Construing the Cross

Type, Sign, Symbol, Word, Action

THE DIDSBURY LECTURES 2014

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In Memoriam
my respected Wesleyan grandfathers
Rev. Ernest Marshall (1878–1957), who was born in Manchester;
Rev. Sidney A. Worrall (1880–1978), who trained at Didsbury College.

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Preface

Three things have made it a special privilege for me to be invited to deliver the Didsbury lectures: (i) the distinguished list of previous lecturers, many of them Methodist, amongst whom I am honored to be numbered; (ii) the declared intention that the series should contribute to theological discourse between the church and the academic community, that having been a key element in my own call to ordination in the UK Methodist Church while continuing to teach at the University of Birmingham; (iii) the opportunity, given Nazarene history and my own Methodist lineage, to share with the wider Wesleyan family. This last consideration has prompted me to dedicate this volume to the memory of my grandfathers, both ordained in the Wesleyan Methodist Church in years prior to Methodist union in the UK in 1932.

By publishing here slightly fuller versions of the four lectures given October 27–30, 2014, I hope to convey my thanks publicly to the College both for the invitation and for the experience of interacting with my audience. The hospitality I received during my week's stay at the Nazarene Theological College and the lively interest taken in what I was presenting made my visit comfortable, memorable, and heart-warming. I was encouraged by the good fellowship, the evangelical commitment, the openness to historical exploration of Christianity on a much wider ecumenical canvass than our own tradition, and the level of critical engagement with theological scholarship. I am grateful, too, that the College agreed to my proposal to include in this volume an adaptation and enlargement of a paper delivered around the same time (November 7–8, 2014) at a conference at Heythrop College in London. That conference was entitled "'For Us and our Salvation': Girard's Mimetic Theory and the Doctrine of the Atonement." It was clear, therefore, that the subject-matter was bound to cohere with the topic I had chosen to address in the Didsbury lectures and that its inclusion as

chapter 2 would enhance the coverage of this volume. My particular thanks are due to Kent Brower for facilitating all this behind the scenes, and Robin Parry for sterling assistance with the production of this book version. I am grateful too to the Rev. Dr. Andrew Teal, Chaplain, Pembroke College, Oxford, for compiling the Index to this volume, with the assistance of Chris Long.

Frances Young
December 2014.

List of Abbreviations

General

ACW	*Ancient Christian Writers*. New York: Newman Press.
ANCL	*Ante-Nicene Christian Library*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
CCL	*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina.*
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum.* Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky.
ET	English translation.
FC	*Fathers of the Church*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
GCS	*Greichischer Christlicher Schriftsteller*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
LCL	*Loeb Classical Library*. London: Heinemann / Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
NPNF	*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. London: Parker.
PG	*Patrologia Graeca*.
PTS	*Patristische Texte und Studien*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
SC	*Sources Chrétiennes,* Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf.

Patristic Texts

Cels.	Origen, *Contra Celsum*
Comm. in Io.	Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarii in Evangelium Iohannem*
Cor.	Tertullian, *De Corona militis*
Demetr.	Cyprian, *Ad Demetrianum*
De Spir. S.	Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto*
Dial.	Justin, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*
Ep.	*Epistula*
Ep. Barn.	*Epistle of Barnabas*
Epid.	Irenaeus, *Epideixis tou apostolikou kērygmatos Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*
Haer.	Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*
Hist. eccl.	Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*
Hom. Lev.	Origen, *Homiliae in Leviticum*
HP	Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*
Marc.	Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*
Oct.	Minucius Felix, *Octavius*
Off.	Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum*
Or.	Tertullian, *De oratione*
Orat.	Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*
PP	Melito, *Peri Pascha*
Praescr.	Irenaeus, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*
Princ.	Origen, *De Principiis*

Introduction

Thomas Noble, in his Didsbury lectures of 2012,[1] challenged the classic approach to expounding the atonement through "theories." Despite his critique, elements of those much debated theories remain at the heart of his discussion, though overlaying one another rather than cancelling each other out. A similar conflation I have essayed in some of my own explorations of atonement. In fact, the cross has been a perennial theme in my theological journey.

My doctoral thesis was entitled *Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers from the New Testament to John Chrysostom*,[2] and it covered the way in which the early Christians rejected literal sacrifice yet saw both the cross and the Eucharist in sacrificial terms. A brief more popular version appeared as *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*,[3] the outcome of some Lent lectures in a local church, which both encouraged me to present my research findings and provoked me into trying to say why this historical theology could be important for people today; continuing interest in this early book is proved by its reissue in 2009, nearly thirty-five years after its initial publication.

