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HOOKING LEVIATHAN:
DID JESUS DECEIVE SATAN AT THE CROSS?

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CONTENTS

HOOKING LEVIATHAN: DID JESUS DECEIVE SATAN AT THE CROSS?

What happened to Satan at the cross? Was God playing "the ultimate April Fools'-style prank," on Satan?[1] As a common Easter sermon riff puts it, Satan thought he had Christ defeated on Friday, "but Sunday's comin.'"[2] The classic image of the deception of Satan at the cross is found in Gregory of Nyssa's "fishhook" theory of the atonement. This image strikes many readers as very strange, even bizarre. Nicholas Constas assembles a litany of epithets against the fishhook theory: "childish and immoral," "perverted and repulsive," highly objectionable, disgusting and grotesque," "self-contradictory, inconclusive and inappropriate," "repellent," and "a crude and distasteful trick."[3] Oliver Crisp calls the image "lurid."[4]

In addition to the strangeness of the picture, is the further difficulty: does such a scheme implicate God, "who cannot lie" (Titus 1:2), in deception? The question of the *pia fraus,* ("pious fraud") has exercised theologians since the very beginning. This paper seeks to explore the idea of Christ's death as "bait and trap," with particular eye to the issue of the "divine deception" of Satan. It begins with detailed exploration of some early patristic depictions of this image, then offers some Biblical and theological critiques of some of the construals, before positing an account of in just what way the Devil was deceived, or rather, *blinded* to the work Christ was accomplishing on the cross.

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1 Wesley Hill, "Easter Fool's Day," Christianity Today, March 29, 2018.

2 See "It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming," for a classic example of this type of Easter sermon, https://tonyagnesi.com/2014/04/its-friday-but-sundays-coming/

3 Nicholas Constas, "The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative," Harvard Theological Review 97.2 (2004), 145–46.

4 Oliver D. Crisp, "Is Ransom Enough?," Journal of Analytic Theology 3.1 (2015), 5.

This paper does not set out to articulate or defend any one theory of the atonement. The writer assumes some variety of *Christus Victor* through penal substitution. The focus here is more narrowly to evaluate "bait and trap" images that have been used historically in versions of *Christus Victor* (or "ransom") theories of the atonement.

The Earliest Fathers: Irenaeus and Origen

Irenaeus (130–?)

One of the first to address the question of Christ's work was Irenaeus. It is instructive that Gustaf Aulén takes Irenaeus as his starting point, claiming that "of all the Fathers there is no one who is more thoroughly representative and typical, or who did more to fix the lines of Christian thought."[5]

Irenaeus barely hints at the ransom theory, and Aulén finds "only a trace in him of the theme of the Deception of the devil which became to some of the other Fathers a subject of engrossing interest."[6] Of concern to Irenaeus, though, is that in all of God's dealings with the devil, God acts justly:

> The Word of God did righteously turn against that apostasy and redeem from it His own property, not by violent means, as the apostasy and obtained dominion over us at the beginning, when it insatiably snatched away what was not its own, but by means of persuasion, as became a God of counsel, who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction.[7]

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[5] Gustaf Aulén, Christus Victor: *An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: S.P.C.K., 1983), 17.

[6] Aulén, 26. However, one searches in vain in both Aulén and in the citations from Irenaeus for evidence of these "traces." He makes the claim again on page 51.

[7] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), V.1.1.

God "did righteously turn against that apostasy"; or, in Aulén's translation: "God deals according to justice even with the apostasy itself"; God "observes 'the rules of fair play.'"[8] This concern for the justice of God even in redeeming sinners sets an important standard for theological discourse that other writers will be measured against.

