

## BIBLICAL METAPHORS AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT

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Metaphors have been a topic *en vogue* for several decades. Factors include the so-called “linguistic turn” of Western thought—Michel Meyer, who teaches at the University of Brussels, suggests “one could speak of a ‘rhetoric turn’ with Habermas and Perelman, Eco and Gadamer”<sup>1</sup>—the emphasis on the social sciences, on anthropology, and on the power symbolic systems have to mold minds and behavior; an interest in form rather than contents; and, both as a consequence and as a supplementary cause, a heavy investment in the study of metaphors on the part of major thinkers, such as Paul Ricœur.

It is little surprising, therefore, that many writers should stress the abundance of metaphorical material in the biblical exposition of Christ’s atoning work. Some count as many as thirteen key metaphors or “models.” Willem J. van Asselt (from the University of Utrecht), to whom I owe this piece of information, settles for four: the Ransom-Victory, the Sacrificial, the Substitution, and the Exemplarist representations.<sup>2</sup> A possible typology would distinguish three basic schemes (already singled out by R. W. Dale)<sup>3</sup> and two additional schemes (also distinguished by Emil Brunner),<sup>4</sup> as instruments the NT uses to unfold the significance of Christ’s death, the “way it works” for our salvation (Christ the Example, even unto death, is not included, since one fails to see anything metaphorical in that presentation: it is literally valid, and that is the difficulty!):

1. It was a *sacrifice of atoning* (piacular, expiatory, propitiatory) value and efficacy, each mention of the “blood” of Jesus Christ recalling that model (the emphasis on his blood is not called for by the literal mode of his execution, for crucifixion shed little blood); this language pertains to the religious or cultic sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> *Histoire de la rhétorique des Grecs à nos jours* (ed. Michel Meyer; Biblio Essais 4283; [Paris]: Livre de Poche, 1999) 249 (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> “Christ’s Atonement: A Multi-Dimensional Approach,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003) 54ff.

<sup>3</sup> *The Atonement. The Congregational Union Lecture for 1875* (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1897<sup>19</sup>) especially 355ff.

<sup>4</sup> *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption. Dogmatics II* (trans. Olive Wyon; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1952) 283–85.

2. It was a *judicial execution*, the infliction of penalty (capital punishment), which, though a denial of justice on the part of human judges, did satisfy divine justice, by virtue of the voluntary substitution of the Righteous Head for the sinful members of his Body; within the same forensic framework, the NT proclaims the free *justification* of believers.
3. It was the payment of a *ransom* that *redeems* beneficiaries “unto freedom”: the background is that of the slave market, but also that of the exodus deliverance of Israel (and of the New Exodus, Isa 40ff., with a subtle play on the ransom idea, 43:1–4 and 45:3), and of the special institution of the *gôêl* גואל (the next-of-kin who is called upon to fulfill vicariously social-legal obligations; cf. Lev 25:25; Num 35:19–21, 24–34; Deut 19:6, 12; 25:5–10; Ruth 3:9–4:17).
4. Consequently, it was the *victory* won by the Lion-Lamb over the Enemy, the whole power of evil; the language is that of warfare.
5. Synthetically, it was the true *Passover*, a model that recapitulates several features of the previous ones, and functions along the lines of biblical typology.

Most people, across the spectrum of theological opinion, would label these “metaphors” or “metaphorical schemes.” But regarding the import of the fact, a rift opens and widens. Not a few put forward the metaphorical character of atonement language in Scripture to unsettle or even to dismantle the classical Protestant orthodox doctrine of this *locus*, with its central emphasis on penal substitution. A major attack is being launched against the Reformers’ view (Luther’s already, despite his variations and taste for paradox), which has been, through Puritanism and revivals, the hallmark of evangelical preaching and piety. And metaphors are used as missiles.

Not that such attacks are really new. It is true that the ancient church was spared important controversies on the topic, though the doctrine of vicarious punishment was by no means absent. Many Church fathers preached it in no uncertain terms. Harnack had acknowledged the fact for the Latin side, but Jean Rivière<sup>5</sup> has shown that the evidence is no less compelling for the Greek Fathers, especially for Athanasius who already worked out a systematic account (*De Incarnatione Verbi* 6 and 9–10). Chrysostom explained: “Men ought to be punished; God did not punish them; they ought to perish: God gave his Son in their stead (*ant’ ekeinōn*)” (*In Epistola I ad Timotheum*, hom. VII, 3). Eusebius explicitly interprets sacrificial expiation as penal substitution (*Demonstratio evangelica* X, 1). It is later included in Thomas Aquinas’s doctrine of redemption (*Summa theologica* IIIa, qu. 48). Yet it hardly represents the major component in their soteriology. Apparently, it failed to grip their hearts as other themes were able to do—as it did for the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers.

<sup>5</sup> *Le Dogme de la rédemption. Etude théologique* (rev. ed.; Paris: Lecoffre-Gabalda, 1931 [1914]) 72–104, especially 82–97.

A few forerunners had opened the way (especially John Wessel Gansfort, who had been preceded by John Gerson):<sup>6</sup> the Reformers seized upon a combination of the sacrificial and penal models as the unifying center of the doctrine of the Cross, as the fountain of Christian assurance, and they drew consequences that had not been clearly perceived, notably for justification. Immediately, the then-nascent modern mind rebelled. Fausto Sozzini already framed most arguments that have been raised against the doctrine of vicarious punishment, against the requirement of blood (life taken away) for atonement.<sup>7</sup> Socinians, who were the first modernist theologians, chose two targets in their polemics: the deity of Christ, and that doctrine of redemption. The main motive and interest were the defense of human autonomy. Liberal theology, and religion, generally followed in their train. A distaste for a theology of a “blood-thirsty” God accompanied alternative theories of moral influence and moving example. It is striking and significant that attempts at demythologization usually pass by the possibility of extracting a valuable meaning from the “myth”: they simply discard it. While the revered witnesses of evangelical faith, from John Bunyan to John Stott, from Turretini to Warfield and Packer, maintained it firmly, not seldom some evangelicals yielded to the pressure of the *Zeitgeist*. The pressure today has grown more intense: that late decaying modernity which boasts itself of being “postmodernity” (a salesman’s tag that should not impress us too much) hates nothing more than the ideas of objective guilt and guilt transfer, and the demand for judicial satisfaction. And the cry grows louder: metaphors!