A few years later I was asked to write a Lent book for 1982 and produced the little volume entitled *Can These Dry Bones Live?*,[4] one feature of which was an account for the general reader of the three "theories" of

1. Published as *Holy Trinity, Holy People: The Theology of Christian Perfecting*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013.

2. Submitted to the University of Cambridge in 1967; published in the Patristic Monograph series, no.5, Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979.

3. Published in 1975 by SPCK (London) and Westminster Press (Philadelphia); reissued by Wipf and Stock (Eugene, Oregon) in 2009.

4. London: SCM, 1982, 1992.

atonement. Then a key argument of *The Making of the Creeds*,[5] published in 1991, was that soteriology (that is, the doctrine of salvation) was an implicit driving force in the arguments and debates that produced emerging Christian doctrine. Meanwhile, the significance of the cross in my struggle to understand how it was that my first-born son was "created" with profound learning disabilities, already hinted at in *Incarnation and Myth* (1979),[6] had become apparent in the two versions of *Face to Face*, published in 1985 and 1990.[7]

It is scarcely surprising, then, that my recent updated account of my son's life and vocation, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability*,[8] includes a chapter on the cross; or that my attempt in retirement to offer a "systematic theology" integrating the various aspects of my personal, academic, and church life—*God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity*[9]—has a chapter that moves from patristic understanding of the cross to reflection on what that might mean for us. And all that without mentioning the various articles that have appeared over the years in journals, Festschriften. and other collections . . . .

So what more could I possibly have to say about the cross? Well, what I offer here is different, though it builds on all that previous work and in places draws from it. Over the period of my career the wider context of biblical studies and theological discussion has shifted substantially—from modernity to post-modernity; and my intellectual outlook has opened up beyond the strict parameters of the linguistic, historical, literary, and theological traditions of scholarship that formed me and my contemporaries. Besides, my long-standing engagement with the early fathers of the church has encouraged recognition that we are ourselves creatures of history, limited by the socio-cultural environment in which we think, just as they were. So this project was conceived as a way of trying to learn from earlier Christian cultures by reconsidering ways in which they construed the cross *before* "atonement theories" narrowed the categories. It both takes its genesis from study of the fathers and moves beyond; on the one hand, drawing on other periods and, on the other, developing some patristic insights further than the fathers ever could have done themselves.

5. London: SCM, 1991.
6. Edited by Michael Goulder. London: SCM, 1979.
7. London: Epworth, 1985; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990.
8. London: SPCK, 2014.
9. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

What I want to pursue is best described as a move from theory to *theōria*, to use the underlying Greek term, a word meaning something like a "seeing through." So, by *theōria*, I mean a kind of insight or spiritual discernment that comes through imaginative engagement or storytelling, rather than literalizing exegesis; through liturgy and living, rather than legal transaction; through poetry and preaching, rather than rationalistic system. Not that I denigrate our God-given reason, nor the benefits of analysis, research, model-building, or theorizing. But I have come to recognize their potential narrowness, the need for a more holistic understanding of rationality, as well as a respect for the creaturely limitations of the human mind, its language, and conceptual capacity.[10]

In a way I take my cue from the fourth-century writer Ephrem the Syrian,[11] whose work will appear and reappear in the following pages. He not only did theology through poetic composition, but even spoke of two divine incarnations; first in limited human language in the words of Scripture, then in the limitations of flesh in Jesus. God speaking to us, he suggested, was like someone trying to teach a parrot to speak by placing a mirror over his face, so that the bird thought it was conversing with one of its own kind.[12] The language in which we speak of the infinite, transcendent God is never adequate, always allusive, suggestive, metaphorical, pointing beyond itself, and, as other fourth-century writers, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, suggest, only able to get near its object by a multiplication of images overlaying each other and correcting each other. Insight into the saving mystery of God's presence in one who cried out in God-forsakenness on the cross requires similar multifarious meditations, as well as a willingness to embrace the possibility of truth in paradox. As with all theological enterprises, construing the cross demands the richness of Scripture, the suggestive wealth of ecclesial traditions, the plurality of experience in different socio-cultural environments, along with endeavors to make some rational sense of it all: in other words, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

What I have said so far implies more than I have spelt out fully. Let me reserve further discussion of presuppositions and methodology to the

10. See further *God's Presence* for the discussion in this paragraph, particularly Introduction and chapter 8.

11. See Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem*—page numbers are given to the second edition (1992).

12. *Faith* 31.6–7, quoted in Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 61–62.

concluding chapter, and first demonstrate what I mean by *theōria* through key examples, simply observing now that the "seeing through" I envisage bears some parallel to the way in which icons function in Eastern Orthodox churches. Icons have never been regarded as depictions or representations in some literal sense; rather they are signifiers, meant to draw the eyes towards another dimension, to provide material for contemplation, meditation, and reflection, opening up to the beyond. For as Paul indicates, "No eye has seen nor ear heard nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). But we can learn to look with amazement.