Origen (184–253)

Origen is best known as the proponent of the "ransom theory" of the atonement. Origen himself does not delve very deeply into the details of this ransom, only to specify clearly that it is paid to Satan and not to God:

> "If then we have been bought at a price, as Paul also confirms, undoubtedly we were bought from someone, who's slaves we were, who also demanded the price he wanted so that he might relate from his authority those whom he was holding. Now it was the devil who was holding us, to whom we had been dragged off by our sins. Therefore he demanded the blood of Christ as the price for us."[9]

In Origen's commentary on Matthew, he briefly alludes to the fact of the Devil's deception: "For he had control over us, until the soul of Jesus was given to him as a ransom for our sakes. To him who quite clearly was deceived and imagined as though he was able to control Jesus' soul and who did not see that torture would not suffice to constrain it."[10] Origen, however, does not explore this "deception" at any length.

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[8] Aulén, 18.

[9]. Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, tr. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 2.13.

[10] Justin Gohl, "Origen's Commentary on Matthew, Book 16 -- An English Translation" (2017), 16.8.

Further Development: Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and others

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390)

Gregory of Nazianzus is notable here just for his insistence that any idea of ransom to the devil is simply "outrageous." He acknowledges that "We were detained in bondage by the Evil One, sold under sin, and receiving pleasure in exchange for wickedness." This would seem to lead to the conclusion that the ransom is paid to Satan, "since a ransom belongs only to him who holds in bondage." Nevertheless, when he asks explicitly, "to whom was this offered, and for what cause? If to the Evil One, fie upon the outrage!" Nazianzus also rejects the idea that the ransom is offered to God, and in the end does not answer the question. The question of "justice" in the redemption of men is cut out completely. As a robber, the devil has no just claim to us at all, thus no ransom (deceptive or otherwise) is needed.[11]

Gregory of Nyssa (335–394)

Gregory of Nyssa is the most famous of the proponents of the "fish hook theory" of the atonement. He offers one of the most extensive explanations of the image in his *Great Catechism*, and thus his account is worth some extended reflection.

In speaking about how man is ransomed from Satan, Gregory is concerned for God's justice. If we sold ourselves into slavery to Satan, then it would be unjust for God to simply overpower him using force and take us away. Gregory draws a comparison with slavery in his day: "If any one out of regard for the person who has so sold himself should use violence against him who has bought him, he will clearly be acting unjustly in thus arbitrarily rescuing one who has been legally purchased as a slave."[12] Gregory is clearly concerned to defend God against the

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[11] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 45.22 (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310245.htm).

[12] Gregory of Nyssa *The Great Catechism* in *NPNF* vol. 5, ed. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (Oxford: Parker and Company, 1893) §22.

charge of "acting unjustly," and is not satisfied with a version of *Christus Victor* in which Christ conquers by mere brute force.

He goes on to explain why the devil would even consider exchanging his current slaves for Christ. He opens §23 by asking: "What, then, was it likely that the master of the slave would choose to receive in his stead?" He thinks it is possible to "make a guess as to his wishes in the matter" and postulates that only if he could exchange it for something "higher and better in the way of ransom, and thus, by receiving a gain in the exchange, he might foster the more of his own special passion of pride." Now Jesus, born of a virgin, without sickness or sin, having great power over storms and even demons, performing miracles, *he* would be a valuable prize. "The Enemy, therefore, beholding in Him such power, saw also in Him an opportunity for an advance, in the exchange, upon the value of what he held." But since the devil could not look upon unclothed deity, God had to come on terms he could accept: "Therefore it was that the Deity was invested with the flesh, in order, that is, to secure that he, by looking upon something congenial and kindred to himself, might have no fears in approaching that supereminent power."

Next, in §24 comes the famous image:

> For since, as has been said before, it was not in the nature of the opposing power to come in contact with the undiluted presence of God, and to undergo His unclouded manifestation, therefore, in order to secure that the ransom in our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might vanish; for it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active.

The devil is the "ravenous fish"; the human nature is the bait, the deity is the hook. Once Jesus was swallowed down into the realm of darkness and death, his divinity became unveiled and light and life streamed forth. At this point it was not possible for any to be left in darkness or death, since light and life were now shining.

