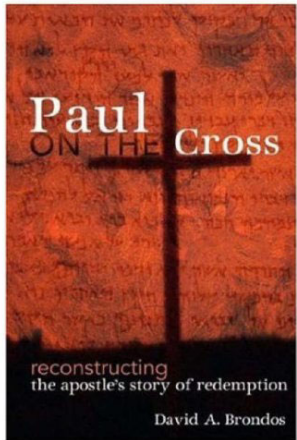


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Brondos, David A.

Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle's Story of Redemption

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Brondos begins by observing that, “even though New Testament writers like Paul never employ terms such as *satisfaction*, *substitution*, and *representation* in relation to Christ’s death nor speak explicitly of Christ’s undergoing divine judgment, suffering the penalty or consequences of human sin, exhausting God’s wrath, or healing our fallen humanity, it is common to claim that ideas such as these are in fact behind the language we find in Paul’s letters” (ix). In a claim that no one will attribute to classic understatement, Brondos then announces, “The main argument of the present work is that all this has led to a misreading of Paul, and that Paul’s understanding of the role of Jesus’ death in the salvation of human beings is fundamentally different from that which has generally been attributed to him by his interpreters from at least the late second century to the present” (ix–x).

What Paul teaches is “that *by means of* Christ’s death God has saved and redeemed human beings and has reconciled them to himself” (x). This wording, Brondos insists, is “not a matter of splitting hairs. There is a vast difference between saying that ‘Christ died for our sins’ (1 Cor 15:3) and saying that his death takes away sins, effects forgiveness, or makes atonement” (x). Or again:

To say that believers have died and been crucified and buried with Christ (Rom 6:3–8; Gal 2:20) is not the same as saying that they participated in his death, crucifixion, and burial. To say that Jesus “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age” (Gal 1:4) is not the same as saying that his death has

effected that deliverance or inaugurated a new age. Similarly, to say that believers are justified *in* or *through* Christ's blood (Rom 5:9) is different from saying that Christ's blood or death justifies them. (x–xi)

Despite initial appearances, Brondos is not denying that Jesus' death is "salvific and redemptive," only that it is salvific and redemptive *in itself* or through any "effects" it has. "Rather, *it is salvific and redemptive only in that it forms part of a story*" (xi). Unlike the "stories of redemption" adopted by "the vast majority of theologians and biblical scholars" (xi), the story that controls Paul's thought "is essentially the same simple story we find in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, which in turn developed out of the foundation story running throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and other ancient Jewish writings" (xi). And what is that story? Jesus' death is "the consequence of his dedication and faithfulness to his mission of serving as God's instrument to bring about the awaited redemption of Israel, which would also include Gentiles throughout the world" (xi).

In this case, for Paul, Jesus' death is salvific not because it satisfies some necessary condition for human salvation in the way that most doctrines of the atonement have traditionally maintained nor because it effects some change in the situation of human beings or the world in general; rather, it is salvific because God responded to Jesus' faithfulness unto death in seeking the redemption of others by raising him so that all the divine promises of salvation might now be fulfilled through him. Through Jesus' death, a new covenant-community (the church) has been established, in which people from all nations may now find salvation and forgiveness of sins as they live under his lordship, led by the Holy Spirit. For Paul, this is what Jesus lived and died for, and what he attained by giving up his life and consequently being raised and exalted to God's right hand. It is *in this sense* that Jesus died for others and for their sins. In short, Paul regarded Jesus' death as salvific because for him it formed part of an overarching story culminating in the redemption of Israel and the world; it is *this story*, and in particular *what precedes and follows* Jesus' death on the cross, that makes that death redemptive. (xi–xii)

I have quoted so much from Brondos's introduction because it admirably summarizes the argument of the whole book. The six chapters that follow flesh out the argument, occasionally with some surprising turns. The first chapter briefly recounts the "stories of redemption in the Christian tradition." Both the *Christus Victor* theme and substitutionary atonement theories inevitably constitute stories of redemption, and invariably, Brondos asserts, these are skewed so as to ensure that Christ's death had some "effect" on God that ensured our redemption—indeed, that this death was "needed" or "necessary" if our salvation is to be the consequence. Brondos criticizes scholars as diversely positioned as Calvin, E. P. Sanders, T. L. Donaldson, James D. G. Dunn, Richard

Hays, and N. T. Wright for falling into the assumptions implicit in these skewed stories. But N. T. Wright fares much better in Brondos's second chapter. Here Brondos, largely following Wright, sketches the "Jewish story of redemption known to Paul" (11–31). This story places Israel at the center. Jews do not participate in the universal salvation of human beings, but other nations come to share in the salvation of Israel. To enjoy this salvation, Israel was required to obey. As for the sacrifices and offerings, they were not thought of as being *required* for salvation; it is not even clear, Brondos insists, that sins were thought of as being somehow transferred to the sacrificial animal. In any case, God is perfectly free to determine when some degree of repentance and obedience in his people will result in blessing upon them. After all, sacrifices "were atoning only when accompanied by repentance and a commitment to obey God's laws" (27). "Even if the need for some type of atonement for past sins is posited, it must be remembered that *what atoned for sins were precisely repentance and a commitment to obedience on the part of the people*" (29). Moreover, "all of this must be seen against the background of the Jewish belief in the absolute sovereignty of God: in Jewish thought, *there is no type of necessity to which Israel's God is subject*" (30).