When arguments are attuned to the music of the times, there is reason for vigilance—but the arguments are not thereby disarmed or disproved. They must be heard and weighed. The case against the traditional “evangelical” doctrine of the atonement, inasmuch as it is based on the recognition of metaphors and some views of metaphorical function, will be examined first. The second move will be to gather available helps to measure the import of biblical metaphors for one who proceeds to build a theology of Christ’s work of redemption.

<sup>6</sup> François Bonifas, *Histoire des dogmes de l’Église chrétienne*, tome II: *L’histoire des dogmes depuis la mort d’Origène* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1886) 391–94. Gerson is quoted: “The Son of God took our flesh to satisfy divine justice; everything he suffered, he suffered as the punishment of our sin” (p. 391) and, then, Wessel: “The punishment that Jesus Christ undergoes is precisely the one which divine justice requires of the sin of all men” (p. 393). Albrecht Ritschl also quotes from Wessel’s *De magnitudine passionum Christi*: “Hic dolor debitus noster dolor est, quem si vere agnus dei tollens peccata mundi pro nobis portavit, in tanta mensura portavit, quantus districto divinae iustitiae iudicio repositus pro omnibus omnium nostrum peccatis, quos redemit ex morte, languore et dolore.” *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, III. Band (4th ed.; Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1895 [1874<sup>1</sup>]) 352 n. 1. However, he also shows that Wessel did *not* draw the Reformation doctrine of justification from this view of the atonement, I. Band (3d ed.; 1889 [1870<sup>1</sup>]) 130–31.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Pierre Osier, *Faust Socin ou le Christianisme sans sacrifice* (Paris: Cerf, 1996) especially 53–99.

## I. LISTENING TO THE CRITICAL ARGUMENT

“Mere metaphors”? Only older writers dared such bluntness. R. W. Dale finds “illustrations, and nothing more.”<sup>8</sup> Emil Brunner comes close to such an evaluation: the “pictures” (he also says “conceptions”) constitute each an “inadequate expression of the truth they are trying to expound,” and though, taken together, they provide us with our basis, it is not as norm which should rule our theologizing.<sup>9</sup> The vogue of metaphors muffles such disparaging talk. Yet, when it comes to theological use, one may overhear the same “mere metaphors” comment. Though Derrida’s strategy goes far, far, beyond the theologians under consideration here, Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s summary of Derrida’s deconstructive procedure does indicate the *orientation* of many: “Concepts are undone when they are unmasked as metaphors, as figures of speech masquerading as privileged keys that unlock reality.”<sup>10</sup>

The common charge leveled at the traditional view is that of unwarranted *literalism*. For Colin E. Gunton, “to conceive Jesus as primarily the victim of divine punitive justice is to commit” a grievous hermeneutical *sin*: it is “to read that metaphor [the legal metaphor] literally,” and he adds (a rather odd addition): “and merely personalistically.”<sup>11</sup> Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker warn that “we should not be tempted to confuse the various metaphors . . . with the actuality of the atonement.”<sup>12</sup> As a joint emphasis, the last named authors insist that metaphors are time-conditioned. They complain that evangelicals (who maintain such positions as Warfield’s) “carry over in our own lives and pronouncements models and metaphors that belong to another age and that are dead to us”:<sup>13</sup> “drawing on the language and thought patterns” of their own context, NT “writers struggled to make sense of Jesus’ crucifixion”,<sup>14</sup> “we must move beyond the temptation simply to read their words and metaphors into our contemporary world.”<sup>15</sup> While they vibrantly call for a “creative” designing of new metaphors that will impact our societies, they also criticize theologians such as Charles Hodge for reading into the NT Western and modern concepts of justice.<sup>16</sup> (One observes that the target of the “overly literal” criticism is almost exclusively the penal-substitutionary interpretation, together, sometimes, with the identification of the defeated

<sup>8</sup> *The Atonement* 358.

<sup>9</sup> *Dogmatics II* 287. The goal is for us to “understand [the function of Christ’s death] without being dependent on those various ‘pictures,’ either as a whole or on one in particular.”

<sup>10</sup> *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 127.

<sup>11</sup> *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 165.

<sup>12</sup> *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 20, cf. 99.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 111.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 146 (24).

“powers” as objectively existing celestial spirits:<sup>17</sup> it just so happens these beliefs are also most unpalatable among the intelligentsia today.)

Among recent writers, many do extol the cognitive value of metaphors, but *not* in such a way as would give them a controlling role in doctrinal elaboration. Paul Ricœur is wont of speaking of *metaphorical truth*.<sup>18</sup> That truth belongs to an ontological level clearly different from the ontic level of daily experience. It requires the suspension of ordinary reference. Colin Gunton, though he pens some comforting *realist* statements,<sup>19</sup> has imbibed much Romantic influence (he is deeply indebted to Samuel T. Coleridge) and distrusts conceptual clarity.<sup>20</sup> The guiding light on his hermeneutical path shines from his prior insights and moderately modern sensitivity. It is not derived to any significant degree from the metaphors of Scripture. On the contrary, the way these are viewed and used is determined by his independent theological conviction.<sup>21</sup>

The plurality of biblical metaphors provides a second reason why they cannot be used the way they have been in evangelical tradition. The wide array and diversity of “images” which NT books display is stressed with the intention and result of relativizing their doctrinal import.<sup>22</sup> For Colin Gunton, the other “sin” that has been committed is “to treat one metaphor of atonement, the legal, in isolation from the others.”<sup>23</sup> NT writers were struggling to make sense of the Cross and seized upon whatever was near at hand: hence the multiplicity.

Diversity, and, above all, *divergence*! What clinches the argument based on plurality is the presence of incompatible features across the field of biblical metaphors: one is caught in contradiction if one tries to erect them as doctrinal sketches. In sacrifices, for instance, John Goldingay affirms: “By laying hands on the offering, the offerers identify with it and pass on to it, not their guilt, but their stain. The offering is then not vicariously punished but vicariously cleansed.”<sup>24</sup> He also writes that “the language of atonement-propitiation-expiation and of anger do not come together.”<sup>25</sup> Jürgen Moltmann

<sup>17</sup> C. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* 65–66.