1

Passover and Passion

A Christian Passover Liturgy

Passover appears as *Pascha* in Greek, a lone word (Hebrew *pesach*, Aramaic *pasha*) used alike for the feast, the lamb, and the meal. Melito of Sardis explained in the rediscovered *Peri Pascha*[1] that it gets its name from *paschein*—the Greek verb meaning "to suffer." That was, of course, a false etymology, confusing the Semitic term with the Greek root, but the frequency of this linguistic mistake in early Christianity helps us to understand how easy it was to associate the passion with the Passover.[2] According to Melito the "suffering one" is the true meaning of the Passover festival.

Melito is instructive in other ways too; but first, a few critical and explanatory notes. I just described his *Peri Pascha* as rediscovered. The text

1. Text and ET: *Melito of Sardis, On Pascha and Fragments*, edited by Stuart George Hall; ET: *Melito of Sardis. On Pascha*, translated by Alistair Stewart-Sykes; this is the translation quoted below.

2. Gregory of Nazianzus corrects this mistake: "This great and venerable *Pascha* is called *Phaska* by the Hebrews in their own language; and the word means 'passing over.' Historically, from their flight and migration from Egypt into the land of Canaan; spiritually, from the progress and ascent from things below to things above and to the Land of Promise. . . . [S]ome people, supposing this to be the name for the holy Passion, and as a result Grecianising the word by altering Phi and Kappa into Pi and Chi, called the day *Pascha*. And custom took it up . . ." (*Orat.* 45.10). Quoted by MacKenzie, *Irenaeus' Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 144.

we now have came to light during the twentieth century, a long, complicated story, by which papyrus leaves from different libraries, other fragments, and versions were gradually put together in the 1930s and then an almost complete Greek copy was found in one of the Bodmer papyri and published in 1960. This copy and the Coptic version bear the name Melito. According to Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, quoted by Eusebius, the first historian of the church,[3] Melito was buried in Sardis and, like other church leaders of second-century Asia Minor, followed the Quartodeciman tradition[4] of celebrating the Pascha: after naming Melito as the climax of a list of seven, Polycrates wrote: "All these kept the 14th day of the month as the beginning of the Paschal festival, in accordance with the Gospel, in no way deviating from but following the rule of faith."

Towards the end of the second century, the Bishop of Rome, Victor, challenged the practice referred to. It appears that generally the Roman church distinguished the celebration of the resurrection on Easter Sunday from the commemoration of the crucifixion on the previous Friday, whereas the churches of Asia Minor, probably represented in Rome by immigrant communities, celebrated their Christian Passover on the same night as Jews held their festival. The text of *Peri Pascha*—sometimes treated as a homily, but very likely to be regarded as a Christian Passover Haggadah[5]—makes a dramatic correlation between Passover and passion, our present theme.

The text begins by noting that the scripture describing the Hebrew exodus has been read—how the sheep was sacrificed, the people saved, and Pharaoh overcome. This mystery of the *Pascha*, it states, is both new and old, eternal and provisional—old with respect to the law, new with respect to the Word; provisional with respect to the "type," yet everlasting through grace. The notion of "type" Melito explains later on in an important digression.[6] Any composition, he suggests, is preceded by a sketch or prototype, the draft or model is not the finished work, but indicates what is to be, just as a preliminary outline made in wax, clay, or wood represents the completed work, the statue or whatever, which is to be much bigger, stronger, and better. The type bears the likeness of the reality to come, but then becomes obsolete. What was once valuable becomes worthless. So, says Melito, the Lord's salvation was prefigured in the people of God, the gospel in the law;

3. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.
4. The term Quartodeciman deriving from the Latin word for fourteen.
5. Stewart-Sykes, *The Lamb's High Feast*.
6. *Peri Pascha* (Stewart-Sykes translation, henceforth *PP*) 36–46.

but once the church and the gospel arose, the type was depleted, the law fulfilled, and they gave up their meaning to the gospel and the church.

