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The Body of the Cross: Holy Victims and the Invention of the Atonement. By

Travis E. Ables. New York: Fordham University, 2022. Pp. ix + 260. Price \$35.00 (pbk). ISBN 9780823297993.

Reviewed by: SALVADOR RYAN, *St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth*

In this ambitious and illuminating study, Travis E. Ables examines the evolution of the idea of penal substitutionary atonement, which he points out is a relatively recent phenomenon, by way of a more general discussion of the development of atonement theology from the earliest centuries of the Christian movement to the 17th century (with the book's Conclusion offering a reflection on substitutionary atonement as treated in *The Fundamentals*, foundational tracts for Christian fundamentalism, in the early 20th century, alongside imagery of the cross employed by African Americans opposed to lynching in Jim-Crow-era America).

In the period of the early Christian martyrs, which would give rise to the development of the cult of the saints, what Ables terms the 'logic of vicarity' saw the violence of the cross sublimated into both saints and sinners. While holy victims were considered to have suffered within their own bodies, and thereby to have transferred excess merit to the whole Church, by the same token the sufferings imposed on heretics maintained the sanctity of the Church, and preserved it free from corruption. For Ables, throughout Western Christian history the cross 'forms a boundary marker, a means of social differentiation, carrying with it the tension of inclusion and exclusion' (p. 16); as he pithily puts it, 'We need the reprobates to tell us who we are, as the elect' (p. 4). What happens in the period of the Reformations, Ables continues, is that penal substitution merged the concepts of merit transfer and vicarious suffering in the crucified flesh of Christ.

The book is divided into seven chapters, the first three dealing with the early centuries of Christianity, up to the period of Augustine. There is a leap forward in chapter four to the Central Middle Ages and the period of Anselm and Abelard and Heloise, while chapter five examines in turn the mysticism of Mechthild of Magdeburg and Franciscan spirituality surrounding the cross. The final two chapters take us into the period of the Reformations, the sixth chapter focusing predominantly on the theology of Luther and the magisterial Reformation, while chapter seven examines the Reformed tradition, transitioning from Martin Bucer and John Calvin to William Perkins and Puritanism.

From the outset, Ables admits that Christianity has minimized the gratuitous violence of Christ's death; 'atonement theology drains the cross of its violence by sacralizing it' (p. 5). He avoids using the familiar categories of atonement theology in his study, preferring to ask a more fundamental question surrounding the origins and development of the idea of participation in Christ's sufferings. On the whole, in choosing his sources, Ables consciously avoids mining the more familiar texts of historical theology, preferring to privilege 'devotional treatises, prayer manuals, and psalter illustrations' rather than a more canonical set of texts.

In the first chapter, in which he surveys texts such as the Epistle of Barnabas, Justin Martyr's First Apology, the Apostolic Tradition, and the Valentinian text, the Gospel of Philip, Ables identifies the cross as a boundary marker which indicates divine ownership and preservation and plays a significant role in the liturgical fight against spiritual evil. What is surprising here, he notes, is that the emphasis is not on an abstract notion of Christ's victory over sin and death, outlined in eschatological terms, but on the apotropaic cross which wards off evil now.

In chapter two, which discusses early Christian martyrdom accounts, Ables argues that the idea that the martyr was somehow participating in Christ's death was, at the very most, a minor theme in this literature. He contends that 'Christ's death on the cross did not give meaning to the martyrs' suffering; instead their suffering gave meaning to Christ's death' (p. 40). The deaths of the martyrs are variously described as sacrifices of praise, winning a crown in a contest, and imitating Christ. However, even in the case of the latter, Ables proposes, the language of the *imitatio Christi* is just that: imitative, not participatory. Furthermore, the martyrs 'give their bodies as offerings of worship, not as agents of atonement' (p. 46). He argues that we need to nuance our idea of sacrifice in early Christianity, especially when we read these accounts of the early martyrdom; for these texts, 'the fundamental focus of this sacrificial language is worship, not sin' (p. 53). Using Frances Young's three categories of sacrifice to frame this discussion – gift sacrifice; communion offerings; and sin offering – he identifies the second category as that which is most appropriate to understand these accounts. Ables differs from Young who sees the acts of the martyrs in expiatory terms; instead, he frames their *imitatio Christi* in terms of Christ's triumph over evil: 'only gradually did triumph over suffering become triumph through suffering' (p. 55). In chapter three, Ables will chart the development of a growing understanding of the martyrs' deaths as sacrificial imitations of Christ, exemplified in writings such as those of Origen, Cyprian, Augustine and Prudentius. He sees 'all the themes necessary for the logic of vicarity to coalesce' (p. 63) as present by the early fifth century – forgiveness of sin, union with Christ, atoning sacrifice, suffering and the cross.

Chapter four brings us into the period of the High (or Central) Middle Ages and the theology of Anselm who is so often associated with atonement theory. Ables reminds us, however, that Anselm's ideas surrounding atonement are rooted in the theology of the incarnation rather than Christ's death, and he reminds his readers how remarkably little of *Cur Deus Homo* is devoted to the death of Christ on the cross. Far more important is the notion of Christ as an exemplar of monastic obedience: 'Christ is a substitute—but a substitute of righteous life, not vicarious death' (p. 80). In this chapter, Ables pays closer attention to Anselm's Prayers and Meditations which he regards as frequently neglected

