

***Stricken by God? NonViolent Identification and the Victory of Christ.***

Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, ed. Abbotsford, BC: Fresh Wind Press 2007.

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Review by Jon Waind, McGill University

In a way, asking why Jesus had to die on the cross seems to be the query of Sunday school children who have just heard the Passion narratives. Far from a question for the immature or unformed, however, theologians from all strains of Christianity continue to debate and divide over how to understand the atonement in light of Jesus' death on the cross. *Stricken by God?* is Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin's attempt to answer this question by gathering a wide range of theological voices to both challenge the veracity of sacrificial models of the atonement, and put forth an approach to this doctrine that does not attribute to God the violence done to Jesus.

This collection of twenty essays is particularly critical of the Reformed doctrine of penal substitution defended by Hans Boersma in *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004). In his introductory essay, Jersak argues that this "so-called doctrine is really a debate" (21–22), and counters it by stating that "[o]n the cross, God was not punishing Jesus [for the sins of humanity]" as though he was some "offended lord or punishing judge" (31, 33, 53). Hardin also rejects penal substitution, in part because he believes that the way we understand the atonement is reflective of our understanding of God (57, 61, 74–76), and according to *Stricken's* editors the God of Christianity did not answer sin with violence. Rather, through Christ he destroyed the power of violence by refusing to be drawn into it, and through the resurrection he affirmed Jesus' loving refusal of judgment and wrath (53).

The rest of *Stricken* is organized into six parts. Part II attempts to place Jesus' crucifixion in historical context, while part III provides some religious perspective on the significance of the atonement. The social and political implications of a nonviolent atonement are then considered in parts IV and V respectively, with forgiveness being a core theme. Next, part VI focuses on the nonviolent victory of Christ, and is perhaps most notable for J. Denny Weaver's "narrative" approach to the *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement. Finally, part VII, while largely concerned with the thought of Irenaeus, also works hard to explain the double meaning of nonviolent identification: the atonement not only means that Christ has identified with human beings, but that through his work human beings can identify with God through him.

Perhaps the most obvious contribution made by Jersak and Hardin through this work is their ecumenical attempt to harmonize diverse theological voices through a nonviolent theory of the atonement. As such, *Stricken* is an endeavor

to wrestle with the doctrine of penal substitution in a way that promotes debate without falling into the tragic irony of breaking fellowship over the cross of Christ (25). The harmonization of these voices seems possible, at least in part, because Jersak and Hardin have brought together contributors for whom the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection are a unified event. That is, they see the story of the cross as “enfolded” into the broader narrative of the incarnation (53), and they also insist on holding the resurrection together with the crucifixion (347). This appears to provide a simple theological basis upon which these diverse voices can add their harmonizing layers.

Where this work falters, however, is in addressing some of the hard questions raised by a nonviolent theory of the atonement. While the editors argue that God did not answer sin with violence on the cross, they provide no discussion of biblical narratives where the divine reaction to sin was, in fact, violent. There is no mention of Hebrew Bible stories like Noah and the flood (Gen. 6–9), the leveling of Jericho at God’s command (Josh. 5:13–6:21), or the instructions he gave about putting to death all Amalekite men, women, children and infants (2 Sam.15:3). Furthermore, there is no mention of Jesus’ violent cleansing of the temple in the New Testament (Matt. 21:12–13), or of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). There might be a satisfactory way to balance these accounts of divine violence with a nonviolent understanding of the atonement, but *Stricken* makes no such attempt.

With these cases left unaddressed, it appears that there is a theological tension between violence and nonviolence for which Jersak and Harden must account. Unfortunately, although the ancient voice of Irenaeus is well represented in *Stricken*, another church father whose contribution might prove valuable in attempting to account for such a tension is either rejected (67, 485, 496), or simply ignored. Yet it is Augustine’s discussion of justice and power in Book XIII of *The Trinity* that could aid their argument for a nonviolent atonement, as there he contends that “God delivered man from the devil’s authority by beating him at the justice game, not the power game.”<sup>2</sup> It would have been interesting to see how an Augustinian scholar might have dealt with this passage in *The Trinity* while considering a nonviolent theory of the atonement.

Finally, *Stricken* falters because the argument the editors are attempting to make does not unfold with clarity. This is at least partly because Boersma is introduced from the start of *Stricken* as a significant interlocutor for those contributing essays (15), even though his work is not seriously engaged between part I and part VI. Furthermore, if—as part I indicates—the main point of this book is to argue against sacrificial models of the atonement and to promote a theory of nonviolent identification and victory, then *Stricken* should be read differently than the editing

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2. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. E. Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991), XIII:4.17.

suggests. The argument presented is more clearly understood if parts I, VI, and VII are read consecutively, and parts II–V are seen as distinct essays for those interested in the historical context of Jesus' death and resurrection, or in the social and political implications of a nonviolent atonement. It is the argument advanced in parts I, VI, and VII that elicits a theological response, and it is that argument that must strike us if this collection of essays is to aid our consideration of the place and impact of violence in Christian theories of the atonement.

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***Tell Me, O Muse: The Song of Deborah (Judges 5) in the Light of Heroic Poetry***

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The goal of Echols's detailed study of Judges 5 is to "demonstrate that the Song has been reworked, and that it was originally a heroic victory song" (12). Judges 5 is a chapter whose text and meaning is notably obscure, and despite continuous study there is no scholarly consensus concerning its key aspects, including linguistic complexities, unity, and, most importantly for Echols, genre. He argues that ascertaining the genre of the text is essential to its interpretation, maintaining that previous classifications of the Song have led to misunderstandings, especially concerning the role of Yahweh in the poem. Echols attempts to rectify previous generic classifications through a comparative study of heroic poetry. He argues that Yahweh's role in the original form of the Song is unusual, as the original text lacks any explicit statements crediting the deity for victory over the Canaanites. Instead, the actions of the human characters are the focal point. Echols argues that this is because the original text of Judges 5 belongs to the genre of "heroic victory song," in which "the overarching purpose is to praise the human characters, who predominate, for their actions" (198). Echols's work is neatly divided into two parts.

Part I includes a detailed survey of arguments on the age of the Song, an excellent annotated translation of the text, and a thorough discussion of the various arguments regarding its unity, a crucial issue since, as Echols upholds, it impacts the understanding of the poem as either sacred or profane and speaks to the issues of genre, authorship, date, and occasion. Echols offers a thorough examination of the arguments both for and against the poem's unity, concluding that the religious material found in the Song was added later. The original poem was comprised, he posits, of vv. 6–30 (minus "Bless Yahweh!" in v. 9c) and was not overtly religious but largely secular. Echols then compares the presence of Yahweh in the Song with the