<sup>18</sup> *La Métaphore vive* (coll. L'ordre philosophique; Paris: Seuil, 1975) 310–21. So also Eberhard Jüngel, according to Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 31, 40, 45, 48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 17, 38, 167.

<sup>21</sup> This is manifest in the frequent occurrence of value-laden, manipulative epithets: as characteristic of traditional doctrine, he rejects “abstract” justice, “mathematical” equivalence, a “grim” balancing of accounts; he wants to be free of “slavish” dependence (*ibid.* 196–97); he acknowledges that the metaphorical language of Scripture favors the view that the Incarnation happened because sin had marred God’s creation (p. 151), but he will not follow (the language of Scripture does not appear, therefore, to be his *principium cognoscendi*).

<sup>22</sup> Already Brunner, *Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 283–85; Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 61–62, 95, *et passim*; Sally Alford, “Sin and Atonement in Feminist Perspective,” in *Atonement Today* (ed. John Goldingay; London: S.P.C.K., 1995) 162.

<sup>23</sup> *The Actuality of Atonement* 165.

<sup>24</sup> “Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ,” in *Atonement Today* 10.

<sup>25</sup> “Your Iniquities Have Made a Separation between You and Your God,” in *Atonement Today* 50.

does not wish to give much weight to “expiation” since the concept hardly associates with the message of Christ’s resurrection: sacrificial victims do not rise again.<sup>26</sup> Stanislas Lyonnet typically exemplifies disharmonistic readings. We are told, he notes in order to prevent anyone from drawing dogmatic consequences, that Christ’s life was a ransom, but nowhere do we see to whom the ransom was paid, “there is nobody to demand or receive it.”<sup>27</sup> Several pages later, he mentions the metaphor of legal debt, and he symmetrically relativizes it: Paul “does not say that this debt was repaid.”<sup>28</sup> Discontinuities, which a literal interpretation hardens into insuperable divergence, forbid building a systematic theory of atonement in direct dependence on the NT metaphors.

## II. ASSESSING THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF METAPHORS

When comments are made on the doctrinal import of figures of speech in Scripture, assumptions about metaphors in general play a significant part. One cannot dispense, if one is to weigh these comments, with some consideration of linguistic and philosophical treatments, most of them still controversial, of the topic of tropes, of the various “twists” of expression.

The older Aristotelian view of metaphors—the so-called “substitution” view—which has largely fallen into disrepute among theologians, is by no means dead, at least among linguists. Paul Ricœur, who was probably more influential than any other writer as the champion of another option, still quotes from Aristotle and from Pierre Fontanier<sup>29</sup> with utmost respect.<sup>30</sup> Patrick Bary adopts the version developed by Roman Jakobson: a metaphor involves a substitution along the paradigmatic axis (which crosses the syntagmatic one).<sup>31</sup> Leland Ryken and his joint editors offer as a definition: “A *metaphor* is an implied comparison.”<sup>32</sup>

Max Black himself, who pioneered (after Ivor A. Richards) the *interaction* theory, issued the caution: “It is easy to overstate the conflicts between these three views,” that respectively focus on substitution, comparison, and interaction.<sup>33</sup> He acknowledged that in some trivial cases, the first two may

<sup>26</sup> *The Crucified God. The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden; New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 183.

<sup>27</sup> “La sotériologie paulinienne,” in *Introduction à la Bible*, vol. II (ed. A. Robert and A. Feuillet; Tournai: Desclée, 1959) 864.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 878.

<sup>29</sup> *Les Figures du discours* (reprint ed.; coll. Champs; Paris: Flammarion, 1977), with an introduction by Gérard Genette who brings out the lasting and present interest of this work of 1821–1830.

<sup>30</sup> *La Métaphore vive, passim* (according to the index, Aristotle’s name is found on 143 pages, Fontanier’s on 45).

<sup>31</sup> *Les Figures de style* (Paris: Belin, 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester: InterVarsity, 1998) xiv.

<sup>33</sup> *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962) 45.

seem to reach nearer the mark, with no loss of cognitive content if paraphrase replaces metaphors—what is lost is only “the charm, vivacity, or wit of the original.”<sup>34</sup> However, in the true “interaction” cases, he maintained that “the literal paraphrase inevitably says too much—and with the wrong emphasis.”<sup>35</sup> The danger of interpreters disfiguring what they intend to serve and preserve is obvious, but Black does not explain why falling into the trap is *inevitable*. Is it impossible that masters of paraphrase match original authors for truth and beauty? Art for art?

Nelson Goodman, noteworthy for his strong anti-realist stand and for his careful construction of concepts, designs delightful metaphors to flesh out his acute analysis of interaction: “Briefly a metaphor is an affair between a predicate with a past and an object that yields while protesting,” for “metaphor requires attraction as well as resistance—indeed an attraction that overcomes resistance.”<sup>36</sup> There is resistance, because the transfer is not only “of range but also of realm”:<sup>37</sup> “What occurs is a transfer of a schema, a migration of concepts, an alienation of categories. Indeed, a metaphor might be regarded as a calculated category-mistake—or rather as a happy and revitalizing, even if bigamous, second marriage.”<sup>38</sup> Far be it from him to disparage cognitive pursuits. Among treasures of perspicacious observations, he claims of our symbolizing faculties: “What compels is the urge to know, what delights is discovery, and communication is secondary.”<sup>39</sup>

Paul Ricœur builds on Black’s and Goodman’s work. His amazing synthesis finds the locus of metaphor in the whole sentence. He highlights the power of *live* metaphors to fashion our world—he is interested in the metaphors of deep, creative poets. He likes Goodman’s phrase, “Reality re-made,”<sup>40</sup> but he does not decide clearly between epistemological realism and idealism (nominalism): he champions a *second degree* reference of metaphors (which could be labeled ontological rather than ontic, as already indicated), correlative of a dynamic or “tensive” ontology.<sup>41</sup>

Under the shadow of Ricœur, several theologians have tackled the subject of biblical metaphors and produced sophisticated and helpful works. They are directly relevant to the present inquiry. Herwi W. M. Rikhof, a younger friend of Schillebeeckx, offers a merciless critique of the weaknesses of his predecessors—he is a typical Dutchman—but it would be hard to escape his

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985 [1968]) 69.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 72.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 258.

