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The Violence of Atonement: A Review of *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us* by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker

The sign upset me. It would have triggered feelings of comfort to most of the population in Goshen, Indiana, but not to me. “Jesus Christ will set you free” was posted outside the church. Perhaps it upset me because I cannot seem to reconcile the murder of the man Jesus with anything that “saves” me, or “sets me free.” In fact, the most prominent Christian Atonement theologies encourage just the opposite of being “set free” and actually do much to aid oppression.

Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, is the narrative accounts of two women who use their experiences of sacrifice and suffering to illustrate the oppressive work of the cross and to show that atonement theology perpetuates interpersonal violence. Jesus serves as the prime example of self-sacrificing violence in obedience to an angry Father. Working with Brock and Parker’s narrative analysis suggests three primary ways in which people experience the violence of the atonement theology in a personal way: self-sacrifice, obedience, and suffering or “shouldering the cross”. Quickly after beginning my work, I discovered that these three themes are so closely interwoven that it would be harder to untangle them than to simply let them be webbed as they were.

Stories

Both Rebecca and Rita tell their painful narratives with honesty and forthrightness. In their memoirs, Rita and Rebecca use their experiences as their primary truth source, concluding that the death of Jesus on the cross has had direct violent implications for their lives. Brock and Parker were well received, being praised by reviews as “serious theologians, confidently challenging such explicators of the faith as Anselm and Abelard, Wesley and Whitehead... Brock and Parker have thrown down a gauntlet that cannot be ignored.”¹ Their narrative style was appreciated as being passionate, beautiful, “personal and provocative.”² One review even commented that the book serves to provide “a viable guide for church leaders who struggle to respond to current violence both within and outside of religious institutions.”³ Brock and Parker support their theology with anecdotal evidence; but for theologians using the Bible as their primary truth source, the implications of Brock and Parker’s work may be hard to grasp. One review of the book commented, “Basing their theologies on their own experiences is not a problem, but on balance, the narratives swamp the theological arguments presented here.”⁴ *Library Journal* sees the book as just “a first step in an

¹ Review of *Proverbs of Ashes: The Trouble with Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Publishers Weekly* 248 (November 12, 2001) 56.

² Stephen Joseph, review of *Proverbs of Ashes: The Trouble with Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Library Journal* 126 (November 15, 2001): 71.

³ Keenan, Elizabeth King, Review of *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Religious Studies Review* 28, no.4 (October 2002) 349-350.

⁴ Joseph, Review of *Proverbs of Ashes*, *Library Journal* 126.

interesting but unfinished theological project.”⁵ There is something lacking in Brock and Parker’s work.

While the particulars of their stories are very different, both women conclude that the violence of Jesus’ self-sacrifice on the cross contributed directly to the violence in their own lives. Most of Brock and Parker’s arguments are clear, but it seems it would be difficult for those who have not experienced sustained interpersonal violence to appreciate the link entirely. Brock and Parker’s book fails to address the crucial issue of what Christians are theoretically being saved from—sin. With this vital piece missing it is hard to put the whole puzzle together. Brock and Parker present a clear and compelling argument that those suffering violence at the hands of others often remain and are able to survive in that situation because they find meaning in “shouldering the cross” as Jesus did. I sense a feeble and illusive second argument; that there is a correlation between God and characteristics of a human abuser. Brock and Parker’s support for this idea is subjective and inserted as if the conclusions were already obvious. They end with the offer that God’s true love is not found in God’s bleeding son on the cross but in the Presence of God in community.

Chief Theories of Atonement

Brock and Parker do not explicitly articulate what vein of atonement theology they are challenging. They confront atonement theory in general, but they do not recognize that their argument does not apply to some strands of theory. Their stories and the assumptions underlying their arguments suggest, however, that they primarily

⁵ Ibid.

experienced the effects, and are testing the ideological value of substitutionary atonement theory.

Substitutionary Model

According to leading, modern-day theologian S. Mark Heim, the substitutionary model is the most prominent theory in Western Christianity and almost synonymous with the cross. He describes it as “the belief that God’s redemptive plan revolves around offering an innocent Jesus for punishments and death in place of a guilty humanity, allowing a just God to practice mercy by saving sinners whose debt had been paid by God’s suffering on their behalf.”⁶ Mercy requires justice accomplished by painful, substitutionary punishment. It is violence sanctioned by God. Brock and Parker call this “cosmic child abuse” because essentially God is inflicting violence on His son. Hans Boersma, author and professor of theology at Regent College, talks of the penal substitutionary model as “the Reformation’s submodel of the Anselmian satisfaction model,” in which “God sends his Son to the earth in order to punish him for the sins of the world.”⁷

Moral Influence Theory

Late eleventh-century theologian Peter Abelard’s moral influence theory argues that Jesus’ death causes people to see human cruelty. When people realize their own weaknesses, they will feel repentant and see that Jesus had such great love that he remained faithfully nonviolent rather than repaying violence with violence. People will

⁶ S. Mark Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice a Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 4.

