



Our Serpent of Salvation: The Offense of Jesus in John's Gospel

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IN JOHN 6:61 JESUS ASKS HIS DISCIPLES TO TAKE NO "OFFENSE" AT HIM FOR HIS teachings. Those teachings include offenses such as Jesus being greater than Moses and the eating of a person's flesh and blood. But underneath these offenses lurks a far greater one: "It is that a mere man, whose life ends in death, solemnly lays claim that he is the Revealer of God!"¹ How, we wonder, could God reveal the salvation of the world through the death of his only begotten Son? This death offends us because it seems to reverse the salvation God brings. Therefore in John 6:61 Jesus is actually asking us to honor his crucifixion and not be offended by it. He wants us to see in his death the salvation God brings.

I. THE CRUCIFIXION IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

Some, however, reject this thesis. They do not think the crucifixion is central to John's Gospel. Inspired by John 6:63, that the flesh is of no avail, they argue, for example, that "salvation and benefit no longer come from the cross of Jesus" but only from his words and identity as the Son of God.² But such nay-saying cannot

¹Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 445.

²Jerome H. Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 164.

The crucifixion of Christ is central to John's Gospel, seen in the comparison of Jesus to a snake in John 3:14. The offense this brings surprisingly promises renewal for the church today.

displace the idea that the crucifixion dominates John's Gospel. It continues to be the supreme scandal that stands at the very center of this gospel.³

John's Gospel was written "within brackets drawn from the story of Passover": that is, the Lamb of God of John 1:29 correlates nicely with the explicit identification of Jesus with the paschal lamb in 19:36.⁴ The story of Jesus in John's Gospel is therefore punctuated from beginning to end by Jesus' excruciating death. But for some this is inappropriate. The harshness of the crucifixion conflicts with "the humane and rational." Indeed, if "faith in the crucified Christ is in contradiction to all conceptions of the righteousness, beauty and morality of man, faith in the 'crucified God' is also a contradiction of everything men have ever conceived, desired and sought to be assured of by the term 'God.'"⁵ This is because we want to think of God as "the highest good" who is thereby "exceedingly lovable." But in the shadow of the cross this is not so. There what is "the best and most worthy of love" is—shockingly—the "impositions and obligations of punishments" inflicted by God.⁶ Our sense of decency rebels against such cruelty. Making it central to Christianity seems to exceed what is needed for the salvation of the world, and so we would rather not give it such bold relief.

II. OUR SERPENT OF SALVATION

In John's Gospel the theme of the Son of Man being lifted up is "the Johannine theology of the cross in a nutshell!"⁷ This ascent theme is in John 3:14, 8:28, and 12:32-34. It manifests the domination of the crucifixion in John's Gospel by setting off "the upward swing of the great pendulum of the Incarnation corresponding to the descent of the Word which became flesh."⁸ Of its three occurrences, the saying in John 3:14 is the one most often overlooked. In it Jesus says, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up." It may well be that it has been overlooked because of the great difficulty many have had with the reference to the serpent in that verse. But because this verse is so close to John 3:16, where many believe the gospel shines forth most brightly, neglecting it would seriously misrepresent the Fourth Gospel.

The major dispute regarding John 3:14 is whether or not there is a positive

³Craig R. Koester, review of *Reading John*, by C. H. Talbert, *Word & World* 14/1 (1994) 96. See also Gail R. O'Day, *John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 552: "The Fourth Gospel is often criticized for having an inadequate theology of the cross, but such criticism misconstrues the Johannine treatment of the crucifixion." Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 301.

⁴Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale, 1993) 209.

⁵This objection is discussed in Jürgen Moltmann, *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) 34, 37.

⁶Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. to date (Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883-) 1:575; in *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (1518), *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-86) 31:227; hereafter cited as WA and LW, respectively.

⁷Robert Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 42.