by theologians. When he comes to discuss the theology of Abelard, he eschews the familiar pitting of Anselm against Abelard when it comes to atonement theory; indeed, he believes that Anselm was just as much a moral exemplar atonement theorist as Abelard. In short, the modern Anselm–Abelard textbook dispute ‘obscures more than it reveals about the medieval theology of the cross’ (p. 91), the debate between them being largely ‘a modern scholarly fiction’ (p. 95). By contrast, while examining the letters exchanged between Abelard and Heloise, Ables finds that Heloise rejects Abelard’s attachment to the Christomorphism of the martyrs and the logic of vicarity altogether. She seeks her redemption neither in a holy victim, nor in becoming a holy victim, but in seeking merely to find ‘an open seat in heaven’ (p. 95). Nonetheless, by this time, the idea of holy bodies which conveyed merit, the logic of vicarity, was now firmly in place. By the time readers come to the figure of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207–82), discussed in chapter five, they will encounter the use of a ‘fusillade of motifs . . . to portray union with Christ as a eucharistic practice of mystical desire’ (p. 110). Here was a mystic who desired to participate immediately in Christ. For Ables, this is new. While Mechthild and Francis of Assisi might regard themselves as recapitulating the sufferings of Christ for the Church, nonetheless this sort of language was considered by many, including Bonaventure, as too volatile and dangerous for more widespread use.

In chapters six and seven Ables charts how reformers continued to wrestle with issues surrounding participation in Christ. For Luther, Christ’s righteousness is conveyed to the passive recipient in faith through word and sacrament, whereas for reformers from more radical traditions, one participates in Christ through active imitation. As early as 1519, suspicious of the danger of human suffering being considered another human ‘work,’ Luther displayed a wariness towards compassion for the crucified Christ, counselling his hearers that they should opt to participate in the benefits of the cross, not in the cross itself. ‘Suffering is imitative and edifying, but it is not participation in Christ’s own sufferings’ (p. 136). For Thomas Müntzer, however, the very notion of discipleship denotes a direct participation in Christ’s passion. The great eucharistic debates among 16th-century Protestants would throw these differing approaches into sharp relief, pitting ‘the cross as a site of reception (passive exchange)’ against ‘the cross as a site of participation (performative enactment)’ (p. 140). Ables argues that it is ‘out of a threefold matrix in the Protestant reformations: the Christomorphic, the sacramental and the ecclesial’ that the doctrine of penal substitution will eventually emerge (p. 151). In chapter seven, he situates this development within the socio-political realities of the Reformation churches in the aftermath of the peasant revolts. In what he calls ‘recursion,’ the more central Christ’s punishment and death were to Reformed theology (with the elimination of the mediation of the martyrs and the saints), the more the old logic of vicarity became lodged within the human religious subject, and drove the internalization of the wrath of God into religious experience (p. 184). Focusing the logic of substitution into the body of Christ himself, he thus becomes the mediating body of holiness and the suffering body of the reprobate.

In this book, Travis E. Ables tackles a large and complex subject. Inevitably, some readers will question the extent to which his set of conclusions can be drawn from the particular selection of sources which he has chosen to interrogate. Others will wonder at the chronological leap from the fifth to the 11th centuries (might an additional chapter have served to bridge this gap?). This reviewer considers it a pity that the book did not

include colour images of the illustrations which Ables discusses at some length. For instance, in chapter five, which opens with a discussion of two images from the Rothschild Canticles, an early-14th-century devotional book, he refers to the orange flame of the virgins' lamps recalling the red of wine (p. 104), but this cannot be fully appreciated without the colour image. Meanwhile, in an endnote in chapter six, Ables specifically acknowledges this issue by referring the reader to where she can find a colour version online of a panel of altar paintings by Jörg Ratgeb from the parish church of Herrenberg.

These observations aside, Travis Ables has succeeded in producing a thought-provoking study, confidently charting intellectual waters that are not always easy to navigate. It will certainly need to be reckoned with by all future scholars writing on atonement theology.

Introduction to Eastern Christian Liturgies. By Stefanos Alexopoulos and Maxwell E. Johnson. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Academic, 2022. Pp. 472. Price £47.99 (pbk). ISBN 978-0814663554.

Reviewed by: LIAM TRACEY, *St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth*

As the world seems to get ever smaller and even the most exotic and furthest places can come into our living rooms, a greater realization grows of the different cultural and religious traditions that exist in our world and even within the Christian family. Christian communities once only known as exotic names to many Western Christians from history books are now our neighbours and friends, and may well have built or converted places of worship near us. It is very much the liturgical expression of these communities that we may well encounter and that enables us to grow in our appreciation and respect for them. This wonderful book studies these liturgical expressions then and now.

The book, made up of six chapters, has an excellent introduction and an extensive bibliography, which is wisely arranged according to rite.

In their introduction Alexopoulos and Johnson note the need for a one-volume contemporary study of the liturgies of the Christian East, one that would gather the many developments in liturgical scholarship over the last 50 years. 'All of these Eastern Christian families have long-standing and rich liturgical traditions, called "rites." A rite is a unique and integrated system of worship with its own rules and inner system conditioned by history, culture, theological outlook, and it embodies that tradition's official expression of its Christian faith' (p. xv). Grouping the seven extant rites into four ecclesial communities, the authors note the difficulties in naming the rites, and wisely the aim of the introduction is to provide a framework and a context for the study which follows. The introduction offers: '... brief sections on the methodology of the study of Eastern liturgical traditions, the phases of the evolution of liturgical rites, a discussion on the factors and forces in the development of these rites, and, not least, a description of each of the living rites themselves' (p. xix). The section on methodology is welcome and suitable for any course, which introduces the study of Christian liturgy of any tradition. Favouring the approach of the comparative liturgiology of Anton Baumstark and developed by Juan Mateos, Robert Taft, Gabriele Winkler, Paul Bradshaw and others, they recognize that