Chapter 3 introduces the "early Christian story of redemption" (33–62), and it is a continuation of the antecedent story. Whether in the Synoptics, Acts, Hebrews, or Paul, Jesus' death is viewed as "necessary" not to satisfy God or effect salvation but in the sense that God had determined that by this means he would save his people. In other words, "Jesus' death was necessary in order for the divine plan conceived of old and foretold in the Scriptures to come to pass" (59). In Hebrews, for instance, Jesus' death is necessary because the establishment of a covenant is achieved through the shedding of blood: this is by the divine determination.

According to the evangelists, Jesus' death was necessary in order for the divine plan conceived of old and foretold in the Scriptures to come to pass. As part of that plan, Jesus' death was no more and no less necessary than everything else that took place, including Jesus' coming, his ministry, his rejection and passion, his resurrection and exaltation, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the sending out of the apostles, and the spread of the gospel throughout the world. This understanding of the necessity of Jesus' death stands in contrast to the understandings found in the later Christian stories, which make use of foundational arguments regarding the nature of God, humanity, or the world to claim that human salvation was impossible without God's Son becoming man, dying, and rising. There is nothing even remotely resembling such claims in the Synoptics or Acts. Not even the idea of an eternal divine plan was understood according to such an idea, as if the nature of God or the world made it impossible for God to save the world without that plan. The God of Israel always remained free to act as he wished, and nothing

impeded him from saving people without Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.
(59)

In fact, the biblical writers often insist that Jesus' followers must suffer as Jesus did. No clear line is drawn between his sufferings and ours. In the dominant stories told by Christian theologians, Jesus had to die for reasons largely detached from the *historical* events surrounding his life: that is, he had to die so that human sin might be forgiven, the devil overcome, human beings transferred to the new age, and so forth. But the biblical accounts are quite different, Brondos asserts, for "*the theological reasons in the Synoptics and Acts are precisely the historical reasons*, in that what was necessary was that the Scriptures be fulfilled and that the divine plan of which Jesus' death formed a part be carried out" (62).

In chapter 4 Brondos turns to Paul's story of redemption (63–102). There is no reason to think that Paul looked outside the story he had received both from his Jewish heritage and from the collection of Jewish Christian believers who preceded him. To postulate that Jesus' death introduced a new age, or answered to the "plight" of human beings, is to indulge in historical anachronism. As for keeping the law, Paul is really saying that what people must do is get beyond merely formal observance to keeping its "spirit" (which Brondos makes equivalent to the *dikaiōmata* of the law), which interpretation, Brondos writes, is in line with what the Sermon on the Mount affirms. This opens up the possibility of admitting Gentiles, and this of course is what gets Paul into trouble. But trying harder will not win one salvation. In the final analysis, what is required is grace, the righteousness that only God can give as a free gift. Faith is necessary—not the generalized faith of theism nor the faith in God typical of Judaism but "a belief regarding God's Son, Jesus Christ: it was by accepting Jesus as Lord and Son of God that one received through him the promises of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, righteousness, and new life" (89). Brondos at first seems sympathetic to the subjective genitive reading of *pistis [Iēsou] Christou*: this refers to "the personal faith or faithfulness of Jesus Christ himself" (89), and so it follows that "believers are justified when they share in Christ's own faith" (89). But he concludes that Dunn's criticism of this position has weight. What is in view is "Jesus-Christ-faith," that is, neither Jesus' own faith nor Jesus as the object of faith. Rather, the genitive is very much like the genitive in the "gospel of Christ" or the "hope of Christ" or the "proclamation of Christ": this is the gospel or hope or proclamation *concerning* Christ, the faith of which Christ is the content. For Paul as in Judaism, the object of the believer's faith is still primarily God, yet "the faith Christians have, in contrast to Jewish non-Christians, is something more extensive, embracing everything related to the coming of Jesus Christ as God's son and Messiah, including his life, death, and resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit, Christ's future return, and the gospel as a whole" (89–90).

According to Paul, then, this kind of faith constitutes the “solution” to the “plight” of Israel as well as that of the rest of the world, in that it leads to the life of righteousness and obedience to God’s will that God commands and desires, and to a life of trust in God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness. In this regard, Paul is once again in basic continuity with the Christian story of redemption ... in which salvation depends on following Jesus Christ as Lord in faith and living according to God’s will, fulfilling the law in the way Jesus taught, while at the same time looking to God’s love and mercy for forgiveness. (92)

