

A critique of James Bejon's critique of The Day the Revolution Began

James Bejon in his *Academia* paper, "A Critical Review of Tom Wright's Revolution" makes four criticisms of Tom Wright's, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of the Crucifixion*. New York: HarperCollins, 2016.

Thus, James argues that:

1 The book gives a distorted view of what evangelicals believe.

He cites Tom Wright's comments that evangelicals see "'sin' as the breaking of arbitrary commandments and [of] 'death' as the...penalty inflicted by an unblinking divine Justice on all who fail to toe the line" (A Critical Review, 2).

James Bejon acknowledges that Tom Wright's caricatures are a rhetorical device—but I think Tom Wright's rhetoric is not without foundation when it comes to some Western Reformed teaching.

For example, Brandon Crowe (associate professor of NT at Westminster Theological Seminary) states, "full obedience" was required of Adam";¹ —or as the Westminster Catechism states, God required of Adam "personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience."² Thus Crowe (and much Western theology) sees that the lack of such in Eden was our undoing—and therefore argues that "full obedience" is required for our salvation.

From this comes the concept of Imputed Active Obedience, vigorously defended by Brandon Crowe: "Jesus's incarnate works form an essential part of our salvation."³ In this system, which Tom Wright describes (and repudiates) as a "works contract" (*The Day the Revolution*, 75–77, 224, 240), the gospel is about diverting God's anger for our failure to be totally obedient to every command.

Tom Wright also points to the danger of falling into the trap of portraying God as an "angry despot" (*The Day the Revolution*, 43). Thus, James Bejon does not help his argument by conflating the concept that Jesus stood in our place and *diverted* God's wrath, with the concept that "God punished Jesus"—articulating the latter (A Critical Review, 3). I do not think they are the same thing, nor does David Instone-Brewer, or John Stott.⁴

But others also conflate the two. For example, Garry Williams argues for the latter (God is punishing Jesus), and yet his key illustration strongly supports the former (that Jesus diverted God's wrath, not that God punished him):

Imagine, for example, the father who directs teams of Médecins Sans Frontières, sending his son into an area where he and the son know that the son may suffer greatly. The father wills to send the son, and the son wills to go. There is no injustice here, because the purpose is good and both parties are willing. The same applies in the case of penal substitution.⁵

¹ Brandon Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2017), 303

² The Westminster Larger Catechism, 1648, A.20

³ Crowe, *The Last Adam*, 107

⁴ David Instone-Brewer, *Church Doctrine & The Bible: Theology in Ancient Context* (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham, 2020), 166–69

⁵ Garry J. Williams, "Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms," *JETS* 50/1 (March 2007): 85

Surely Tom Wright is correct to point out that in the OT sacrificial system, the type of the anti-type of Jesus's death, the shedding of blood is not seen as a punishment for the animals even though they suffered its effects (*The Day the Revolution*, 188). Perhaps James Bejon (and Garry Williams) have not considered this subtle, but important difference?

And although James seems to embrace the Reformed understanding that the Bible's key metanarrative is about Adam's disobedience and the consequent sins committed by humanity, in that he sees 'Jesus's sacrifice [for sins] is the focal point of history' (see point 4 below) —this is not how Scripture tells the story.

What we *are* told is that Adam was not to touch one particular tree. And what is more, the reason given for Adam's exile from Eden is not because of sin or disobedience *per se*, but: "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil ... therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden ... [God] drove out the man." (Gen 3:22–24)

Furthermore, it is surely instructive to note that Israel's exile from the promised land was not because of imperfect *Torah* obedience, as Tom Wright points out, they were exiled because they went with 'other gods' (*The Day the Revolution*, 85–87; 103–04).