<sup>40</sup> *La Métaphore vive* 291.

<sup>41</sup> This ontology owes much to Spinoza’s *conatus*, the effort, impulse, tendency, to persevere in being, and to Aristotle’s Potency or Potentiality, the second mode of being (ibid. 315–16, 321, 338, 376, 388ff.; cf. Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* [coll. L’ordre philosophique; Paris: Seuil, 1990] 357 for Aristotle, 365–67 for Spinoza). We should deny that Reality simply *is* (*La Métaphore vive* 387: “Il faut donc ébranler le règne de l’objet,” cf. p. 8); it has a future, it is being re-made.

grip; his arguments are compelling.<sup>42</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, who draws on Rikhof's dissertation, elegantly summarizes the main points of the case: in a brief compass, his presentation could hardly be bettered.<sup>43</sup> In her volume that was published a little later, Janet Martin Soskice of Cambridge infuses much common sense into technicalities: she notes that *speakers*, not words, refer to realities;<sup>44</sup> that context, including extra-linguistic context, is often determinative for the identification and understanding of metaphors, with the warning: "We need not . . . replace the hegemony of the word with an hegemony of the sentence."<sup>45</sup> Along her line, the locus of metaphor is the speech-act, precisely the illocutionary act.<sup>46</sup>

As a fruit of these authors' investigations and reflections, Rikhof's quasi-definition may stand: "in a metaphor the rules governing the sets of concepts or conceptual realms involved are relaxed for this occasion in function of a proposed redescription of reality."<sup>47</sup> The rules are there. They are not *violated* by the transfer from realm to realm, only relaxed (they resist, and then happily yield). "Redescription" is a humble word which borrows from the more realist side of Ricœur's thought. What should be stressed is that the rules of language themselves depend on experienced reality: they have been shaped (even if one admits there is an innate basis for them) by the actual intercourse of human groups in and with the world.<sup>48</sup>

On that basis, several convictions on the function and value of metaphors gain credibility (reckless statements that extol them as the essence of language and *the* tool of knowledge should simply be laid to rest).<sup>49</sup> Ricœur often recalls Aristotle's point: in order to find apt metaphors, one is to perceive *resemblances*.<sup>50</sup> If object A is described, or redescribed, in terms suggestive of B, *some* likeness is brought to light between A and B—the newer the discovery of this resemblance, and the more unexpected, the more felicitous, also, the metaphor. Whether or not one analyses this relationship in terms

<sup>42</sup> *The Concept of the Church: A Methodological Inquiry into the Use of Metaphors in Ecclesiology* (London/Shepherdstown, VA: Sheed & Ward, 1981) 67–219 on the general theory of metaphors (openly indebted to Ricœur, but still vigorously original).

<sup>43</sup> "Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical Deepening of Ecclesiology," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (ed. D. A. Carson; Exeter: Paternoster, 1984) 64–109, especially 65–83 and 93–97.

<sup>44</sup> *Metaphors and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985, paperback 1992) 134.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>46</sup> Already Rikhof, *The Concept of the Church* 77.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

<sup>48</sup> Despite the wise choice of the word "redescription," there is a slight idealistic strain in Rikhof's treatment, an echo of the common view that language shapes reality, rather than the other way around (it may be granted that, once established, language does shape our perception of reality, and hence the reality of our behavior, individual and social, and therefore the "face" of the world as human; from this proceeds the seduction of non-realist views; realism is necessary to safeguard the prior claim of ordered *creation*). Janet Soskice is faithful to a nuanced realism.

<sup>49</sup> They are exploded by Rikhof, who quotes from Sallie McFague TeSelle with devastating efficacy (*The Concept of the Church* 124–28). None of the major thinkers have adopted this indefensible position. (Incidentally, it is ruled out by John 16:25.)

<sup>50</sup> *La Métaphore vive* 10.

of common *semes*, as linguist Bacry does,<sup>51</sup> a certain proximity to simile is hard to deny: "Herod, that fox" does not carry us very far from "Herod behaves as a fox" (the common *seme*, if one uses that concept, being cruelty and destructiveness, rather than cunning, in the NT environment).<sup>52</sup>

What is the status of the resemblance? Writers with idealistic leanings suggest that metaphors *create* the likeness they bring to light: a privileged instance of the power of language to shape reality. Yet, N. Goodman himself cannot escape choosing words with realistic overtones: a metaphor, he writes, "may bring out neglected likeness and differences . . . in some measure remake our world."<sup>53</sup> "In some measure" is not very bold, and if the likeness was "neglected," it must have existed prior to the metaphorical speech-act! Unless this be true, how could the aptness or fitness of a metaphor be assessed? The issue is ultimately theological: whether all things were made and are given coherence by the divine *Logos*, or by our own *logos*.

Here, however, the *particula veritatis* of the idealist option must be preserved. Our *logos* was indeed created in the image, or as the image, of the divine *Logos*. In human thought and speech the creativity of the divine *Logos* reflects itself. Devising metaphors is more than mere passive recording or imaging. It may imply (as thought and speech generally) daring initiatives, subtle strategies, an opportunity for genius, a royal domination over the works of God's hands. *Quoad nos*, for our perception of the world, for our common, social, perception of the world and consequent forms of behavior, metaphors introduce new features. They sometimes revolutionize things human: they prevent or precipitate wars, they destroy or defend empires. Who can measure the efficacy of that one metaphor: the "iron curtain"? Inasmuch as these human effects are a part of reality, Goodman's words apply: "in some measure," metaphors "remake our world." Provided one acknowledges, as Janet Soskice urges, that their efficacy depends on cognitive and explanatory function.<sup>54</sup>

At this stage, one may broach the issue of possible paraphrase. Leaving aside the matter of vividness, of aesthetic pleasure, can a "literal" paraphrase replace a metaphor as far as cognitive function is concerned? Several writers, the Blacks, Ricceurs, and Guntons, deny the possibility and extol the irreducible power of metaphors for *knowledge*. However, they usually grant that this is not the case with trivial metaphors: and such an admission makes the case somewhat suspect, for a radical divide between sub-kinds is not very likely. When ravished by the lively beauty and "revelation" of a new metaphor, we may *feel* that it could not be replaced by any other form of discourse; but may we rule out that some great artist, some enchantress of prose, one day will do it and, so, ravish us again?

