'That justice might not be infringed upon': the judgement of God in the passion of Christ in Irenaeus of Lyons

Joshua Schendel

Department of Theological Studies, St Louis University, St Louis, MO 63108

joshua.schendel@slu.edu

Abstract

Some recent scholarship has claimed Irenaeus as an early proponent of a non-violent atonement theory. In response, this essay argues that by tracing out tracing out the themes of the guilt of Adam and Eve, the justice and judgement of God, the passion of Christ, and their relations in the thought of Irenaeus of Lyons, it becomes evident that Irenaeus was not an early proponent of a non-violent atonement theory.

Introduction

This article traces the themes of the guilt of Adam and Eve, the justice and judgement of God, the passion of Christ and their relations in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons. Over against the claims of some scholars that Irenaeus is an early proponent of a non-violent atonement theory, I argue that he was not. Rather, I maintain that Irenaeus interprets the passion as a culminating part of his recapitulation theory, in which Christ 'sums up' in himself the judgement of the Father against the apostasy of humanity in his suffering and death on the cross.

There has been recent debate over the role and importance of the cross of Christ in Irenaeus' thought.[1] Part of the issue in this debate is the degree to which the polemical context of Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* shapes both its structure and content.[2] Perhaps Irenaeus would not have talked so or so often about the cross, had not his opponents talked so poorly, in his view,

---

[1] See, e.g., Jacques Fantino, *La Théologie d'Irénée: lecture des Ecritures en réponse à l'exégèse gnostique. Une approche trinitaire* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), p. 180; Daniel Wanke's *Das Kreuz Christi Bei Irenäus von Lyon* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), esp. pp. 141–3; and Fantino's critique of Wanke's work in the *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 76 (2002), pp. 103–4. For a good historically contextual study of the overall thought of Irenaeus see John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

[2] Hereafter *AH*. For references to the Latin text, I have consulted W. W. Harvey, *Sancti Irenaei episcopi Lugdunesis libri quinque adversus haereses*, 2 vols (Cambridge: CUP, 1857). References

212

about it. Remaining mindful of this issue, this essay will attempt to avoid some of its tricky pitfalls by primarily referencing Irenaeus' less polemical work, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*.[3] Irenaeus intended the *Demonstration* as a 'manual of essentials' for 'the members of the body of the truth'.[4] As such, it provides a concise, positive exposition of what Irenaeus considered to be the essentials of the Christian faith. Of course, its concision can also be the source of ambiguity, and so it will be necessary to cross-reference with his *Against Heresies*.[5]

Irenaeus, atonement and violence: will the real Irenaeus please stand up?

In 1930 Gustaf Aulén published his study on the history of the doctrine of the atonement, *Christus Victor*.[6] Aulén took issue with the previous paradigm of the history of atonement theory that had been put in place by Aldolf

---

to the English trans. are taken from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds), *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911). For an overview of the scholarly discussion concerning the original Greek text, its Latin trans. and transmission see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 3 vols (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950–60), vol. 1, pp. 290–2; Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), pp. 120–1.

[3] Hereafter *Dem*. The only extant manuscript is the Armenian version, found in 1904 and published by K. Ter-Mekerttschian and E. Ter-Minassiantz, *Epídeixis tou apostolikou kerúgmatos* (Leipzig: Texte und Untersuchungen, 1907). English citations are from *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997). References to the Latin or Greek are taken from the standard trans. of the *Demonstration* by Adelin Rousseau, *Irénée de Lyon: Démonstration de la Prédication Apostolique* (Paris: Cerf, 1995). In this translation Rousseau also gives a French translation based upon his best conjectures of what was the original Greek. Behr consults both this text and the original Armenian text for his own translation. I have also consulted Iain M. MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching: A Theological Commentary and Translation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). MacKenzie, however, uses the inferior translation by Armitage Robinson (originally published New York: Macmillan Co., 1920). By 'less polemical' I only intend that the *formulations* and overall exposition of the faith are not explicitly aimed at opponents. See *Dem*. 1–3; cf. 'Introduction', in Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, p. 7.

[4] *Dem*. 1.

[5] It might also be noted that in the secondary literature on Irenaeus' view of the atonement very little attention has been paid to the *Dem*. It is hoped that this essay will constitute a contribution at just this point.