⁷ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 40.

then be inspired to accept the loving God and receive God's mercy.⁸ Parker points out that this model assumes that perpetrators have the conscience, morals, desire to see the damage done by their hand and change it. It uses the violence on the cross as a tactic to move offenders to a change of heart.⁹ It promotes the idea that victims have a divine responsibility to help change others' behavior, and it "makes the repentance of the perpetrator more important than the suffering of the victim."¹⁰ This encourages men and women to hope for and even appeal for a change in their abusers which may never happen.

Christus Victor Model

The Christus Victor model is based on the struggle of God versus Satan, good versus evil. It shows redemptive violence in that the cross is "a victory of God over third parties that hold humanity in bondage."¹¹ Humans are liberated through the payment of the ransom—Jesus. The cosmic battle has now changed tides, and the dark side is losing.¹² God must be a Machiavellist. If might makes right, then the world is in for some very violent times. This model has two distinct spins, however. One sees the atonement as a very literal fight with Satan, a war waged in spiritual terms. The other

⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 40.

⁹ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*

analysis sees Jesus fighting the evil powers of his day, exposing their social, political and economic injustices. Jesus is nonviolently resisting an oppressive structure.¹³

Self-Sacrifice of the Cross in Relation to Violence

Brock and Parker declare that Jesus' example of self-sacrifice, which atonement theology says is motivated by love for humanity, is mimicked in our lives and is seen as honorable, even when it is destructive to us and others. Too late in life, Rebecca comes to this realization:

I recognized that Christianity had taught me that sacrifice is the way of life. I forgot the neighbor who raped me, but I could see that when theology presents Jesus' death as God's sacrifice of his beloved child for the sake of the world, it teaches that the highest love is sacrifice. To make sacrifice or to be sacrificed is virtuous and redemptive. But...What if the consequence of sacrifice is simply pain, the diminishment of life, fragmentation of the soul, abasement, shame?¹⁴

Parker's two most definite and painful sacrifices were to other people for something that did not benefit her or the other person. Her body was sacrificed in painful and terrifying ways to Frank, who abused her as a child. She also willingly sacrificed the fetus inside her for the man she thought would love her more for that action. As Rebecca reflected on the abuse done to her as a child, she became conscious that "I had been treated as a sacrifice- asked to give my life to a man who needed to make me suffer so he could find release for his suffering."¹⁵ Did God need to make Jesus suffer for release of God's suffering (that Christians are told is a direct result of the sinful nature of humankind)? It seems that Rebecca is concluding that Jesus satisfied God's

¹³ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁴ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., 213.

need, just as her sacrifice, in some sense, satisfied Frank's need. I see this drastic interpretation as being applicable only in that violence (in Rebecca's experience and in theories of atonement) fulfills a need.

In his book *Eye for an Eye*, William Ian Miller discusses the significance of the word "satisfaction." He claims that its earliest root was related to "debt discharge and repayment," after which it was extended to the feeling of having one's desires fulfilled. He then delves deep into the crevices of implication. He notes that the word "satisfaction" also relates the fulfillment of sexual actions both obligatory and desired. "We think of discharge in sex, though, not as being discharge of an obligation but of built-up pressures we call desires"; later satisfaction "came to name an emotional state...of the desire now satisfied, recalling the 'peace' that discharging a debt was to buy."¹⁶ In satisfaction atonement theology, God needed to have satisfaction for a debt. There was a build-up of pressure, a build-up of suffering from years and years of human sin and the build-up needed satisfying. The death of Jesus provided effective repayment and "satisfaction."

Abusers find this same satisfaction. Rebecca describes it as such: Frank "needed to make me suffer so he could find release for his suffering."¹⁷ What would Jesus do? He sacrificed himself; he helped facilitate that release for God. What did Rebecca do? She sacrificed herself, she helped facilitate that release. The point is that self-sacrifice is damaging, not salvation gaining! Not only does the church represent the death of Jesus

¹⁶ William Ian Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141.

¹⁷ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 214.

as required by God, but as necessary to our plan of salvation.¹⁸ Brock and Parker call this (in what may be considered an example of a careless assignment of human characteristics to God) “cosmic child abuse.”

The strictly historical view of Jesus suggests that he was killed because he was challenging the powerful leaders of his day while working for positive social change. Present day Christians are being subjected to propaganda that implies God wants us to sacrifice ourselves for others, even in violent situations where the point of the sacrifice is not driven by a motive of social change or evangelicalism. Selflessness is seen as the highest good. But Christians are not the only ones being taught the value of sacrifice. So are the “terrorists.” In an article responding to the destruction of the World Trade Center, Nancy Scheper-Hughes writes that she turned to the writings of René Girard, celebrated modern-day Christian theologian and anthropologist

On sacrificial violence and the uses of the surrogate victims, the one whose death helps to resolve terrible, unbearable conflicts, difficulties, and collective anxieties. In the most recent instance, the sacrificial violence and victimhood were shared not only by the thousands of victims and survivors of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks but equally by the young terrorists (and their family members), whose lives were held hostage by their religious convictions and who were readily, even eagerly, offered up, given up- *sacrificed*, that is- by their own religious and political leaders.¹⁹

While there is a significant distinction between sacrificing oneself and sacrificing self *and* others, both cases emphasize sacrifice being noble and prompting salvation—two ideas that can be misused easily.