<sup>51</sup> *Les Figures de style, passim*.

<sup>52</sup> Ryken *et al.*, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* xiv; Soskice, *Metaphors* 58–59; *contra* Black, *Models and Metaphors* 35ff., but see his concession 37 n. 16.

<sup>53</sup> *Languages of Art* 32.

<sup>54</sup> *Metaphors* 109.

In a sense there is an irreducible identity to every item of God's creation: nothing can replace anything in all respects, or even in any one respect *perfectly*. But we are not caught in a fanatic all-or-nothing dilemma. There is also a solidarity and a commonality among all created entities (including metaphors!) that grounds the possibility of proxy service; it is mirrored in the remarkable way language is able to explain itself (Peirce's discovery; you can always say the same thing with other words). Kevin Vanhoozer's reply is well-taken: "metaphors, like texts, are determinate enough to convey stable meaning without being exhaustively specifiable."<sup>55</sup> Therefore,

Interpretation is not a matter of translating all figurative language into clear and distinct propositions. Our interpretations may adequately, though not exclusively, grasp the metaphorical and textual meaning. This is simply to acknowledge that our interpretations, while not arbitrary, are revisable and incomplete. Wittgenstein pointed out that words have "rough edges"; even "literal" language is rarely clear and precise.<sup>56</sup>

Interpretations of metaphors, as Vanhoozer has in view, inevitably take the form of paraphrases. Reasonably adequate paraphrases, if we follow his wisdom, are not beyond reach.<sup>57</sup> Rikhof shows with illuminating precision that a metaphor receives *another kind* of paraphrase than a non-metaphorical statement—but one that can be adequate after its own kind.<sup>58</sup>

An appropriate theoretical sketch makes it possible to appreciate the diversity among metaphors and the relation to concepts. Some metaphors, indeed, are of little cognitive import and of little help in elaborating doctrine. They draw attention to superficial or accidental similarities. They are used as mere ornaments, as in passing. But "there are degrees and shadings of metaphorical use."<sup>59</sup> Other metaphors correspond to such regular and essential likeness between A and B that they structure and feed our intelligent apprehension of A, what we know of B helping us. Some successful metaphors attain so common, frequent, and quasi-automatic use that they slide into another status: not the status of "dead metaphors" (a misleading metaphor!) but of "literal" meanings of words (*catachresis* is a technical term) in the service of *concepts*. Between metaphors and concepts, it is possible to make room for the *analogical* use of concepts, which has a noble pedigree in the Christian church.

Should one speak of "metaphorical truth"? H. Rikhof remains reticent.<sup>60</sup> So does Soskice, who reminds us that "I feel a gnawing pain" may carry a dreadfully literal truth.<sup>61</sup> There appears to be little justification for the opinion that metaphors "traffick" at levels of being altogether different from ontic realities. The Heideggerian-Spinozistic-Aristotelian flavor of Ricœur's

<sup>55</sup> *Is There a Meaning?* 130.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 139–40.

<sup>57</sup> So also Soskice, *Metaphors* 94–95.

<sup>58</sup> *The Concept of the Church* 114–19.

<sup>59</sup> Clowney, "Interpreting the Biblical Models" 100.

<sup>60</sup> *The Concept of the Church* 114.

<sup>61</sup> *Metaphors* 70.

tensive ontology is a cool recommendation if one is attached to an orthodox or biblical position. It implies an intermingling of “is” and “is not,” a sort of substantification of “non-being” that has its roots in pagan myth rather than biblical monotheism and the doctrine of creation.

However, on the last point, it would be unwise to discard Ricœur’s intention: he tries to escape the deadly matter-of-factness of Positivism.<sup>62</sup> Under the parameters of orthodoxy, this flat-“ism” is denounced and destroyed by the Creator’s transcendence, and by the freedom of his rule. Before the biblical God—“in him”—creatures are one and many, and becoming; irreducibly diverse, they work together in symphony; there is a *life* of the cosmos, all created beings, with their assigned powers, conspiring towards a glorious fulfillment, towards the Kingdom. This, it is suggested, provides the ontological basis for metaphorical speech-acts, together with the reflection of divine creativity in the inventive activity of our *logos*. Edmund Clowney also writes, “The principle of analogy, so fruitful in the operation of our thought, is not an alien mold stamped upon a meaningless universe. Rather analogy is fruitful because God has established a universe with analogical structure.”<sup>63</sup>

If metaphors vary, especially in fruitfulness for doctrine, how can one discern those which should be granted privilege? How may one avoid over-exploiting them, or some traits in the picture? J. Green and M. Baker rightly remind us that metaphors imply no complete similarity between A and B, but draw on some partial likeness.<sup>64</sup> The following criteria may be helpful:

- (a) *Frequency* of occurrence, regularity, *development*, with a constellation of subordinate metaphors and other recurring arrangements,<sup>65</sup> ensuing predictability in a given context—all such textual features raise the probability of doctrinal significance (and of a corresponding intention of this sort on the writer’s part).
- (b) Every application of some *reasoning* to metaphorical statements shows that the author considered them to be a springboard for understanding the matter, to be a matrix of meaningful connections, very close to a conceptual scheme. His or her actual behavior in that case practically amounts to a *metalinguistic* proposition: “I intend this as an account of the way things are, and are logically related in reality.”
- (c) The literary (or rhetorical) *genre* of the unit in which metaphors are found also may provide a clue: the more didactic, the nearer conceptual implications are to be expected.

When the distance between A and B is not altogether unknown, how the terms of B function in A’s redescription is easier to measure. General criteria of textual interpretation are also relevant: above all, the degree of consistency with the author’s other opinions, if they are identified (an author is

<sup>62</sup> See our last quotation, n. 41 above.

<sup>63</sup> “Interpreting the Biblical Models” 76, cf. 104.

<sup>64</sup> *Recovering the Scandal* 42 (quoting from Umberto Eco).

<sup>65</sup> Black, *Models and Metaphors* 43.

to be presumed consistent with himself unless or until proved guilty of contradiction). In the case of scriptural metaphors, the *analogia fidei* and the agreement with main patterns of biblical teachings may help decision and bring confirmation. The question is relevant: Is the alleged theological “profit” drawn from metaphors in harmony with the *intellectus fidei*—itself *semper reformandus*—as it has been ascertained?