[6] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. Arthur Gabriel Hebert (London, SPCK, 1953 [1930]). Aulén's study was not the first analysis of this sort. It was preceded in both its analysis and some of its conclusions by the studies of Jean Rivière, *The Doctrine of the Atonement: A Historical Essay* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1909). Compare to the alternative views of Adhémar d'Alès, 'La

Harnack and Albrecht Ritschl. They had argued that, prior to the tenth century, the church's understanding of the atonement was more mystical and Hellenistic than a fully worked out Christian doctrine.[7] It was not until Anselm in the eleventh century, they argued, that a fully systematic view of the atonement was given. Anselm set forth what they called an *objective* view, emphasising the work of God that takes place outside the person being saved. In contrast with this theory, they argued, Abelard put forth a *subjective* view, emphasising the work of God internally on the persons being saved. These, they claimed, are the two dominant Christian theory types of the atonement.

Aulén disputed their claim, arguing that in regard to the doctrine of the atonement the first millennium was not to be dismissed. He traces the first 'clear and comprehensive doctrine of the atonement and redemption' to the second-century bishop and theologian, Irenaeus of Lyons.[8] According to Aulén, the model of the atonement that Irenaeus proposed – and that became the dominant model of the atonement in the early church – was what Aulén called the 'classical' or 'dramatic' view, often now going under the moniker of *Christus Victor*. According to the *Christus Victor* model, God conquers the devil, sin and evil. It thus provides a middle way between the objective and subjective models of the later medieval period. The work of God in the atonement was indeed outside of us, but also for us and in us. So clear was this model in the writings of Irenaeus, claimed Aulén, that it was beyond dispute.[9] Though apparently mistaken in this latter claim, Aulén did succeed in both inspiring further study of Irenaeus' view of the atonement and establishing the categories within which those further studies, and theories of the atonement in general, have been placed.[10]

Of particular importance for this essay is the number of scholars who have appropriated the work of Aulén in an attempt to work out a non-violent theory of atonement.[11] It is claimed by these scholars that Irenaeus'

Doctrine de la Recapitulation', *Recherches de Sciences Religieuse* 6 (1916), pp. 185–211; and Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

[7] Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma,* trans. Neil. Buchanan, 7 vols (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), vol. 2, pp. 10, 236, 267–74; Albrecht Ritschl, *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation,* trans. John S. Black (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1872), pp. 19–21.

[8] Aulén, *Christus Victor*, p. 16.

[9] Ibid., p. 17.

[10] See e.g. John Friesen, 'A Study of the Influence of Confessional Bias on the Interpretations in the Modern Era of Irenaeus of Lyons' (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1977), pp. 106–42, for a history of various interpretations of Irenaeus' writings on atonement.

[11] The discussion of a non-violent atonement is broader, of course, than Irenaeus studies. For a few more recent examples of non-violent atonement theories that do not rely

214

Christus Victor model of the atonement provides conceptual possibilities for circumventing the traditional, western, violence-laden theories of atonement.[12] In particular, Andrew Klager, Thomas Finger and Bernard Sesboüe have all argued that there is in Irenaeus not only elements which point towards a non-violent atonement theory, but an actual non-violent theory itself.[13]

  According to Klager and Finger, in order to properly understand Irenaeus' atonement narrative, one has to understand his views of human freedom and culpability, particularly with regard to the apostasy of Adam and Eve.[14] Both build their cases upon the studies of Irenaeus' view of the 'infancy' of Adam and Eve in the garden.[15] Klager puts the question pointedly:

on, or interact much with, Irenaeus, see James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992); Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

[12] This is by no means an uncontroversial claim, even among proponents of non-violent atonement. J. Denney Weaver e.g. has argued that all three models of atonement in Christian history are guilty of perpetuating a view of a violent God. See J. Denney Weaver, 'Christus Victor, Ecclesiology, and Christology', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (July 1994), pp. 277–90; Some Theological Implications of Christus Victor', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 70/3 (Oct. 1994), pp. 483–99; 'Response to Peter Martens, "The Quest for an Anabaptist Atonement"', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82 (April 2008), pp. 313–20; 'The Nonviolent Atonement : Human Violence, Discipleship, and God', in Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (eds), *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 316–355. Some scholars have argued even further that not only is there divine consent and action in the passion of Christ, but also an element of substitution. See Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p. 233; John Aloisi, '"His Flesh for Our Flesh": The Doctrine of Atonement in the Second Century', *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 14 (1 Jan. 2009), pp. 23–44.

[13] Andrew Klager, 'Retaining and Reclaiming the Divine: Identification and the Recapitulation of Peace in St. Irenaeus of Lyons' Atonement Narrative', in *Stricken by God?*, pp. 422–80; Thomas Finger, '*Christus Victor* as Nonviolent Atonement', in John Sanders (ed.), *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), pp. 87–111; Bernard Sesboüe, *Tout récapituler dans le Christ: Christologie et sotériologie d'Irénée de Lyon* (Paris: Desclée, 2000).