Gregory, though, is still concerned that having performed this act of "baiting the hook" makes God a deceiver and unjust. He turns in §26 to a defense of God on this count by means of an analogy. Deception is like a poison or drug. The same substance can be used either to murder or as a medicine, depending on the dose and intent: "For although a mixture of poison with the food may be effected by both of these persons alike, yet looking at their intention we are indignant with the one and approve the other." God intends the good of humanity, and also the good of the devil himself: "he who is at once the just and good and wise one used His device, in which there was deception, for the salvation of him who had perished, and thus not only conferred benefit on the lost one, but on him, too, who had wrought our ruin." The devil himself agrees that this is just: "Therefore even the adversary himself will not be likely to dispute that what took place was both just and salutary."

This conclusion is crucial. For Gregory of Nyssa, the way to escape the charge of an unjust deception on the part of God is by means of a total universalism with even the devil himself redeemed: "He accomplished all the results before mentioned, freeing both man from evil, and healing even the introducer of evil himself." How could the devil complain if the trick ends up saving him from torment?[13]

Patristic Exegesis

The image of a fishhook does seem "lurid" to modern ears. Where did Gregory and others come up with such bizarre imagery for the cross? David Scott-McNabb dismisses "Gregory of Nyssa's

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[13] Perhaps here is the place to note that *pace* Benjamin Myers, I'm not convinced that for Gregory "the real problem is not Satan but death" (p. 79). I don't recognize that account in Gregory, at least not in §22–26 where Gregory labors the point of Christ's righteous ransom of sinners from Satan. Satan is the main character in these sections needing an apologetic for his deceit, death is the secondary character. I would not go so far as to call Myers reading an "extravagant misunderstanding" (as he does Aulén, see p. 77), but nevertheless I find it less than illuminating. Benjamin Myers, "The Patristic Atonement Model," in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Zondervan Academic, 2015): .

non-scriptural trope" of a fish and a hook.[14] However it is actually not *quite* so strange, and not

unscriptural at all once you enter the world of patristic exegesis. The image of a worm on a hook

catching a big fish is not dreamed up from nowhere, it comes from some specific texts. Nicholas

Constas helps us here: "this seemingly peculiar metaphor was not invented *ex nihilo* and

subsequently imposed upon Scripture. Rather, it derived from a theologically consistent

conflation of several biblical passages, including Job 40–41, Psalm 104:26 (LXX 103:26); and

Isaiah 27:1, all of which are concerned with mocking the cosmic dragon and dragging him up

from the depths of the sea on a fishhook."[15] Here are the texts:

> Job 41:1: "Can you draw out Leviathan with a hook, or snare his tongue with a line which
> you lower? Can you put a reed through his nose, or pierce his jaw with a hook?"

> Psalm 104:26: "There the ships sail about; there is that Leviathan which you have made to
> play there."

> Isaiah 27:1: "In that day YHWH with His severe sword, great and strong, will punish
> Leviathan the fleeing serpent. Leviathan that twisted serpent, and he will slay the reptile
> that is in the sea."

In a particularly grotesque twist, they even added Psalm 22:6 into the mix: "But I am a worm, and

no man." John Chrystostom (349–407) explicitly puts these texts together in his sermon on

Matthew 26:39 ("Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me,"): "I clothed the hook of my

deity with the worm of my body… it says "I am a worm and not a man" [Psalm 22:6]… and that it

might be fulfilled what is written in Job "Now will you catch the dragon with a hook? [Job 41:1]"[16]

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[14] David Scott-Macnab, "Augustine's Trope of the Crucifixion as a Trap for the Devil and Its Survival in the English Middle Ages," Viator 46.3 (2015), 12.

[15] Constas, 147.