The Bible's marital imagery (its dominant conceptual metaphor and yet largely ignored by the academy and the church) underlines this concept, in that the two exiles Israel suffered are treated in Scripture as a divorce (for northern Israel), and a marital separation (for Judah), because of their predilection for 'other gods.' In other words, she had been committing "adultery" against Yahweh (e.g., Jer 3:1–10; Isa 50:1).⁶ She was not exiled because of a lack of "personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience" to the 613 (?) pentateuchal laws. Israel had repeated Adam's mistake: the primal couple had thrown their lot in with the serpent (why was he in the Garden?), Israel was seduced by the Canaanite gods (why were they in the promised land?).⁷

The first exodus was from Egypt and freed Israel, not from sins, or a neoplatonic Augustinian sinful nature, but from slavery to a foreign power, namely Pharaoh, considered to be the son of the high god Re.⁸

Such also seems to cohere with the NT new exodus typology when at the cross "the ruler of this world is cast out" (John 12:31) and the elect are delivered from the "domain of darkness" (Col 1:13) to enter a renewed Eden. Such is the trajectory outlined in the *protoevangelium* of Genesis 3:15 where there is no mention of "disobedience" or "sin."

Thus, the NT focus is not on Adam (mentioned outside the genealogies just six times?), but on Satan—Farrar and Williams demonstrating that Satan is referred to by every NT author,

⁶ For a detailed analysis of this imagery see my 2015 PhD dissertation uploaded to *Academia* as: "Marital Imagery and Divorce Teaching in the Bible" —and published as: Hamer, Colin. *Marital Imagery in the Bible: An Exploration of Genesis 2:24 and its Significance for the Understanding of New Testament Divorce and Remarriage Teaching*. London: Apostolos, 2015

⁷ For an analysis of the great many parallels see: Postell, Seth D. *Adam as Israel: Genesis 1-3 as the Introduction to the Torah and Tanakh*. Eugene, Oreg.: Pickwick, 2011

⁸ Heiser: "The exodus event is repeatedly cast as a conflict between Yahweh and the gods ... From the fourth dynasty onward in Egypt, Pharaoh was considered the son of the high God Re." Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham, 2015), 150–51. In the Augustinian/Reformed Original Sin model Jesus delivers us from Adam. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to demonstrate its flimsy textual basis or outline how such does not fit a new exodus framework.

at least 137 times, and ‘topically’ (that is, when Satan is the subject of the discourse) in 14 out of the 27 books.⁹

As Tom Wright suggests, when we see that sin is the central problem for mankind rather than its symptom, it is like treating the headache rather than the brain tumour (*The Day the Revolution*, 73–74). Thus, I suggest, the focal point of history is not a sacrifice for personal sins, but a strike at the heart of the problem—Satan. His defeat by Jesus’s death on the cross, our Paschal Lamb, enables the new exodus, a reversal of the exile, the recovery of ‘Eden’ for God’s people.

2 The book gives a theologically incomplete view of the cross.

I believe James Bejon is correct when he suggests Tom Wright is not clear about propitiation and indeed seems ambivalent about the concept. But the problem for me is that James reads back into the Passover a propitiatory element and I think Tom Wright is correct to resist this. I will return to this in point 4 below.

3 There has been too little criticism of the book.

James suggests it is irresponsible to review Tom Wright’s book favourably because it criticises Christian orthodoxy and ordinary members of the church might not be able to weigh Tom’s arguments carefully. I suggest the danger is the opposite: ordinary members of our churches are programmed into thinking that Reformed teaching is synonymous with the Bible’s teaching. In August 2019 *Evangelicals Now* carried an article with the title: “We are all Augustinians” without any irony intended.¹⁰ Any challenge to this mindset, no matter how constructive, is usually strongly resisted.

4 The book contains flawed and inconsistent argumentation.

In this section James Bejon, correctly to my mind, mounts a defence of the understanding that propitiation in Romans 3:25–26 is about averting God’s anger—and on this Tom Wright is certainly weak.