⁸Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, Anchor Bible 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 146.

comparison made in it between Jesus and the snake.⁹ Early on, it was believed that in the bronze serpent Moses gives a symbol of Jesus.¹⁰ But for most modern commentators there is no such symbol.¹¹ Their most trenchant argument against this is that, if a parallel had been intended, John's Gospel "would have made ἡ [sic] ὄφις the subject of a passive verb in 3:14a," which it did not.¹² For these critics, this wipes out the significance of the syntactical parallel: "as...the serpent,...so...the Son of man" in John 3:14.

Long before this criticism was leveled, Gregory Nazianzen (329-389) argued that the "brazen serpent was hung up as a remedy for the biting serpents, not as a type of Him that suffered for us, but as a contrast; and it saved those that looked upon it, not because they believed it to live, but because it was killed, and killed with it the powers that were subject to it."¹³

But Gregory's contrast between the live Christ and the dead snake is superficial. Augustine (354-430) explains how this is so:

The serpent's bite was deadly, the Lord's death is life-giving. A serpent is gazed on that the serpent may have no power. What is this? A death is gazed on, that death may have no power. But whose death? The death of life....Is not Christ the life? And yet Christ hung on the cross....But in Christ's death, death died. Dead life slew death....Just as they who looked on that serpent perished not by the serpent's bites, so they who look in faith on Christ's death are healed from the bites of sin.

The only noteworthy—though minor—difference, notes Augustine, between Jesus and the snake is the quantitative one "between the figurative image and the real thing: the figure procured temporal life; the reality, of which that was the figure, procures eternal life."¹⁴

Martin Luther expands Augustine's use of Heb 2:14, "by death" Christ "destroys...death." Luther writes:

He has driven out death by death, he has overcome the Law by the Law. How has he done this? Christ was a sinner upon the cross, bearing the title of an arch fiend in the midst of knaves. He suffered the judgment and punishment which a sinner

⁹The pioneering work against this parallel is Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel: Interpreted in its Relation to Contemporaneous Religious Currents in Palestine and the Hellenistic-Oriental World* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1929) 98-113.

¹⁰For this judgment, see *Barnabas*, 96-100.

¹¹See, for instance, Edwin K. Lee, *The Religious Thought of St. John* (London: SPCK, 1962) 147; Bultmann, *John*, 152; Carson, *John*, 202; Anthony T. Hanson, *The Prophet Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 48; Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 136; D. Moody Smith, Jr., *John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 98. The reason Ridderbos gives for the disanalogy is that "the element of glorification cannot be applied to the serpent" (136).

¹²Godfrey C. Nicholson, *Death as Departure: The Johannine Descent-Ascent Schema* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983) 99.

¹³Gregory Nazianzen, "The Second Oration on Easter," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 431.

¹⁴Augustine, "Homilies on the Gospel of St. John," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 85.

must suffer. He was innocent...and thus has abolished sin by taking upon himself the sin which was not his.¹⁵

Through this substitution Christ “atones for my sins and takes away from me the wrath of the Father. The living, fiery serpent is within me, for I am a sinner, but in him is a dead serpent”—provided I have faith in Christ.¹⁶

Luther amplifies this understanding of John 3:14 by proclaiming boldly that Christ is “our Serpent of salvation.”¹⁷ “Christ nailed to the cross” is our “bronze serpent,” for faith in him frees us from “the threats and terrors of the Law, sin, death, wrath, and the judgment of God.”¹⁸ Luther thereby ties the knot between Jesus and the serpent. And Luther’s contemporary, Hans Baldung Grien, does the same in his woodcut of St. John the Evangelist by putting a serpent in the chalice of the Holy Eucharist in order to have it mingle with the very blood of Christ.

III. THE OFFENSE OF JESUS

The advantage for Luther in linking Jesus with the serpent in John 3:14 is to uphold the offense of Christ. This is important because without this offense “faith in Christ would not be true faith.”¹⁹ So, just as those who first saw the bronze serpent in the wilderness were offended, so are we who now look upon Christ crucified. And rightly so. The first case in Numbers 21 therefore helps us with the second in the New Testament.