[16]"Ἐὰν μὴ ὁ ἁλιεὺς, ὅτε χαλάσει τὸ ἄγκιστρον εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, ποτὲ μὲν ενοψ τω ἀγχίστρω. ποτὲ δὲ ὡς φεύγοντα δείξῃ τὸν σκώληχα, τῃ χειρὶ ὑφέλκων, οἱ ἰχθύες οὐκ ἐφάλλονται. Περίέθηχα τω ἀγκίστρω μου της θεότητας τον σκώληχα του σώματος. ἐχάλασα τὸ ἄγκιστρον κεκρυμμένον εν τω σκώληκι του σώματος εἰς τον βυθόν του βίου τούτου. ἐὰν μη ὁ σχώληξ ὡς σχώληξ κινηθῃ. ο ὀφειλών Αγκιστρευθῆναι οὐκ ἐπέρχεται τω αγκίστρω. Δει με τοίνυν ὡς σχώληχα σχηαατίσασθαι., και λαλήσαι. Εγω γαρ ειμι σκώληξ, και ουκ ἄνθρωπος. ἵν' ἐκεινος επιδραμη χαι ἀψηται τω ἀγκίστρω, και ἑλκυσθῆ ὑπ' εμού, και πληρωθη το γεγραμμένον εν τω Ἰώβ· Αξεις δε δράκοντα ἐν ἀγχίστρω. Γίνομαι ως Ανθρωπος δαλιών, γίνομαι ως φεύγων τον θάνατον ειπο, Περίλυπος εστίν ψυχή μου ως Θάνατον." John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, Patrologiae Graeca 61 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1859), 753–54.

In addition to these texts, Constas reminds us of "the figure of Jonah swallowed by the whale and regurgitated intact, invoked by Christ as a foreshadowing of his own death and resurrection (Matt 12:39–40)."[17]

Athanasius (296–373) makes reference to the the fishhook image in his *Life of Saint Anthony* tying it explicitly to Job 41. In a passage describing the way that demons appear in order to frighten humans, he turns to the devil himself. "And though speaking words so many and so great in his boldness, without doubt, like a dragon he was drawn with a hook by the Saviour (Job 41:1), and as a beast of burden he received the halter round his nostrils, and as a runaway his nostrils were bound with a ring, and his lips bored with an armlet."[18] Therefore, human beings, especially saints like Anthony, have nothing to fear and can resist them through fasting and prayer.

Returning to Gregory of Nyssa, in his work *On the Three-Day Period between the Death and Resurrection of Christ,* the Cappadocian explicitly anchors his famous fishhook in a figural exegesis of Job 41:1:

> Omnipotent Wisdom, coming down into the heart of the earth, was able to make utterly foolish that great Mind which dwells in it, turning his counsel to folly, and catching the wise one in his cunning and turning back upon him his clever devises. For this reason, having swallowed the bait fo the flesh, he was pierced with the fishhook of deity, and so the dragon was caught with the fishhook, just as it is said in the book of Job "You shall catch the dragon with a fishhook" (Job 40:25 LXX).[19]

Far from bizarre, the fishhook theory is just what you would expect if you apply Christ-focused allegorical exegesis to this collection of texts, a move that is, in general, explicitly warranted by the prophets (Isaiah 27) and by Christ himself (Jonah, Psalm 22).

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[17] Constas, 148.

[18] Athanasius, *Life of Saint Anthony*, 24.4–5 (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2811.htm)

[19] Cited in Constas, 144.

Cultural and Theological Context

Further light is shed on the motivation for developing this image when we consider some cultural and theological context. Constas explains that "the fourth century was a time of crisis for the Christian community, which struggled to legitimize itself within a cultural system that had long derided its faith in a crucified God."[20] The cross looked very weak, so preachers sought to find ways to justify this weakness. In one sermon, attributed to Athanasius, Christ is compared to a "noble wrestler who, when seeing his opponent about to take flight, feigns weakness in order to lure him back to the ring."[21] He uses the illustration of the Greek god Odysseus, "the archetypical trickster," pretending to be an old man in order to trick a young man into a wrestling match.[22] Thus Christ's agony in the garden works as a trick on the devil, "as the spectacle of Christ's emotional weakness is in fact at grand theater of diversion."[23]