But then, less convincingly, James argues that because the Passover narrative is predicated on the concept of substitution, and its backdrop is Yahweh’s wrath—propitiation can be read back into that original Passover. To my mind this is like reading back into the Edenic account an understanding that Adam’s problem was a lack of “personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience”—not that he touched the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and in so doing repudiated God and trusted the serpent.

Although James does acknowledge that “Jesus’ sacrifice is about the defeat of the world’s dark powers, the inauguration of a new eschatological age, the announcement of a ‘year of liberty’ (i.e., the Jubilee), and a million other things” (A Critical Review, 6)—it seems to me that, in this paper, his paradigm is Reformed orthodoxy:

“Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is the focal point, centre-point, and highlight of history.... It simultaneously displays ... the ugliness of our sin ... God’s anger ... God’s wrath ... God’s uncompromised justice.” (A Critical Review, 16)

But is Jesus’s *sacrifice* for sins (not his death) the “focal point of history”? The problem with following this Reformation perspective is that the Reformers had no theology of Satan (such being absent from the 1689 Baptist Confession, the Westminster Confession, and the

⁹ “Talk of the Devil: Unpacking the Language of New Testament Satanology.” Journal for the Study of the New Testament 39 (1) (2016): 79–96

¹⁰ <https://evangelicalsnetwork.com/2019/08/02/we-are-all-augustinians/>

Anglican 39 Articles) —nor did they engage in any significant way with the exile/exodus/new exodus narrative of Scripture, dramatically told through its marital imagery.

For Reformed theology “freedom” is freedom from our sins, and such is achieved by the atonement. Thus James, seemingly with this Reformation mindset, reads atonement theology into the original Passover—and thus folds the exile/exodus story into the Reformed narrative of forgiveness of personal sins (A Critical Review, 8).

But that is not the story of the exodus as the Bible tells it—as Tom Wright points out elsewhere, the exodus narrative does not indicate a propitiatory element:

“Passover was not about forgiveness. Jacob and his sons were hardly paragons of virtue, but Genesis makes no connection between that and the long years of slavery.”¹¹

To bolster his argument James goes to Ezekiel 45, when in the vision of the eschatological temple the Passover and the Day of Atonement are brought together—for James this appears to mean that the Passover is subsumed into the Atonement, or at least the two are merged (A Critical Review, 13–15).

But of course, if anything—it is the other way round. In Ezekiel, the Passover date remains the same, and the Day of Atonement sacrifices are brought forward into that.

That follows the chronology of the story. The Passover rescue from Egypt came first—and then the institution of the sacrificial system in the desert. Thus, April was the first month of the Jewish calendar followed by the Day of Atonement in October.

I suggest the ontological metanarrative has the same logic. On the cross Jesus *first* secured the elect—and then he atoned for their sins ready to take them to ‘the place he has prepared’ (John 14:2–3). There would be no point in atoning for sin if the elect had not been rescued from Satan. The brain tumour must be excised before the recovery can begin. This is the same sequence as the marital imagery—the bridegroom must pay the *mohar* (the bride price: Gen 34:12; 1 Cor 6:20; 2 Cor 11:2) to secure his (corporate) bride *before* the wedding could be arranged—where she is presented as a virgin bride having been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

And it is not that the atonement was subsumed into the Passover, or vice versa—I believe Ezekiel’s point is that *both* the new exodus freedom *and* the atonement for the elect were to be achieved on the same day, as Tom Wright affirms (*The Day the Revolution*, 64).

In summary

James Bejon has published some remarkable and helpful papers on *Academia* employing a biblical theology hermeneutic, so it is disappointing that he appears in this paper to uncritically employ an Augustinian/Reformed hermeneutic in his approach to the NT.

Where I am in perfect agreement with James is that Tom Wright in his presentation of his arguments is often flawed and inconsistent, in this book and elsewhere. For me, in his wordiness, he often obscures what he is saying. I sometimes wonder if he has a consistent theology at all.

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¹¹ N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic* (London: SPCK, 2020), 30