In the first case Luther imagines them saying: “We are so terrified that we cannot stand the sight of them! If only you would, instead, give us a drink, a cooling plaster, a cooling drink, to take away the venom and the fever!...How can that dead and lifeless object up there benefit us?”²⁰ Just so, Christ crucified offends us. We who want to be free from torment, suffering, and eternal punishment see just that happening to Christ on the cross. He was “smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isa 53:4)! So the cross looks like the wrong place to go for help. Therefore calling Christ our “healing serpent” offends us royally.²¹

As with any offense, Christ crucified offends us by crossing our path and thwarting our hopes and dreams. Such obstructions frustrate us and hurt our feelings. We are looking for an easier way of salvation and God does not provide it. For all his love for us, God does not consult us on how we would like to be saved. We

¹⁵Martin Luther, *Sermon on John 3:1-15* (1526), WA 21:549.22-28; *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. John N. Lenker, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 3:451-452. Hereafter, the Lenker edition will be cited as SML.

¹⁶Martin Luther, *Sermon on John 3:1-15* (1522), WA 10/1/2:305.38-306.1; SML 3:420. I disagree with Arland J. Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits: Christology and Redemption in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 149: “The concept of Jesus’ death as an atoning sacrifice is not the primary thrust of the Fourth Gospel.”

¹⁷Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John 1-4* (1538), WA 47:66.33-34; LW 22:340.

¹⁸Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1-4* (1535), WA 40:283.12-14; LW 26:166.

¹⁹Gustav Stählin, Σκανδαλον, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:354. On this complex idea of faith needing an offense in order to maintain itself, see O. K. Bouwsma, *Without Proof or Evidence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1984), and D. Z. Phillips, *Faith after Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1988).

²⁰Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John 1-4* (1538), WA 47:65.28-32; LW 22:338-339.

²¹*Ibid.*, WA 47:69.5; LW 22:342.



Hans Baldung Grien (1485-1545), *Saint John the Evangelist* (1516/1519). Reprinted by permission from Christiane Andersson and Charles Talbot, eds., *From a Mighty Fortress: Prints, Drawings, and Books in the Age of Luther, 1483-1546* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1983) 194, from the collection in the *Kunstsammlungen der Veste Colburg*, Germany.

are offended that he insists on dragging us through a knot hole in order to save us. This makes the divine cure look worse than the disease. Indeed, the “help looks like a torment, the relief like a burden.”²² This turns our beautiful Savior into a “homely...ugly Jesus,” who shocks us. John 3:14 therefore puts an end once and for all to the “unusually attractive...incandescent Christ,” the “handsome figure” of “popularized Johannism.”²³

But this is a test. We need to find out if our faith will fizzle in the face of such ugliness or, as 1 Pet 1:7 says, “redound” to glory. Will I “push through the possibility of offense and accept Christianity on any terms” simply because “I want only one thing,” and that is “to be a Christian”?²⁴ After all, according to Luther, “the world judges Christ only by His outward appearances; it does not regard Him otherwise than as a devil.” And Christ wants to be

a serpent, a devil, a judge to those who despair, to the unrepentant, and to the ungodly. Yes, He will be their tyrant and their punisher, since they make a serpent of Him and run from Him. He must have the form of a serpent; but even if He were still more repugnant to the eye and resembled a devil or a vile worm, I must even then learn to ignore this figure and outward appearance of Christ and say: “The world may regard Him as it will. What is that to me? He may be a murderer to others, and the inscription on the cross may label Him as a disgraceful rioter. All this does not affect me. I will look for the power concealed behind all this and not be offended by His external appearance. I look upon Him as my savior. And he who gazes this way at the serpent, so woefully ridiculed and blasphemed, will be saved....I for my part will still hold to Christ and regard Him as the bronze serpent. In reality, of course, He is not a serpent; He is the Lamb of God.”²⁵

That is the test. It is what in large part makes faith such a battle.