¹⁸ Ibid., 157.

¹⁹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Violence Foretold: Reflections on 9/11”, *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 224-226.

Girard made famous the “scapegoat” theory in which he says that the Roman powers of Jesus day identified him as the cause for the political and religious troubles arising. In order to purge the realm of the problems, they eliminated Jesus. God resurrected Jesus, which had the dual purpose of showing Jesus’ innocence as well as exposing the malevolent leaders.²⁰ S. Mark Heim advocates that the violent sacrifice helps expose the violence done to victims like Rebecca. Heim says, “God made that occasion of scapegoating sacrifice (what those who killed Jesus were doing) an occasion of overcoming scapegoating violence (what God was doing)...And the result, uneven but real, is that victims of such acts become harder to hide. They look too much like Jesus.”²¹ But the reality is that the victims become easier to hide, precisely because suffering is seen as Jesus-like.

Victims of violence are told to be like Jesus and remain suffering. Brock and Parker argue that “redemptive suffering...has proven particularly destructive for women, who, under its influence often have been socialized to be self-sacrificial and to tolerate abuse.”²² In their book, Brock and Parker present case after case of women who were encouraged by their religious faiths’ and communities to “bear their cross.” After Rebecca’s childhood experience of sexual abuse, the painful experiences with her abuser haunted her intimate relationships with men. “I thought of myself as good and loving, I knew what a good person does. She lives for the other, unselfishly. Her own needs and

²⁰ S. Mark Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice*, xii, 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

²² Steven Schroeder, Review of *Proverbs of Ashes: The Trouble with Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Booklist* 98 (October 1, 2001), 280.

wants are irrelevant to love. She bears pain silently.”²³ Rita observed this phenomenon in children as well.

While working at a camp, she met a little girl who was being abused by her own mother. “I was haunted by Sylvia’s conviction that God was letting her be hurt, the passivity and resignation it elicited from her.” She goes on to talk about many youth who are hurt by loved ones and how they sometimes interpret “violence as divine intent, pain for their own good. And the Christian tradition reinforced this impulse by upholding Jesus as a son who was willing to undergo horrible violence out of love for his father, in obedience to his father’s will.”²⁴ A woman, who was being abused by her husband, went to her priest for help. “The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, ‘If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.’”²⁵ Brock and Parker bring case after case to the examining table. These are not isolated events; this is an epidemic. Feminist Elaine Storkey writes, “The qualities that Christianity *idealizes*, especially for women, are also those of a victim, sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc.”²⁶

An Argument for the Value of “Divine Violence”

Hans Boersma looks at hospitality as a metaphor for God’s love, but argues that “violence does not destroy hospitality,”²⁷ thus implying that that violence is a part of

²³ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 192.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶ Elaine Storkey, “Atonement and Feminism,” *Anvil* 11, no.3 (1994): 231.

²⁷ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 16.

God's love. Throughout Boersma's book *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, he is adamant that violence—divine violence—is necessary in the work of the cross, in hospitality, in the love of God. He gives poor support for his conclusion, making suppositions about the expertise of his readers. The strongest argument that Boersma provided in support of the violent cross was that in order to protect good hospitality, we must sometimes use violence to rid the divine space of evil. Boersma responds to Girard.

Girard has a radically nonviolent understanding of Jesus' actions and in particular of God's involvement with Jesus on the cross. But it is hospitality without boundaries or punishment. That means it is a hospitality without recourse for victims against violence...he underestimates the *beneficial* role of violence in connection with redemption and a politics of hospitality.²⁸

But Boersma fails to tell us *what* the beneficial role of violence is and why it is necessary for redemption. Boersma says that we need violence in order to be safe. Offenders may need to be punished in violent ways to create a remedy for abuse, but what about the many cases of abuse mentioned by Brock and Parker? Violence was not a viable option for any of those women. Boersma suggests that divine violence is necessary when in fact it only serves to bring about and carry on damaging violence. In most cases of abuse violence would only serve to make things worse. In order to truly be liberated from violence and in order to truly be "saved" we must live in loving community. "Salvation begins with the courage of witnesses whose gaze is steady....violence is illuminated by insistent exposure."²⁹ Both Rebecca and Rita knew the love of God because they felt the Presence of God, not because Jesus was murdered. "Does Jesus' self-sacrifice on the

²⁸ Ibid., 150-151.

²⁹ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 250.

cross end dominance and submission? No. Jesus' crucifixion was a consequence of domination, not its cure."³⁰

A New View of Jesus Death

The violent self-sacrificial teachings of atonement with Jesus as the exemplary model we emulate, perpetuates interpersonal violence. Christians must stop looking at violent self-sacrifice as an honorable action that God encourages. They must stop viewing Jesus' death as salvific for our souls or as salvific for acts of violence that are suffered. We must experience God, as Brock and Parker suggest, in the love of community, ourselves and the Presence of God.

³⁰ Ibid., 37.

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