[14] Klager, 'Retaining and Reclaiming', p. 425; Finger, '*Christus Victor* as Nonviolent Atonement', p. 93.

[15] Klager e.g. says, 'this unique concept of Irenaeus' anthropogony alters significantly the purpose of God's wrath, the definition of human freedom and the affirmation of human culpability in the rest of his thought' ('Retaining and Reclaiming', p. 428). For Irenaeus' view see, e.g. *AH* 3.25.3 and *Dem.* 14. For studies on this aspect of Irenaeus'

215

If Adam and Eve were created as infants, whether physically, cognitively or metaphorically, they would have lacked the capacity to avoid sin, a competency of which they were devoid congenitally by virtue of their infantile and created state. Is it then logical to blame humanity for its apostasy and consequentially impose on it punitive measures in the form of God's wrath, a wrath supposedly intended for this same exonerated humanity but ultimately redirected on his Son? St. Irenaeus says *no* and is clear that God 'took compassion on man' precisely because Adam's apostasy occurred 'through want of care no doubt …' and accordingly assigns blame '[on the part of another]'.[16]

According to Klager and Finger, for Irenaeus the apostasy is an expected and understandable result of the infantility of Adam and Eve, and, thus, it cannot be the object of God's wrath but merely of his pity. But this means, they continue, that for Irenaeus God's wrath cannot be the problem to which the atonement is the solution. In fact, says Klager, unlike some in the later tradition, Irenaeus 'does not introduce a problem' to which an atonement theory is the solution.[17] Rather, as Finger puts it, 'our childlike first parents' went wrong not by wilful, culpable rebellion, but by 'following the voice of another'.[18] Unfortunately, the voice they followed led them down the path towards death and corruptibility. Death, then, is the 'real culprit', with which the *incarnation* – not retributive atonement – is meant to deal.[19]

So what of those passages in which Irenaeus does speak about the wrath and justice of God? Klager argues that for Irenaeus the wrath of God is primarily pedagogical: an 'easily relatable mechanism by which humanity is instructed as to what is evil and exhorted through godly counsel, a

---

thought see M. C. Steenberg, 'Children in Paradise: Adam and Eve as "Infants" in Irenaeus of Lyons', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12/1 (Spring 2004), pp. 1–22; John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 43, 110, 135–6; Iain M. MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, pp. 116–17; Ysabel de Andia, *Homo vivens: Incorruptibilité et divinisation de l'homme selon Irénée de Lyon* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1986), pp. 127–45.

[16] Klager, 'Retaining and Reclaiming', p. 436; cf. Finger, '*Christus Victor* as Nonviolent Atonement', p. 95.

[17] Klager, 'Retaining and Reclaiming', pp. 436–7.

[18] Finger, '*Christus Victor* as Nonviolent Atonement', p. 93.

[19] Klager, 'Retaining and Reclaiming', p. 442; cf. Thomas Finger, '*Christus Victor* and the Creeds: Some Historical Considerations', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72/1 (1 Jan. 1998), pp. 31–51, esp. 47–8. For similar conclusions of older scholarship see Johannes Werner, *Der Paulinismus des Irenaeus* (Leipzig, 1889), p. 177; Paul Beuzart, *Essai sur la théologie d'Irénée* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1908), pp. 93, 102, 104, 148; Theophil Tschipke, *Die Menschheit Christi als Heilsorgan der Gottheit* (Freiburg: Herder & Co., 1940), p. 25.

216

polemical instrument whose *telos* is the restoration of humankind'.[20] As regards God's justice, Klager maintains that for Irenaeus it has nothing to do with propitiation of wrath:

> Whereas substitution seeks justice by appeasing God forensically and conferentially by means of violent retribution, Irenaeus envisages justice holistically and ontologically as appeasing God by destroying death and restoring to him what is rightfully his, that is, all of creation – including humanity.[21]

So, according to Finger and Klager, for Irenaeus God's justice is not his *violent retribution* to humans who have rebelled, but his *non-violent restoration* of humans who have wandered. Irenaeus, they claim, makes this explicitly clear in *AH* 5.1.1, when he states that God has redeemed humanity through Christ 'not by violent means'.[22] This is a key passage to which we return at the end of the essay.