Anticipating this explanation Melito introduces his perspective on Passover fulfilled in passion:

> . . . the slaughter of the sheep,
> and the sacrificial procession of the blood,
> and the writing of the law encompass Christ,
> on whose account everything in the previous law took place,
> though better in the new dispensation . . . .[7]
>
> For he was born a son,
> and led as a lamb,
> and slaughtered as a sheep,
> and buried as a man,
> and rose from the dead as God,
> being God by his nature and a man . . . .[8]
>
> He is son, in that he is begotten.
> He is sheep, in that he suffers.
> He is human, in that he is buried.
> He is God, in that he is raised up.
> This is Jesus the Christ,
> to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.[9]

The next section is a dramatic rehearsal of the original exodus escape, based on Exodus 12, but free in its rhetorical development.

> "Look," he says, "you shall take a lamb, without spot or blemish,
> and, toward the evening, slaughter it with the sons of Israel.
> And eat it at night with haste.
> And not a bone of it, shall you break."[10]

He then specifies how it should be eaten and commemorated, and its blood then used to anoint the doors of the houses to avert the angel of death. Moses is described as performing "the mystery at night with the sons of

7. *PP* 6.
8. *PP* 8.
9. *PP* 9–10.
10. *PP* 12.

Israel," and then disaster strikes "those uninitiated in the mystery, those with no part in the *Pascha*, those not sealed with the blood." Clearly the commemoration of the *Pascha* is described in terms reminiscent of the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman world, a way of making the narrative liturgically powerful within Melito's contemporary culture. The consequences for Egypt are graphically imagined—the mourning and wailing, Pharaoh in sackcloth and ashes, surrounded by the people full of grief and woe. The firstborn cry out as they plunge into death, not only human sons, but firstborn calves and foals.

> It was a terrible spectacle to watch,
> the mothers of the Egyptians with hair undone,
> the fathers with minds undone,
> wailing terribly in the Egyptian tongue:
> "By evil chance we are bereaved in a moment of our firstborn issue."
> They were beating their breasts,
> they were tapping time with their hands for the dance of the dead.
>
> Such was the calamity which surrounded Egypt,
> and made her suddenly childless.
> Israel was guarded by the slaughter of the sheep,
> and was illuminated by the shedding of blood,
> and the death of the sheep was a wall for the people.
>
> Oh, strange and ineffable mystery!
> The slaughter of the sheep was Israel's salvation,
> and the death of the sheep was life for the people,
> and the blood averted the angel.[11]

Then Melito asks the angel what caused that aversion: was it the slaughter of the sheep or the life of the Lord, the death of the sheep or the type of the Lord? It is clear that the angel turned away because he saw "the mystery of the Lord in the sheep, the life of the Lord in the slaughter of the sheep, and the type of the Lord in the death of the sheep."[12] The reality to which the type pointed was what made it powerful for salvation. This is where he digresses to provide that explanation of type. What was once of value becomes worthless before its powerful fulfillment.

11. *PP* 29–31.
12. *PP* 32.

Now Melito shifts to the "proof" or demonstration of what that old narrative was all about—the mystery of the Pasch, the suffering one. He develops a parallel narrative,[13] an elucidation of the gospel. This narrative goes back behind the exodus, behind the call of Abraham, to the creation of heaven and earth and all that is in it. It tells of Eden, and the command to eat from all the trees in the garden, except the tree of knowledge. Capable of good or evil, humanity consented to the seductive counselor and broke the commandment, leaving as an inheritance to human children

> not purity but lust,
> not incorruption but decay,
> not honor but dishonor,
> not freedom but bondage,
> not sovereignty but tyranny,
> not life but death,
> not salvation but destruction.[14]

The narrative, paralleling Greek mythology as well as biblical history, then tells of catastrophic decline:

> The father took up sword against his son,
> and the son laid hands upon his father . . .
> And brother killed brother,
> and host harmed guest,
> and friend murdered friend,
> and man struck down man with a tyrannical right hand.
> Everyone became murderers,
> parricides,
> infanticides,
> fratricides, everyone on earth . . . .[15]
>
> Many other bizarre and most terrible and dissolute things
> took place among people:
> a father went to bed with his child,
> a son with his mother . . . .[16]

13. From *PP* 47ff.
14. *PP* 49.
15. *PP* 51.
16. *PP* 53.

Patristic Texts

Cels.	Origen, *Contra Celsum*
Comm. in Io.	Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentarii in Evangelium Iohannem*
Cor.	Tertullian, *De Corona militis*
Demetr.	Cyprian, *Ad Demetrianum*
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