IV. SEEING THE SAVIOR

Looking past the offensive snake to the Lamb of God is no small feat. Snakes, after all, scare us. Their mere presence conveys the horrors of life. So to get beyond the offense of this healing serpent we will have to go against all appearances. We, like Joseph in Gen 45:8, will have to look beyond the obvious and abruptly say that it was not his brothers who sent Joseph into slavery but God himself. To do so, we will need to find a way to help us look beyond the obvious. This is because what we see blinds us from seeing anything more than what meets our eyes.

We have just such a way in John 9:39, where Jesus says, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be-

²²Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. and ed. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: University of Princeton, 1991) 114.

²³Stephen D. Moore, “Some Ugly Thoughts on the Fourth Gospel at the Threshold of the Third Millennium,” in *What Is John?* ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998) 243-245.

²⁴Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 115.

²⁵Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John 1-4* (1538), WA 47:69.10-22; 70.14-16; LW 22:342-343.

come blind.” In these words John Chrysostom (347-407) sees a method for “stirring up the faith” by “putting an end to human reasoning.”²⁶ This creates a genuine crisis for whoever sees the crucifixion. Will we believe what we see in the gospel or not? That is the crisis. In order to emerge victorious we will need “a certain poverty of spirit, an abasement of personal pride..., and a candid acknowledgment of spiritual blindness.”²⁷ Blinding us in our self-righteousness brings the self-abasement we need to discover the Lamb of God lurking in, with, and under the bronze serpent.

This blinding links John 9:39 with 12:25, where Jesus says that whoever “hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” This means “one’s life must be spurned” and we must follow Jesus to the “extremity where he is.” But this “creates consternation,” for it will in part mean losing “selfhood through losing the possessions that define selfhood [which] is not the world’s way. It can lead to being buried alive.”²⁸ This method therefore cracks open appearances. Through its disturbance appearances break apart and reveal the hidden truth. Just then we begin to see the lamb of God in the serpent of God.

But darkness remains. The new life of faith is never complete this side of the grave. It always suffers from imperfection. A helpful medical example of this is the case of adults who have had their sight restored but still suffer vision problems. “A newly sighted adult...has to make...a radical change in neurological functioning and, with it, a radical change in psychological functioning, in self, in identity....One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person.” The newly sighted see, but what they see has no coherence. They have no “visual memories” to support their perceptions. Their retina and optic nerve are active, transmitting impulses, but their brains cannot sort them out. So they are, as the neurologists say, “agnosic.”²⁹ They suffer from agnosia or the partial inability to recognize objects by use of the senses.

Similar spiritual confusions abound in John’s Gospel. Our spiritual sight is also imperfect. Misunderstandings, for instance, cloud the meaning of the temple (2:21), spiritual birth (3:4), water (4:11), food (4:32), heavenly descent (6:42), flesh (6:52), freedom (8:33), death (8:52), the gateway (10:6), sleep (11:12), the resurrection (11:24), and spiritual cleansing (13:9).

V. PREACHING CHRIST

If Christ is the Lamb of God in, with, and under our serpent of salvation, then we must always preach him as “glorious and despised.”³⁰ He is glorious because he

²⁶St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John the Apostle and Evangelist, Homilies 48-88, Fathers of the Church*, vol. 41 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1960) 122, 123.

²⁷Carson, *John*, 378.

²⁸Gerard Sloyan, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) 156-157.

²⁹Oliver Sacks, “To See and Not See,” *The New Yorker*, 10 May 1993, 61, 70.

³⁰Martin Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah 40-66* (1530), WA 31/2:430.5-6; LW 17:217.

saves us from our sins. But he is despised because he saves us by taking on “human nature, which was mortal and subject to the terrible wrath and judgment of God because of the sins of the human race. And this anger was felt” by his “weak and mortal flesh.”³¹ He suffered so because God willed “that he be victim, reconciliation, ransom, redemption, price of sins. For the wrath of God could not be appeased or put off except by so great a victim, namely the Son of God who could not sin. There was no other sacrifice by which God could be appeased, other than this victim who gave his life.”³² By taking “the chastisement due us” upon himself, Christ himself—we must dare to say—has become “the refuse of the world and the off scouring of all.”³³ This putrid, beaten Christ offends our religious sensibilities. We would rather have Jesus embedded in “fantasy, illusion, slippery surfaces, revised realities, multiple meanings...and play.”³⁴