Although disagreeing with Klager and Finger on the role of the incarnation in Irenaeus' theology, Sesboüe concurs with them on this latter point. Referring to the same passage in *AH,* Sesboüe states: 'justice is re-established, because salvation is not imposed upon humans by violence, but is proposed to them by persuasion. The violence of the cross is not God's doing; it is done by those still under the dominion of the adversary.'[23] What God did through the cross, according to Sesboüe, was to oppose the 'violence and falsehood of the tempter' with an 'example of the love of Christ and the power of the truth'. Justice, then, is achieved by God in the passion of Christ by overcoming the injustice of the 'violence' by which Satan had lured Adam and Eve into error and by simultaneously maintaining the freedom of human persons.[24]

Not all readers of Irenaeus, however, concur with these conclusions.[25] In order to respond to the claims of Klager, Finger and Sesboüe, I trace the themes of the culpability of Adam and Eve in their disobedience, the justice

---

[20] Klager, 'Retaining and Reclaiming', p. 442.

[21] Ibid., p. 449.

[22] Ibid. Finger also thinks in this passage Irenaeus clearly abdicates any violence on the part of God in the atonement. '*Christus Victor* and the Creeds', pp. 46–7.

[23] Sesboüe, *Tout récapituler dans le Christ*, p. 120. Translations of this work are my own.

[24] Ibid., pp. 120–1.

[25] See e.g. John I. Hochban, 'St. Irenaeus on the Atonement', *Theological Studies* 7/4 (1 Dec. 1946), pp. 525–57; Hans Boersma, 'Violence, the Cross, and Divine Intentionality: A Modified Reformed View', in Sanders, *Atonement and Violence*, pp. 47–69; Daniel Wanke, *Das Kreuz Christi Bei Irenäus von Lyon* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), esp. pp. 141–3, 281, 328.

217

and judgement of God in relation to their disobedience, and the passion of Christ in relation to remission of sins. It is not my claim that tracing these themes will produce a fully adequate treatment of Irenaeus' view of the atonement. It is not even my claim that it is the key to Irenaeus' view. But it is my claim that these themes are necessary elements of Irenaeus' view of the atonement, and as such are overlooked at the expense of distorting his view of the work of God in Christ.

Irenaeus on the fall, judgement and remission of sins

Irenaeus bookends the *Demonstration* with the solemn assertions that what is delivered in this work is 'the preaching of the truth … the character of our salvation (*salutis nostrae*) … the way of life, which the prophets announced, and Christ confirmed, and the apostles handed over, and the Church in all the world hands on to her children', or, in his more concise phrasing, the 'rule of faith'.[26] The *regula fidei*, he says, contains the essentials of Christian teaching.[27] Among the essentials he places 'the remission of sins', and he connects that to the work of God, the Father, the Son, '[who was] incarnate, died, and raised', and the Holy Spirit.[28] And so we ask, what did Irenaeus intend by the phrase 'remission of sins?' In order to answer this question, three further questions need to be asked: what does Irenaeus say about (1) the justice and judgement of God; (2) the guilt of Adam, Eve and their progeny; and (3) the relation of Jesus' passion to the remission of sins?

In his reading of Genesis 2 Irenaeus interprets the command of God given to Adam and Eve, who had been appointed lords of creation, as a command meant to maintain their proper place in creation and their proper relation to himself: 'But, in order that the man should not entertain thoughts of grandeur nor be exalted, as if he had no Lord … a law was given to him from God, that he might know that he had as lord the Lord of all.'[29] As Lord of all, God not only gave the command, but set the consequences for disobedience as well: 'if he should keep the commandment of God, he should remain always as he was, that is, immortal; if, however, he should not keep [it], he would become mortal dissolving into the earth whence his frame was

---

[26] *Dem.* 98, 3 respectively.

[27] *Dem.* 1.

[28] *Dem.* 3. Irenaeus says that this is what Christian baptism reminds its participants of. The question of how Irenaeus understands the relation of baptism to the remission of sins remains outside the scope of this essay. For a collection of Irenaeus' writings on baptism see David N. Power, *Irenaeus of Lyons on Baptism and Eucharist: Selected Texts with Introduction, Translation and Annotation* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1991).

[29] *Dem.* 15.