### III. CONSIDERING BIBLICAL METAPHORS OF ATONEMENT

If one applies the foregoing criteria to the field of atonement metaphors in the Bible, results are not doubtful. With the exception of the more synthetic Passover scheme, all main representations (sacrificial, judicial, redemptive, “polemic”) meet the reader in numbers. The sheer abundance of occurrences, especially in the Epistles, an obviously didactic genre, and Revelation, is striking. They are found in regular association, and closely intertwined with one another.<sup>66</sup> They seem to flow naturally into one another! The key passage Romans 3:24–26 thus begins and ends with the law court language of “justification” and is concerned with the demonstration of “justice” (vv. 25b, 26a) but also refers to “redemption” (v. 24b) and to a place or means of “propitiation” (v. 25a) with the added “sacrificial” mention of “blood” (v. 25a). Colossians 2:14–15 similarly mixes juridical notions, with the *cheirographon*, the document of our legal debt, and the vision of the Conqueror’s triumph. Hebrews 2:14–17 conjoins the theme of the Devil’s defeat (vv. 14b, 15) and the sacrificial representation, Christ’s death (the paradoxical means of his victory, v. 14b) as the high priest’s work of propitiation (v. 17); there may be a trace of judicial language (*enochoi*, v. 15). Later, as part of the development of the writer’s interpretation of Christ’s death as the antitype of Levitical sacrifices, and especially on the Great Day of Atonement, “redemption” is mentioned (9:15) and also the legal conditions for a testament (last will) to take effect (vv. 16–17; the word *aphesis*, v. 22, also carries juridical overtones, and the phrase “to bear the sins of a multitude,” v. 28). Already in the Fourth Servant Song, the infliction of punishment (Isa 53:5, *mūsār*, מִיָּסָר and several phrases for “bearing sin,” vv. 6, 11, and 12, guilt laid upon the Servant—to bear one’s sin or iniquity meaning to suffer the corresponding penalty), a judicial act though unjust on the part of men (*mišpāṭ* מִשְׁפָּט, v. 8, taking the preposition in a causal sense), leading to a verdict of justification (v. 11), is considered as an expiatory sacrifice, precisely a guilt offering (*’āšām* אֲשָׁם, 53:10), a theme introduced already in 52:15 by the “Levitical” verb *nāzā* נָזָה, to sprinkle (form *yazze[h]* יָזַה). This abundant evidence is best explained by the hypothesis of an underlying doctrinal scheme which all four metaphorical sets are designed to serve and to suggest. It may be added that the fifth one, that of Passover, also associates sacrifice and redemption (a word loaded with exodus remembrance).

<sup>66</sup> Gunton (*The Actuality of Atonement*, e.g. 85) notices this phenomenon.

In the same passages or in others, NT writers do appear to *argue* on the basis of their description of Christ's death as a propitiatory sacrifice or as his undergoing the punishment transgressors of the divine law had deserved. The logic of Romans 3:26 is remarkable: there was a need for God's justice to be displayed, since it had been hidden or suspended by the operation of his "forbearance" in pre-Christian times, as he had not punished sins that called for judicial treatment (Paul, by calling Christ's death *hilastērion*, shows he considers the OT sacrifices as types, and surely shares the conviction of Hebrews 10:4 that they did not atone *really* for the sins which believers, such as David, were forgiven); Christ's death, since he was bearing *our* sins, made up for that lack; God's justice was displayed, that he found the way to be *dikaion kai dikaionta*. Hebrews 9:28 argues from the efficacy of Levitical atonement on the merely ritual level, providing "purity of the flesh," that the antitype does away with sin and makes it possible for us to receive the promised inheritance. One can easily follow the apostle's reasoning in Galatians 3:10–13: under the rule of the law, everyone is found under the curse, since no one offers the perfect obedience required; Christ, the perfect righteous one, who did not deserve that curse, nevertheless suffered under the curse; he did so in our stead (by transfer), so that his death redeemed us from the curse (paid, *exēgorasen*, the ransom needed for our liberation); thus another regime is established, under which life at God's judgment may be reached, its formula "by faith" (Hab 2:4) contrasting with that of rule of the law, "by doing" what the law requires (Lev 18:5). The coherence of that scheme is impressive.<sup>67</sup> Biblical writers did not handle the main "metaphors" for atonement as if they were, in their estimate, inadequate images—images they had to borrow from their cultural context while "struggling" to express an impenetrable mystery. They found in them sources of light, on God's action, for believing intelligence. They were confident the various representations had direct doctrinal cash value.

The first two pictorial sets in the list above, sacrificial and judicial, have a special relationship to the event they interpret. In their case, biblical clues are available on the connection between A and B. These two "B's" used to tell of A, the Cross, and of the meaning of A, were not haphazardly selected.

In NT perspectives, the OT sacrifices were *instituted* precisely to this end: to foreshadow the death of Christ in its saving efficacy. The sacrificial metaphor appeals to a *type*—and this suggests the highest degree of adequacy for cognitive purposes. Of course, like all metaphors and all types, OT sacrifices

<sup>67</sup> It is put in even bolder relief by the vain contortions to which exegetical efforts aimed at avoiding that reading are constrained. See, e.g., Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (trans. William Montgomery; London: A. & C. Black, 1931) 63, 188–89, 209, 211–12 (72–73, 221), or Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968) 245–69, especially 249–50, 253–58, and more recent interpreters on which one can read my "Agnus Victor: The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment," in *What Does It Mean To Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons on Salvation* (ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 87ff. But even if the proposed (traditional) reading were doubted, the fact that Paul is reasoning would remain obvious.

were partially *unlike* the antitypical NT event. The intimate and essential bond between Christ's death and his resurrection does not receive a clear prefiguration. However, it may be suggested that the high priest's *surviving* his encounter with the Lord's Most Holy Presence typologically represents a kind of resurrection. I have argued that, since sin-bearing for atonement is ascribed both to the animal victim *and to the priest* (Exod 28:38; Lev 10:17), we should think of the two of them together substituting for sinners before God. Drawing in the presence of God was a matter of life and death—no human being could see his face and live, for his holiness does not tolerate the tiniest trace of evil and his wrath is a devouring flame<sup>68</sup>—and the priest, especially the high priest when he entered the Most Holy Place, risked his life on behalf of the people; Exodus 28:35 expresses the consciousness of that danger. His safe return could be called a resurrection *en parabolē* like that of Isaac (Heb 11:19).<sup>69</sup> If we consider therefore the pair of victim and priest—and Jesus was the antitype of both—the sacrificial type is remarkably complete, and the “metaphor” highly adequate.

