extended discussion on this topic, see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 13-33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ I here choose "action" films because, unlike many other film genres, these films generally contain a strong element of *violent evil that necessitates immediate termination*. Although, I will say that *even* romantic comedies often have an "evil" foil waiting in the wings to snatch up the beautiful heroine who commonly requires immediate dispatch as well.

We begin to see this “myth of redemptive violence” infecting our children very early in their development. At a shockingly young age, many male and female children are inundated with the fantastic adventures of television and comic book heroes and heroines. The psychodynamics of this medium are simple: children identify themselves with the “good guy” so that they can think of themselves as “good.” This, Wink argues, “enables them to project onto the bad guy their own repressed anger, violence, rebelliousness, or lust, and then vicariously to enjoy their own evil by watching the bad guy initially prevail.”¹¹ This part of the show or comic (in which the evil character seems to begin to triumph) consumes all but the closing minutes or pages, and thus, “allows ample time for indulging in the dark side of the self.”¹² Then, when the “good guy” eventually emerges victorious, the viewers and readers are once again able to assert control over their own internal wicked cravings, repress them, and re-project onto themselves their initial sense of their own goodness. “The villain’s punishment provides catharsis,” Wink writes, “one forswears the villain’s ways and heaps condemnation on him in a guilt-free orgy of psychic aggression.”¹³ The problem, of course, is that there is absolutely no premium put on reasoning, persuasion, negotiation, or diplomacy. And the cycle is always doomed to repeat itself, seeing as the underlying pathologies of the watchers and readers are never genuinely dealt with.

A consummate example of this violent mythology is found in one of the longest running comics of our time: Popeye. Each segment customarily begins with the

¹¹ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 18-19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

kidnapping of Olive Oyl (Popeye's girlfriend), by Bluto (the antagonist). When Popeye attempts to save Olive Oyl, Bluto inevitably beats Popeye to a pulp. Then, after Popeye's first pummeling, Bluto ostensibly begins to rape Olive Oyl, a can of spinach miraculously falls out of Popeye's pocket, he ingests the green goop, is transformed and infused with power, and proceeds to annihilate the villain and rescues his love interest.¹⁴ The message here is clear: Popeye is good, and Popeye is valuable; but his goodness and value is predicated only on his ability and willingness to brutally dispatch evil with violence that is understood as "redemptive." And because salvation in this mythic framework is achieved principally through identification with the hero, the watchers and readers are obliged and encouraged to follow their example.

Perhaps a more contemporary example is also in order: Batman. After witnessing the brutal slaying of his mother and father as a young child,¹⁵ Bruce Wayne grew up to become a masked vigilante and crime-fighter, vowing to make war on the criminal element. Ironically, Batman, in his attempt to end the cycle of violence, chose to utilize the same violent methods that took the lives of his parents in the first place. Unwittingly, then, Batman became an integral part of the same cycle of violence that he had initially sworn to break. What the Joker, Two Face, the Penguin, Catwoman, Bane,

¹⁴ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 18.

¹⁵ This violent act was at the hands of a disenfranchised petty crook named Joe Chill. The entirety of Batman's existence, of course, is infuriatingly ironic. His alter ego, Bruce Wayne, is the head of the multinational, multibillion-dollar weapons manufacturer, Wayne Enterprises, which, in the DC comic universe, is, and has been, for the past 40 years, the primary supplier of arms to the United States military. Joe Chill, his parent's murderer, was a Korean War veteran who suffered from PTSD, and during Chill's tour of duty, it was none other than Wayne Enterprises that supplied the weapons to the State Department that kept fueling the war, delaying Chill's return home, and creating his mental instability; the instability that ultimately lead to the murder of Bruce's parents. In this sad paradox, Batman becomes a small-scale and finite attempt to solve the systemic social problems that Wayne Enterprises creates on an extensive, immeasurable, and global level.

and an ever-growing list of more evil and dangerous enemies were unable to teach Batman, is the same lesson that thousands of years of war, rape, and murder were never able to teach us: violence only begets more violence. No violence can therefore ever be redemptive.