218

taken'.[30] As Irenaeus read the story, upon Adam and Eve's disobedience, God 'put the man far from His face (*longe a facie sua*)', to dwell outside of paradise, to toil and to die, which was the 'punishment for sin' (*peccati poenam*) that God himself had set.[31]

Two points may be noted here. First, Irenaeus consistently speaks of God as the judge, not merely allowing 'natural' consequences to take their course, but actively ordaining that those consequences should be and appropriately upholding them.[32] Furthermore, in *AH* 3.25 he affirms that an aspect of God's lordship is this kind of retributive justice. Marcion dangerously errs, he argues, by separating the 'judicial' God of the Old Testament from the 'good' God revealed by Jesus Christ. The true God, he insists, is both just and merciful. To prove the point, he commends to his opponents what Plato had said on the matter. 'And God indeed … does everything rightly, moving round about them according to their nature; but retributive justice always follows Him against those who depart from the divine law.'[33] What is most interesting about this passage is the way in which Irenaeus equates justice with punishment and mercy with reward and favour. This is not a strict equation for Irenaeus, to be sure. The justice of God is not *solely* his retributive punishment, but it does include it.[34] This is why Irenaeus can refer to God as the 'Most Just Retributor' (*iustissimus retributor*).[35]

Second, according to Irenaeus, *Adam and Eve* were punished for their sin. Klager and others have appealed to Irenaeus' notion of the 'infancy' of Adam and Eve for their claims that Irenaeus did not think Adam and Eve culpable for their apostasy.[36] This, however, simply does not account for Irenaeus' explicit statements that Adam and Eve sinned 'through want of care, no

---

[30] *Dem.* 15; cf. *AH* 5.27.1.

[31] *Dem.* 16,17; cf. *AH* 5.23.1–2.

[32] Irenaeus did not see any inconsistency in maintaining *both* that God punishes *and* that humans freely and responsibly incur their own punishment. In *AH* 5.27.2 he says, 'on as many, according to their own choice, depart from God He inflicts that separation from himself which they have chosen of their own accord … God, however, does not immediately punish them of Himself, but that punishment falls on them because they are destitute of all that is good.'

[33] *AH* 3.25.5, referencing Plato's *De legibus* 4.715–16 (in which it is stated that the δίκη which follows God is that by which God is a τιμωρός θεός).

[34] See also *Dem.* 8, 17, 18; *AH* 4.37.1; 4.40.2; 5.27.1.

[35] *AH* 4.36.6.

[36] See e.g. *Dem.* 12. See Klager, 'Retaining and Reclaiming', pp. 450–1. Ian MacKenzie adds to the infancy notion that according to Irenaeus the curse of God is primarily directed at the serpent and the ground, citing passages like *Dem.* 16. Cf. *AH* 3.23.3; 4.40.3. MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration,* pp. 118, 123, 127.

doubt, *but still wickedly*, became involved in disobedience';[37] and that '*he* [God] put man far from his face'.[38] It was Adam and Eve who were banished. What, we ask, did Irenaeus take to be the full scope of this banishment? Adam's creation, he says, consisted of two 'parts', an earthy part and the 'breath-of-life' part, by which he was 'like (ὅμοιος) God' and so immortal.[39] Upon their disobedience, however, Adam and Eve became enemies of God, losing the breath of life, and 'dissolved' back into their earthy part.[40] That is, they became mortal.[41] Their banishment from the presence of God, then, was nothing less than the punishment of death.[42]

It is evident, then, that by proposing the notion of the infancy of Adam and Eve Irenaeus did not intend to remove their culpability for the fall. Rather, it enabled him to make two corresponding points. First, it allowed him to explain just how it was possible for Adam and Eve, created for perfection and living immortally in paradise, to fall prey to such a temptation as was foisted upon them.[43] Secondly, it allowed him to exalt the gracious mercy of God. God, who had every right as judge to deal more harshly with Adam and Eve's transgression, tempers his punishment with mercy. John Hochban seems correct, then, in asserting that 'despite all the mitigating circumstances mentioned, St. Irenaeus does not minimize Adam's guilt'.[44] He rather magnifies God's grace.

The punishment of Adam and Eve extended beyond themselves to their progeny as well. Irenaeus explains that 'because all are implicated in the first-formation of Adam, we were bound to death through the disobedience'.[45] Whatever his metaphysical conception of the 'implication' of Adam and

---

[37] *AH* 4.40.3 (emphasis added).

[38] *Dem.* 16. Commenting on this passage MacKenzie glosses it by saying that God 'expels humanity from paradise', but he fails to mention that, for Irenaeus, this was an expulsion from God's very presence. MacKenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration*, pp. 126–7.

[39] *Dem.* 11, 15. Cf. *AH* 5.1.3 where Irenaeus makes the association of the 'breath of God' and God's Spirit even more explicit. Though beyond the scope of this essay, this interpretation of Irenaeus is consistent with passages such as *AH* 5.9.1 which suggest a tripartite understanding of the human person. The consistency, in short, can be seen from a basic division of human persons into material and immaterial followed by further divisions of both the material and immaterial parts, in this case the immaterial part being sub-divided into 'spirit' and 'soul'.