Since the time of Abelard (1079-1142) this substitutionary view of Jesus’ death has met with severe criticisms. Today it still suffers from neglect and rejection. Abelard rejected it because (1) the Bible shows that God is able to forgive without an authorizing sacrifice; (2) the wickedness of the crucifixion adds to our sinfulness rather than saving us from it; (3) Jesus’ innocent death is too horrible to please God even for some lofty ulterior purpose; (4) the crucifixion is unable to make people any better and so cannot save them; (5) God could not be satisfied by paying off a debt on his own that he himself did not run up in the first place; and (6) an innocent death has no intrinsic properties for saving sinners from everlasting damnation. According to Abelard these six objections pose “a considerable problem” for the substitutionary meaning of Christ’s death.³⁵

But Abelard and his vast progeny insufficiently appreciate the splendor of holiness and sacrifice in Christ’s death.³⁶ The first criticism, then, can be countered by noting that all forgiveness is predicated on the divine sacrifice either in fact or as a promise—much in the way the promise of the Messiah saved those who believed in him long before his actual advent. As for the second one, the evil in the crucifixion is confined by design to exposing sin, not exacerbating it. Regarding the next criticism, God does not delight in Jesus’ suffering but only in his obedience unto death on the cross. As for the fourth, the primary goal of the crucifixion is to snatch us from the jaws of hell, not make us morally perfect. Whatever perfection we have is not intrinsic but borrowed from Christ. Regarding the next, God is satisfied be-

³¹Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John 1-4* (1537), WA 46:632.24-25; LW 22:111.

³²Martin Luther, *Commentary on Isaiah 53* (1544), WA 40/3:732.20-24; translation in Marc Lienhard, *Martin Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ: Stages and Themes of the Reformer’s Christology*, trans. Edwin H. Robinson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 363.

³³Origen (185-254), *Commentary on the Gospel according to John, Books 13-32, The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1993) 326, 325.

³⁴David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000) 11.

³⁵Peter Abelard, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 282-283.

³⁶For these two key points, see the classic study by Emil Brunner, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith*, trans. Olive Wyon (1932; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947) 483-484.

cause *whatever* his Son does delights him, in whatever circumstances it may occur. And as for the last one, the magnitude of Jesus' unique suffering is deemed sufficient by God himself to surmount the defamation of his holiness and the provocation of his wrath.

It is just this tough-minded message that the church needs today to overcome the good feelings and "easy-to-digest spirituality" that is dragging it down. It is just this message that will heal the church by helping it become "half as large and twice as strong."³⁷ This strength will come from believing in the horrible sacrifice of the Lamb of God who is brutalized like that poisonous snake long ago in the wilderness. In that poison and death is power. D. H. Lawrence thought the crucifixion of Christ drained him of this power. He therefore proposed a serpentine Christ free of the blood of the lamb.³⁸ But that was only half right. He needed the offense of the healing snake all right, but not without the blood of the lamb in, with, and under it. John 3:14 has just that. It should therefore fuel all Christian sermons. Then evangelists and preachers will be able to heed the sage warning: "Use all the ability granted to you, ready for every sacrifice and compliance in self-denial; use it to win people—but woe to you if you win them in such a way that you leave out the terror."³⁹ ⊕

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³⁷Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe* (New York: Oxford, 1997) 240-241. This correlation between God's "counterword" being "unwelcome" in the world and his community of followers being "small" is well grounded, for instance, in Jeremiah's prophecy; see Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 363-364, 387.

³⁸D. H. Lawrence, *The Plumed Serpent* (1926; New York: Vintage, 1992) 48, 63, 75, 133, 207, 274, 333. On the cover of this edition there is a wonderful painting of Jesus as a plumed serpent by Joan Hall.

³⁹Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, trans. and ed. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: University of Princeton, 1997) 175.