Regarding atonement, then, if our understanding of God's motivation for Christ's death on the cross were God's wrath, judgment, anger, and violent "redemptive" payback,¹⁶ it would also be logical for us, as his creation, made in His image, to follow in those same relational footsteps. It is no coincidence that those Christians who most fiercely champion Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory are also those who most aggressively endorse the violent combat efforts of the United States war machine. Take, for example, the cases of individuals like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Rob Grant; all of whom are essential players in groups such as the *American Christian Cause* and the *Moral Majority*. These groups have been well-documented as proponents not only of Christian Nationalism, but also strong supporters of America's numerous war efforts, especially those against "terrorism (read, Islam)." It is no accident that these men are proud to fly under the banner of Evangelical "fundamentalism," which, of course, retains only five "fundamentals": biblical inerrancy, the literalism of the miracle stories, the Virgin Birth, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and *Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory*. With that said, let us turn to a study of how Scripture can inform us on the subject of atonement.

¹⁶ Seem like an unfair caricature? Read Jonathan Edward's sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, or watch a few episode of the *700 Club*.

To be perfectly blunt, Genesis 22, the “sacrifice” of Isaac, preaches very well for those who subscribe to Substitutionary Atonement.¹⁷ At the last minute, God, in his graciousness, *substituted* for Isaac a sacrificial ram whose horns were caught in a thicket. Interestingly, historians are quick to point out that child sacrifice was incredibly widespread in the ancient world. “Child sacrifice - which is referred to many times in the Hebrew Bible as the most abominable of all acts - was the kind of thing you expected a god to ask of you,” writes Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.¹⁸ The essence of the story of Abraham, however, is that at the crucial moment, God says, “Stop! I am not that kind of god!” “God,” writes Sacks, “slammed on the brakes; it was the most effective way in history... to prove that God was different than all of the other gods... that he was loving, forgiving, and merciful.”¹⁹

Of course, the compilers of the Levitical and Deuteronomic Law spent a large amount of space prescribing regulations regarding other types of sacrifices, animal sacrifices, for example, all of which were *required by God*. Often, this theme of compulsory sacrifice is sighted by proponents of Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory as evidence of God’s need for satisfaction. However, J. Denny Weaver points out that “the sacrifices of Leviticus happen in times of joy as well as failure. Therefore they

¹⁷ I must note, however, that the “penal” element is missing completely in the Genesis 22 narrative.

¹⁸ As quoted in, Brad Jersak, “Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ,” in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, 18-53 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

cannot be interpreted as rituals that required blood as the necessary payment for sin.”²⁰

Thus, *even if* a Christological “sacrifice of atonement” is indeed modeled after Old Testament sacrifices, it should not be understood as a *substitutionary propitiation*, but instead “as a re-dedication of self to God without being a kind of payment to restoration of honor or worship to God.”²¹

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan also remind us that the roots of ancient animal sacrifice were not in punishment and substitution, but rather, based in protocols for *human reconciliation*: the proffered gift and the shared meal.²² “In a sacrifice the animal is made sacred, and is given to God as a sacred gift, and then returned to the offerer as a sacred meal,” the two write. “That sense of sacrifice should never be confused with suffering or substitution.”²³ Indeed, the point of sacrifice was never violence; the animal was always done away with swiftly and efficiently. “Ancient priests,” remark the two, “were also excellent butchers.”²⁴ How easy it is to forget the words of the prophet Isaiah regarding the sacrificial system; “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of

²⁰ J. Denny Weaver, “The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God,” in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, 316-355 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 344, emphasis mine.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 344.

²² Gregory Boyd also makes this point when God “sacrifices” (read, “dedicate,” or “to make sacred”) the inhabitants of Canaan. He makes the case that this “dedication” is not an essentially evil act, instead it is one of “sacred offering.” See, Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997). A more compelling interpretation of the violence found in Joshua/Samuel/Kings, however, I find again in Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, where he argues that the writers of the text deliberately insert prefabricated violent orders in the mouth of God so as to satisfy their own subconscious desire for memetic scapegoating.

²³ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

goats.”²⁵ Hosea has the Lord remark, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”²⁶ These are potent prophetic critiques of the same sacrificial system that many describe as the *basis for Penal Substitutionary Atonement*.

Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory, of course, maintains that Jesus’ God-commanded, substitutionary death on the cross is based on *far more than a few Old Testament texts*. Interestingly though, nowhere in the New Testament are the words “penal,” “substitute,” or “substitution” ever used, and even in Paul’s and the general Epistles combined, “atonement” is only used four times, and never as a compulsory payment to God. In fact, the writers of the New Testament make it clear that Jesus died for *our* sake, not *God’s*,²⁷ and the violence of the cross is *not by the hand of God* but by the murderous desires of *human hearts*, performed by *human hands*.²⁸

What then, was the purpose of Christ’s death on the cross? I, like both John Howard Yoder and J. Denny Weaver, work from the assumption that theology, and in particular, atonement theology, should be principally anchored in *Jesus and the Gospel narratives*.²⁹ And integral to this narrative is Jesus’ *rejection of violent satisfaction*. Luke declares that Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1-2 to inaugurate his ministry,³⁰ and it is clear, as the Gospels attest, that Jesus carried on this activist nonviolent mission to demonstrate

²⁵ Isaiah 1:11, New Revised Standard Version.

²⁶ Hosea 6:6, NRSV.

²⁷ John 3, 2 Corinthians 4:15; 5:21, 8:9, etc., NRSV.

²⁸ Acts 2:3; 3:14-15; 4:10; 7:52; 10:39; 13:27-28, etc., NRSV.

²⁹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974); J. Denny Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, 316-355 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

³⁰ Luke 4:18-19, NRSV.

that his *primary purpose* was to fulfill Isaiah's prophetic promise.³¹ Jesus' words and deeds demonstrate that the reign of God cares about the powerless, the disenfranchised, the poor, the sick, the hungry, the marginalized, and the sinner. "Equally important," Weaver writes, "to *what* injustices Jesus confronted, is *how* he confronted them."³² When Jesus was arrested, he forbade the use of violence for his defense, rebuked Peter for using his sword, healed the damage Peter caused, and chided those who arrested him for thinking that they needed swords and clubs in his capture; in numerous situations, he told his followers to love their enemies, pray for their persecutors, repay evil with goodness, to turn the other cheek, etc.

Weaver interprets this nonviolent narrative arc as an important "atonement motif,"³³ and observes that within this motif there is no indication of any kind that the death of Jesus *satisfies anything*. In fact, "The death in this story is produced by forces that opposed Jesus... which is clear evidence that their means differ from God's means made visible in Jesus."³⁴ Nothing about the narrative of Jesus supports the notion that his death was needed by God to satisfy a divine requirement, whether that requirement "was punishment demanded by divine law, restoration of honor to an offended God, or restoration of distorted order."³⁵ Any satisfaction motifs lifted from Substitution Atonement Theories are simply not present in the narrative of Jesus given in the

³¹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins San Francisco, 1991), 89.

³² J. Denny Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, 316-355 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 322.

³³ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

Gospels. In fact, any requirements of satisfaction, believes Weaver, “are composed in some other paradigm and brought from somewhere else and placed on - imposed on - this story from the outside.”³⁶ In this approach, then, Jesus’ death *was still* a necessity, but *not* one maliciously dictated by God. Jesus needed to die at *our* hands, to communicate to us that God’s response to violence, hate, and death (epitomized in the crucifixion), is forgiveness (Father, forgive them, they know not what they do - cf. Luke 23:34), love (cf. John 3:16), and resurrection (cf. Romans 6). In a sense, then, atonement happened not on the cross, but on the third day, as God raised Jesus from the dead, endorsing the entirety of his life, method, and ministry!

In this time I have attempted to demonstrate that our view of God, especially our notions regarding atonement, are of utmost importance. As created creatures, it is our nature to follow in the footsteps of our Creator. To paint a picture of God the Father as a deity bound supremely by His own inability to forgive lawlessness outside the parameters of His own sense of “penal justice,” and who demands a violent blood sacrifice for right relationship with his created order, generates individuals and flocks that will *naturally behave equivalently*. In my exploration of some nonviolent motifs of atonement as they are modeled throughout the arc of the biblical text, I attempted to explicate what I see as a better atonement foundation than Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory: a nonviolent, narrative-based atonement theory, built upon the

³⁶ J. Denny Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, 316-355 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 323.

Gospel accounts.³⁷ Atonement, in this framework, understands the cross not as God's violent solution to sin, but instead as an act of love through which God destroyed the power of violence by *refusing to be drawn into it*. It is my sincere hope that this way of thinking about atonement will help followers of Christ stop living into the myth of redemptive violence; that it would empower us to take up our cross, lay down our lives, and go to Golgotha not as hawks and lions, but as doves and lambs.

³⁷ Also called "Narrative Christus Victor," in J. Denny Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, 316-355 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 321; and "Nonviolent Identification," in Brad Jersak, "Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ," in *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, 18-53 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 32.

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