[40] *AH* 5.17.1.

[41] *Dem.* 15; cf. *AH* 5.9.3.

[42] *AH* 5.27.2.

[43] See *AH* 4.38.1–4.

[44] Hochban, *St. Irenaeus on the Atonement*, p. 531.

[45] *Dem.* 31. Rousseau has *omnes implicati-adligati-sumus morti per inobaudientiam*. Cf. *AH* 5.27.2; Hochban, *St. Irenaeus on the Atonement*, p. 532.

Eve's progeny with the 'formation of Adam', it is clear that for Irenaeus in some way all humanity shares in the punishment of death on account of the disobedience of our first parents. Thus, for Irenaeus Adam and Eve were guilty of their disobedience, were punished by God the judge, which punishment extended to the whole of the human race.

Finally, what about the relation between Jesus' passion and the remission of sins in Irenaeus' writings? In the *Demonstration* he plainly affirms that the death of Christ is 'for the sake of our salvation' and that Jesus 'redeem[s] us Himself by his blood'.[46] This form of speech is even more frequent in *Against Heresies*,[47] and at one point Irenaeus makes the connection explicit: the 'death of the Lord was the cure and remission of sins', he says.[48] Yet a word of caution is appropriate at this point. It is easy to read into such phrases the fullness of an idea that develops later in the Christian tradition, but is at most present here in embryonic form. It is important to keep in mind, as Hochban has reminded us (*contra* Aulén) that 'while the atoning value of Christ's passion and death is mentioned many times and in different contexts, St. Irenaeus does not work out a strict theory of his own on this point'.[49] Nevertheless, we may get at what he did say with two questions. First, what did Irenaeus intend by his constant connection of redemption and the blood of Christ? Second, how is it that the death of Christ *is* the cure and remission of sins?

First, then, in book 5 of *Against Heresies* Irenaeus, while lauding the fullness of the redemption offered to humanity by the incarnate Word, again states that Jesus 'redeemed us by his blood' when he 'gave himself as a redemption for those who had been led into captivity'.[50] What is important to note here is that Irenaeus goes on in this passage to speak of the redemption offered not only 'by his blood' but also by his 'flesh and blood'.[51] The context of this passage is Irenaeus' desire to refute various Gnostics who, in their devaluation of the material world, denied if not the reality, at least the importance, of the true flesh and blood of Christ. In contrast, Irenaeus contends that the reason that Christ 'had Himself been made flesh and blood after the way of the original formation of man' was so that he might save 'in his own person at the end that which had in the beginning perished in

---

[46] *Dem.* 72, 78, and 88.
[47] See e.g. *AH,* 3.5.3, 3.10.2, 3.12.7, 3.16.9, 4.20.2, 4.27.2, 5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.2.1. This list does not include Irenaeus' numerous scriptural citations containing the phrase 'redemption by his blood' or 'death'.
[48] *AH* 4.27.2: *curatio et remissio peccatorum mors Domini fuit.*
[49] Hochban, *St. Irenaeus on the Atonement,* p. 545.
[50] *AH* 5.1.1.
[51] *AH* 5.1.2.

Adam'.[52] In this passage at least, then, for Irenaeus, the phrase 'redemption by his blood' was shorthand for 'redemption by his flesh and blood'. That is, Christ had to be truly human if redemption was to be possible.[53] So, to the first question, Irenaeus seems often to intend the *necessity of the incarnation* when he uses the phrase 'redemption by his blood'.

This may seem to confirm the claim that for Irenaeus what redeems is really the incarnation. That would be to draw a conclusion too hastily, however. For it must be asked further why, for Irenaeus, did Christ have to be truly human (i.e. flesh and blood) in order to accomplish redemption? His answer is that Christ must be truly human in order to 'sum up' (*anakephalaíoō*) humanity and human history. In other words, Christ's true flesh and blood are necessary conditions for redemption, but not sufficient. 'The fundamental notion' of Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation', Hochban explains, 'is that our Lord, as the second Adam, sums up the whole of humanity in Himself as a closed unit.'[54] It was in particular his reflections upon Paul's parallel of Adam and Christ that guided Irenaeus in this notion. As he saw it, there is a fittingness and a necessity for Christ to 'vanquish in Adam that which had struck us in Adam':