Atonement was not the only function of OT sacrifices, and other functions were also antitypically fulfilled by Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 5:2), but it was prominent. At any rate, it was *the* function when they were offered *for sins*, and the qualification “for sins” regularly specifies the meaning of Christ's sacrificial death. This disposes of the view that exalts cereal offerings as the paradigmatic sacrifices (whereas the very root *zbh* זבח, akin to *tbh* טבח, expresses the idea of slaughtering, and *thyō* can mean simply “kill” in John 10:10) and therefore downplays expiation, any substitution of the victim to bear the brunt of holy wrath. The taunt, “You cannot punish a cupful of barley,” hardly differs from mere cavil.<sup>70</sup>

Judicial language belongs to another category. Jesus was *literally* condemned and executed; he received capital punishment as a criminal, upon a decision a magistrate issued. But the reply flashes: This was not *God's* judgment seat! In order to say that Jesus was condemned *coram Deo*, one has to cross all the metaphorical distance from B to A, an enormous, maybe an infinite distance! For human justice (B) is not divine justice (A). And yet, is it not a teaching of Scripture that human judges have been instituted to be

<sup>68</sup> I have shown elsewhere that the statement that the languages of atonement and of divine wrath do not come together is a misstatement of fact: they are found together in Ps 78:38 and Jer 18:20, 23 or Deut 32:22, 40–43 (and Prov 16:14 for the king's anger; in all these passages, *kpr* כפר is used and either *'ap* אָפ or *hēmā* הֶמָּה); in 2 Samuel 21, to avert the plague, David seeks to make expiation (v. 3, *kpr* כִּפֵּר), and, to that effect, delivers to death the murderer's sons, and the Lord is placated (v. 14, *yē'atēr* יָעַתֵּר, *repropiatus*); in 2 Samuel 24, the Lord's wrath is mentioned first (v. 1), and it is through sacrifices that he is placated (v. 24, same verb as in 21:14).

<sup>69</sup> According to Heb 9:24–28, Jesus has entered the heavenly Holiest Place as the high priest had to do on earth every year, and he will appear a second time: that return corresponds to the high priest's. It is, of course, the *parousia*, which will bring about our resurrection and was anticipated by his own (“firstfruits”).

<sup>70</sup> C. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* 120. Cereal offerings are the exception when atonement for sin is required, in the case of persons too poor to afford two pigeons (Lev 5:11). The emphasis on blood for atonement prevents any attempt to make the non-bloody offering the model sacrifice (cf. Lev 17:11 and Heb 9:22b).

the representatives of God, אֱלֹהִים *ʾēlōhîm*, not only images of him as judges, but also his *instruments*, even if pagan and unworthy, to mete out *divine* justice?<sup>71</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism confidently asserts that Pilate plays, in the realization of God's design, the role of the heavenly Judge. A similar thought is so dear to Calvin's heart that he dares claim that Christ's death would have been of no avail for our salvation had he been killed by bandits!<sup>72</sup> Without following Calvin that far, the question may be raised whether "metaphor" is, after all, the right categorization for the "forensic" set of atonement language: *analogy* might be more accurate. God's wisdom is commonly conceived of analogically; must the way one understands God's judgment and justice be so different?

In view of the titles the two first representations of the saving efficacy of the Cross have to cognitive import and doctrinal significance, it is strange (and revealing?) that critics of the traditional, evangelical, view, so easily fall back on other, uncriticized, metaphors. One reads of divine wrath having been "absorbed," or "exhausted." Such crude metaphors that redescribe divine wrath in terms suggestive of a physical *quantum*, of energy or matter, are devoid of explanatory power (*why* the alleged absorption or exhaustion?). They lack biblical warrant.

One piece of evidence only could counter-balance the weight of the foregoing considerations: the incontrovertible proof of *disunity* among the key metaphors. Is it forthcoming? On the contrary, coordinating them appears to be an effortless task: they fittingly complement each other; they exhibit the same structure (isomorphism), so that they naturally *translate* into one

<sup>71</sup> This traditional understanding is very hard to obfuscate in Romans 13:1–7, where God's ordination implies such a grant of authority that conscience is under obligation (v. 5), that the magistrate (in Nero's Rome) is God's servant and minister, *diakonos* and *leitourgos* (vv. 4, 6). Christians are not to vindicate themselves but leave vindication to God, which is the operation of wrath (12:19), and the sequence of the passage implies that God operates through the magistrate, who serves as the "vindicator for wrath" (13:4, *ekdikos eis orgēn*). This view is by no means restricted to Romans 13; one hears an echo in Titus 3:1 and finds a fuller statement in 1 Peter 2:13–17. It is at least suggested by John 19:11 and sheds light on Mark 12:17. It was standard fare in Judaism (Sir 10:4–5 and more explicitly Wisdom 6:1–5). It corresponds to the ordinary rabbinic interpretation of the title "gods" in several OT passages, especially Psalm 82 (in connection with Deut 1:15–18, and Exod 21:6; 22:8, 28): judges are meant. This understanding of the psalm (which was emphatically Calvin's) has not been in favor with recent exegetes, who believe real heavenly beings are addressed, whether heathen gods de-divinized or angels, invisible powers. Some, however, acknowledge the force of arguments that support the traditional reading, such as Elmer B. Smick, "Mythopoetic Language in the Psalms," *WTJ* 44 (1982) 95–96, and Herbert Niehr, "Götter oder Menschen—eine falsche Alternative. Bemerkungen zu Ps 82," *ZAW* 99 (1987) 95, who tries to combine both interpretations. A. T. Hanson shows how unlikely it is that John 10:34–36 should imply the "heavenly" interpretation: "John's Citation of Psalm LXXXII," *NTS* 11 (1965) 158–62 and "John's Citation of Psalm LXXXII Reconsidered," *NTS* 13 (1967) 363–67 (p. 365 on the rabbis' reading). In an original (and so typical) article, Meredith Kline argues that Gen 4:15 implies the institution of a judicial order and that "this judicial order is characterized by the prescription in Gen 4:15 as an administration of *divine* justice" ("Oracular Origin of the State," in *Biblical and Near-Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor* [ed. Gary A. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978] 135).