These chapters, then, provide the frame of reference for Brondos’s final two chapters, in which he considers what Paul means by speaking of Jesus’ death as “for us” and what it means to die with Christ. He works through many of the crucial passages and themes (e.g., Rom 3:21–26; Christ as paschal lamb). All of them he interprets within the hermeneutical grid he has set out. For instance, Jews of the old covenant had a *hilastērion*, a “means of expiation and propitiation” (130), but now in Christ God has provided a *hilastērion* for Jew and Gentile alike: God’s wrath is turned aside, and he gives righteousness to his people: even so, this righteousness is not entirely forensic, but rather “believers are accepted by God as they live ‘by’ or ‘out of’ faith (*ek pisteōs*), accepting his gracious gift of a *new life of righteousness*” (129, emphasis added). Brondos thinks it likely that Rom 3:25 means that God “puts forward” (*proetheto*) his Son not only in the sending of that Son to die but also in his resurrection and exaltation (131). As for Christ, the paschal lamb, Brondos works through two or three options and concludes, “If Paul’s allusion here [1 Cor 5:7–8] is not merely to the later Passover celebrations but to the original Passover celebrated by the Israelites in Egypt, then the comparison would be that just as the paschal lamb was offered and its blood shed so that those who partook of that first Passover feast might be redeemed from their bondage in Egypt, so Christ offered up himself and shed his blood seeking that the new covenant people might be redeemed from their bondage to sin and death” (133). As for “in Christ” and other “union with Christ” expressions, the idea is simply “to live under his lordship, as part of his community” (189).

Brondos’s conclusion (191–95) admirably summarizes his argument and claims that his thesis calls for a radical rethinking of theories of the atonement. No less important, instead of interpreting Paul as the great innovator in his understanding of the cross (so, *inter alios*, E. P. Sanders), the great innovators are later theologians of the church, while Paul himself can be tightly tied to the same storyline we find in the canonical Gospels.

Because this book offers a comprehensive theory dependent on a long list of exegetical and theological stances, it is difficult to evaluate on brief compass. Nevertheless, the

following reservations, in no particular order of importance, may at least open the discussion.

First, at the methodological level, the book's comprehensiveness, packed into so few pages, ensures that there is little detailed exegesis. The survey of classical theories of the atonement is grounded entirely on secondary sources; similarly, Brondos's conclusions on the Old Testament and on the literature of Second Temple Judaism are based mostly on secondary sources. In every case one can think of alternative secondary sources that adopt some other stance. Where, then, is the real warrant for the positions Brondos advances? When he turns to Paul and other New Testament writers, he offers a little more discussion of the primary texts but never enough to interact thoughtfully with those taking contrary positions. It is quite clear, for instance, that Brondos's understanding of *pistis* [Iēsou] *Christou* will satisfy neither Richard B. Hays (*The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 2002), on the one hand, nor Moisés Silva ("Faith versus Works of Law," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism 2*, 2004), on the other. This example could be replicated many times. This is not to demand that Brondos write another kind of book; it is merely to say that not many scholars are likely to buy into his interpretative grid if again and again they remain unpersuaded by the exegetical positions he adopts.

Second, a very great deal rests on Brondos's reading of the "story" in which he thinks Paul is embedded, the "story" of the Old Testament, the writings of Second Temple Judaism, and the stance adopted by the historical Jesus and by the canonical Evangelists. That story strikes me as not so much entirely wrong as more than a little reductionistic. It places so much emphasis on Israel that it fails to note how Israel's story is itself embedded within the human story of creation and fall—a point that Paul reflects on at length, demanding that this datum generate a rather different reading of the significance of Abraham and of the law than that adopted by his unconverted Jewish colleagues (e.g., Gal 3–4). Brondos's story does not probingly analyze how the wrath of God functions in both Testaments: if we cannot agree on what the problem is, it is unlikely that we will agree on what the solution is. Moreover, implicit readings of particular books look rather different if a more appropriate lens is put in place. For instance, Paul Barker's *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy* (2004) or Peter G. Bolt's *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel* (2004) fit nicely into some rather more traditional readings of biblical books, leaving at least some readers with the impression that Paul is rather more in line with the Synoptics and with Deuteronomy than some have thought, not because traditional interpretations of the atonement have been built around the wrong story, but because they have been built around the right story.

Third, although it is true that notions of "necessity" in some atonement theory are a tad careless, giving the impression that God himself is under constraint to a system bigger

than he himself is, nevertheless in the hands of the best interpreters this is not the case. The “necessity” is built on the character (including the will and the choices) of God himself. Brondos never engages the strength of this position; he merely knocks down incautious stances.

Fourth, Brondos’s position requires that we abandon the very abundant textual evidence supporting inaugurated or partially realized eschatology. His brief forays into this subject are unconvincing, and of course the subject itself turns on a substantial array of interlocking themes not treated here (e.g., Jesus as mediatorial king, 1 Cor 15; the work of the Holy Spirit as the *arrabōn* of the coming age; and so forth) that extend well beyond the handful of passages his thesis permits him to address. This inaugurated eschatology is itself tied to the notion of the “fulfillment” of the law. Once more, I do not want to criticize Brondos for failing to write a different sort of book. Rather, I am merely saying that his comprehensive claim to overturn most theories of the atonement from the second century to the present necessarily trips over a number of interlocking themes that cannot be (or at least have not been) treated in this work.