> So He united man with God and wrought a communion of God and man, we being unable to have any participation in incorruptibility if it were not for His coming to us, for incorruptibility, whilst being invisible, benefitted us nothing: so He became visible, that we might, in all ways, obtain a participation in incorruptibility. And because all are implicated in the first-formation of Adam, we were bound to death through the disobedience. It was fitting, [therefore], by means of the obedience of the One, who on our account became man, to be loosed from death.[55]

The 'coming among us' speaks of Christ's incarnation; his 'obedience', as Irenaeus goes on to say, is his 'obedience even unto death'.[56] This is why, for Irenaeus, the incarnation alone cannot provide for full salvation. The incarnation is necessary to re-establish union with God, but the death on the cross is needed too, as he later put it, 'un-do the old disobedience'.[57]

Irenaeus' notion of the 'summing up' work of Christ further explains just how it is that Christ un-did the disobedience of Adam in his obedience in

---

[52] *AH* 5.14.1.
[53] See Wanke, *Das Kreuz Christi Bei Irenäus von Lyon,* pp. 198–9.
[54] Hochban, *St. Irenaeus on the Atonement*, p. 542.
[55] *Dem.* 31.
[56] *Dem.* 34.
[57] *Dem.* 34.

222

his passion. In *AH* 5.23.2 he explains that 'by summing up the whole human race from beginning to end, he also summed up its death' (*recapitulatus est et mortis eius*). As we have seen, humanity's subjection to death was, according to Irenaeus, the punishment of God for the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Christ, then, in 'summing up its death' was able to 'sum up' that judgement in its entirety in himself. His obedience to his Father in his passion, then, is that by which he is able to grant humanity 'a second creation', a creation 'out of death'.[58] So, in answer to our second question, for Irenaeus the death of Christ is the remission of sins inasmuch as Christ sums up the judgement of God against those sins, conquering death as punishment and consequence for disobedience, and issuing in the creative consequences of his own obedience.

We have now answered our three primary questions. Irenaeus did indeed think that Adam and Eve were culpable for their disobedience, that God did punish them for their guilt by allowing the consequence (which he had ordained) of death to afflict them and their progeny, and that Jesus in his passion became the remission for humanity's apostasy by summing up death. We have only now to say something about Irenaeus' view of the relation of the passion to the divine will.

Commenting on Old Testament prophecies concerning the scourging, torture and death that Christ endured in his passion, Irenaeus says, 'so it is clear that by the will of the Father it came about that these things happened to Him for our salvation'.[59] It was the will of the Father, as we have seen, because of *what* it accomplished, namely redemption from sin and death.[60] But it was also the will of the Father because of *how* it accomplished it. In that key passage in *AH* 5.1.1, Irenaeus concludes that the Father worked out humanity's redemption by the Son in the way he did 'so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor should the handiwork of God go to destruction'.[61] Rather than having nothing to do with the suffering and

---

[58] *AH* 5.23.2.

[59] *Dem.* 69. Irenaeus cites Isa 50:6, 52:13–53:5, 5–6, 7, Ps 72:14; and Lam 3:30. *Dem.* 68–9.

[60] *AH* 5.1.1; 5.23.2.

[61] … *ut neque quod est justum confringeretur neque antiqua plasmatio Dei deperiret*. This formula, along with his discussion of God's remaining true to his word in *AH* 5.23.2, comes very close to the later discussion of the same by Athanasius in his *De incarnatione verbi* 6. On account of this, it is astonishing that Klager can maintain that Irenaeus 'does not introduce a problem' to which an atonement theory is the solution. Rather, he says, Irenaeus simply provides the '*solution* concerning the origin of sin. Apostasy is not something for which humanity must receive its due punishment, but an opportunity for restoration and reconciliation back to God' ('Retaining and Reclaiming', pp. 436–7). In this

223

death of Jesus, God wills it, yet in such a way as to avoid injustice on the one hand and humanity's destruction on the other.[62]

In the first place, God acts 'in accordance with reason', both humanity's and his own. He does not 'forcefully' (*cum vi*) snatch back humanity from its 'apostasy' (*apostasia*), as the apostasy had unjustly 'snatched' (*rapere*) it from God. Rather, he 'persuades' (*secundum suadelam*) them by the work of Christ in a manner consistent with their rationality and freedom. Thus, God's justice is preserved insofar as he does not violate creaturely freedom.[63] Second, as he makes clear later on in book 5, Irenaeus believed that the truth of God was at stake in the showdown in the garden between the devil and Adam and Eve. God had told Adam and Eve that on the day they disobey they would surely die. Yet, upon their disobedience, if humanity were to die, then God's handiwork would be destroyed.[64] The ultimate – or better, eternal – solution, according to Irenaeus, is Christ's work of summing up death. It is true, he says, that Adam and Eve died just as God had promised. But humanity was not destroyed ultimately because Christ 'recapitulat[ed] in Himself' humanity's death, 'thus granting [humanity] a second creation by means of his passion'. So by summing up death, 'God is indeed true', and humanity is indeed spared.[65] For Irenaeus, then,