<sup>72</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II, 16.5.

another—hence the intertwining in so many passages. As soon as one discerns that cultic *holiness* can be translated “righteousness” in the ethical-judicial sphere, one understands that the danger of the Presence’s devouring fire, the danger of being struck dead by sacred intolerance, *is* the danger of being condemned and punished by divine justice. With the biblical God (not any *numen*), what is the *stain* to be covered or wiped out if not the *guilt* incurred by sinning?—actually “sin” and “sin-bearing” belong to both sacrificial and judicial languages. The solution comes from the representative mediation of the slaughtered animal (a spotless one) which, together with the priest, bears the brunt of holiness’s reaction—or, to switch languages, it comes isomorphically from the representative mediation of the righteous substitute, who satisfies the demands of justice. This is how the worshipper may approach the Holy One; this is how the guilty transgressor may be freed from all condemnation and declared to be in the right by him who judges justly.

Such translation may be carried over with the other “sets.” The language of redemption is very near: the word “ransom,” *kôpēr* כֹּפֶר, is a lexical brother of *kippēr* כִּפֶּר, “to atone, expiate.” Exodus 21:29–30 shows that the “ransom” replaces the death penalty; Numbers 35:30–33 defines that no ransom may be substituted in the case of capital offences: the murderer must be put to death, and this constitutes *atonement* (v. 33, *yēkuppār* יִכַּפֵּר). The *Christus Victor* scheme belongs to the same network (as G. Aulén failed to perceive).<sup>73</sup> Satan is the accuser; his most deadly weapon is the demand of divine law: this is why the law is “the power of sin” (1 Cor 15:56); we are captives as debtors, the ultimate debt, not to “nature” vaguely but to divine justice, being death (cf. Gal 3:23; Heb 2:14–15). Satan was defeated, and we were freed, by the perfect payment of what we owed. The cancellation of our debt (Col 2:14) and the payment of our ransom (Matt 20:28) are one and the same transaction effected by Christ’s death, for us, on the Cross.

The only “dignified” way<sup>74</sup> to escape such a tight nexus of doctrinal solidarities is to flee across the misty spaces of apophatic theology. This has an air of wisdom, with its celebration of God’s transcendence, and the humbling of theological reason, but it is of no use against the mind of the flesh. It finds very little encouragement in Scripture. It may camouflage the arrogant refusal to let God speak in intelligible terms to his people.

<sup>73</sup> For further development, see my “*Agnus Victor*.”

<sup>74</sup> I cannot help considering that some ways are “undignified”: when Green and Baker (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* 63) write that Rom 8:3 “does not mean that Paul thinks of Christ’s having been punished by execution on the cross so as to satisfy the rancor of God,” and (p. 80) “God is not the problem, but sin is,” the violent choice of words uncovers a hideous abyss of misunderstanding, caricature, and estrangement. (They obviously aim these sentences at the classical evangelical doctrine of penal substitution.) Is there anything left of that deep reverence for God that led to the *tiqqûn sôpêrim* of Hab 1:12, “Thou shalt not die” altered to “We shall not die,” and so indicated in the margin, because the very thought of God dying, even if negated, insinuates something unworthy, spiritually unbearable? Some other arguments have more substance. But it is difficult to feel intellectual respect for the cliché that God’s wrath is incompatible with his love, an objection St. Augustine solved sixteen centuries ago. The argument that contrasts the emphasis on guilt in Western tradition with the prevalence of “shame cultures” elsewhere (and so relativizes the sense of guilt) disregards the fact that it is, arguably, the fruit of *biblical* influence.

The recognition of the unifying scheme that underlies the use of the various biblical metaphors does not entail that their diversity be flattened or ignored. It appears that the judicial version, probably the least metaphorical of all and often the middle term in the “translation” of one metaphorical language into another, most clearly expresses the logic of Christ’s work of atonement. Hence the central place which W. van Asselt assigns to it (he also points to its trinitarian connections). But there is a distinct contribution made by each of the main metaphors, and nothing prevents the classical theology of atonement from doing it full justice: sacrificial language shows the location of atonement, between God and humankind, in the “religious” sphere; redemptive language highlights the twofold effect: the freedom of former slaves, and their new belonging to Christ, who bought us with a price (such a price!); the polemic language, of warfare and victory, reminds us of the cosmic scope and operation in the spiritual world. This is not limiting!

Neither does the traditional centrality of atonement through vicarious punishment rule out in any way other aspects of salvation, other dimensions and benefits of Christ’s work on our behalf. Christ our *Example* need not slide to the side. In fulfilling his unique mission, our Lord did set the model we are called to imitate: it is perfectly compatible to confess that “he carried our sins in his body” (1 Pet 2:24) and that we are “to follow in his steps” (1 Pet 2:21). Insinuating that the traditional doctrine breeds neglect in this regard and weakens the commitment to suffer for Christ’s sake and after him—this is slanderous for so many, whose faithfulness transmitted us the Gospel.<sup>75</sup> The vision of Christ our *Head* and *archēgos*, who leads us in the transition from death to life, into the New Creation of which he is the New Adam, who thus effects, through the agency of his Spirit, a real (“ontological,” if you will) change in believers, is not an alternative interpretation of salvation (as C. Gunton seemed to think). On the contrary, it is the fruit of his substitutionary work. Because there is no longer any condemnation, God having condemned sin in the flesh of Christ, the law of the Spirit of Life unleashes the energies of the New Creation (Rom 8:1–11)—“it breaks the power of *cancelled* sin.”

The burden of the several metaphors of Scripture and of its other teachings is indeed that God was pleased to bring about, through Christ’s work, the *fullness* of atonement—all conceivable aspects of the undoing of evil and association with the divine life—such a fullness that, in him, we are filled to the full (Col 1:19–20; 2:9).

<sup>75</sup> I resent it painfully as a descendant of Huguenots, who were steeped in Calvin’s doctrine of penal substitution and resisted “unto blood” under persecution, one sentenced to the galleys, one imprisoned in the sinister Tower of Constance.