passage Irenaeus clearly presents a dilemma to which the plan of redemption is a solution. The dilemma, of course, is taken from the narrative of scripture as Irenaeus reads it. We are not meant to read the dilemma back into his doctrine of God, as if God really were in a quandary and had to devise some clever plan in order to get out of it. Rather, by introducing the dilemma, Irenaeus is able to emphasise the wisdom of God in his one, eternal plan for the world.

[62] In contrast to what those who would claim Irenaeus as an early proponent of a non-violent atonement theory have argued, Irenaeus insisted that even the suffering and death of Jesus is according to the will of the Father. Indeed, Daniel Wanke has shown that it was actually Irenaeus' Gnostic opponents who argued that the true God had nothing to do with Jesus' passion. In contrast, claims Wanke, Irenaeus contended that 'the cross is to be interpreted both *as the event of salvation* and simultaneously as the expression of the consistent will of the one creator God' (Wanke, *Das Kreuz Christi Bei Irenäus von Lyon*, pp. 143; my translation).

[63] It is evident, then, that this passage cannot bear the weight of the edifice built upon it by those claiming Irenaeus as an early proponent of a non-violent atonement theory. Their argument rests largely upon the English translation of the Latin *vis* as 'violence'. When read in context, however, it is clear that Irenaeus does not intend by *vis* what they mean by 'violence' (see n. 22 above). It should also be noted that this passage provides only one element of justice in Irenaeus' conception of the work of Christ. His whole doctrine of recapitulation is meant to convey a sense of the justice, or equality, and thus 'fittingness', of God's work of redemption.

[64] *AH* 5.23.1.

[65] *AH* 5.23.2.

it was the will of the Father to bruise Christ; for by his wounds humanity is healed.[66]

Without straying too far beyond the bounds of the scope of this essay, it should finally be noted that for Irenaeus the passion of Christ according to the will of the Father may also be seen in a larger context. As I hope should be clear by now, for Irenaeus the apostasy of Adam and Eve did not catch God by surprise, leaving him scrambling for a solution; and the passion of Christ was not God's ingenious 'plan B', which he came up with only after a first response of retribution.[67] Rather, the apostasy of Adam and Eve and the passion of Christ are parts which fit harmoniously into God's overarching plan, the *telos* of which is the perfecting of humanity to the glory of God: the Father, Son and Spirit.[68] The apostasy was the reason why God manifested his Christ in the fullness of time, and the manifestation of Christ was the means by which God brings humanity to its perfection.[69]

For these reasons, Irenaeus cannot be counted among early proponents of a non-violent atonement. The story he tells goes rather like this: Human beings were created for a life of union with God. By their transgression, however, they were banished from the presence of God, lost the union, lost the breath of life and therefore lost immortality. They were subjected to the judgement of God, who had promised that death would follow such disobedience. But in the Father's compassion he sent his Son for the salvation of humanity. By his incarnation the union between God and man was re-established, and by his passion he fulfilled the judgement of God against humanity, swallowing it up and conquering it. This, Irenaeus concludes, 'is the manner of our redemption, and this is the way of life, which the prophets proclaimed, and Christ established, and the apostles delivered, and the Church in all the world hands on to her children'.[70]

---

[66] See *Dem.* 69 for Irenaeus' comments on these words from the prophet Isaiah.

[67] See n. 61 above.

[68] See *AH* 4.38.3, where Irenaeus argues that God has worked out his salvation in the created order such that all the parts of the 'plan' are harmonious, that humanity is thereby matured and perfected, and that 'in all things God has the pre-eminence'.

[69] *AH* 4.5.1; 4.37.7; *Dem.* 43. For a discussion of Irenaeus' christological protology see Thomas Holsinger-Freisen, *Irenaeus and Genesis: A Study of Competition in Early Christian Hermeneutics* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), p. 36. Stephen O. Presley also gives a detailed discussion of the relation of Christ to creation and humanity in the thought of Irenaeus in his *The Intertextual Reception of Genesis 1–3 in Irenaeus of Lyons* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 96–106.

[70] *Dem.* 98.

225