In addition to the general attitude of humanity which hates weakness, there was a specific fourth century thread: "Christian thinkers had to confront the challenge of Arianism, a culturally sanctioned religious attitude that refused to identify the suffering person of Christ with the transcendent god of the philosophers."[24] Arians loved to point to the Garden of Gethsemane for proof that Jesus could not be God. How could God suffer and weep and cry at the prospect of death? Even Greek philosophers faced death more calmly than he. Fishhook theologians had an answer: it was a ruse to bait the devil. A sermon by Pseudo-Chrystostom makes this explicit:

> Many, failing to grasp the aim of wisdom, and overlooking the treasure hidden within the literal meaning, ascribe fear and cowardice to Christ [i.e., in the garden of Gethsemane] . . . but let not Eunomius, that giant of blasphemy, be exalted, for the heretics at tack us saying: 'Do you see his fear and cowardice? Do you see how he prays to the Father?' And with this, Eunomius rejoices, and Arius is filled with glee . . . but it was not as you suppose, O Arius, for those words were but bait for the devil, and like a wise

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[20] Constas, 141–42.

[21] Constas, 151.

[22] Constas, 151–52.

[23] Constas, 152.

[24] Constas, 142.

fisherman he says: 'I baited him with cowardice.' For if a fisherman, having cast his hook into the sea, does not let it out, and then reel it in, making the worm appear to retreat, the fish will not be attracted to it, and thus I concealed the fishhook of my divinity with the worm of my body, casting both into the sea of the world.[25]

In answer to the Arians charge of cowardice and weakness in Jesus, the fishhook theologians answered that he only *appeared* weak in order to bait the devil. It was all just the master strategy of a world-champion fisherman.

One could trace this image further out to Gregory the Great (540–604) and his exposition of Job,[26] or in John of Damascus (676–749) *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith.*[27] The image even makes it into the liturgy of the Orthodox Church, which reads: "With divinely-wise bait thou didst hook the author of evil, the dragon of the deep, binding him in Tartarus with bonds of darkness."[28]

The Fishhook Examined

As is usually the case, the early church fathers are a mix of profound and brilliant insight and profound and brilliant error. One appreciates deeply the concern, beginning with Irenaeus, that in all of God's dealings, even with the devil, he must be *just:*

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[25] Cited in Constas, 160–61.

[26] "Our Lord therefore, when coming for the redemption of mankind, made, as it were, a kind of hook of Himself for the death of the devil; for He assumed a body, in order that this Behemoth might seek therein the death of the flesh, as if it were his bait… And this Behemoth knew indeed the Incarnate Son of God, but knew not the plan of our redemption. For he knew that the Son of God had been incarnate for our redemption, but he was quite ignorant that this our Redeemer was piercing him by His own death. Whence it is well said, In his eyes He will take him as with a hook." Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 33.14 (PL 76), 680–81.

[27] "His justice in that when man was overcome He did not make another victorious over the tyrant, nor did He snatch man by might from death, but in His goodness and justice He made him, who had become through his sins the slave of death, himself once more conqueror and rescued like by like, most difficult though it seemed." John of Damascus*, Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 3.1

[28] Cited in Constas, 146.

> "He is the Rock, His work is perfect;
> For all His ways are justice,
> A God of truth and without injustice;
> Righteous and upright is He" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

They are right also that sinners are in "the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will" (2 Tim 2:26), that Christ's death is indeed "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), and that "having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (Col 2:15).

Even further, they are right to note that in some sense, the powers acted out of ignorance. Paul is clear that there was a "hidden wisdom" in the cross "which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:7,8). Even further still, the image of Leviathan as a figure of that great dragon, Satan, seemed totally warranted by the biblical-theological flow of OT texts from Job to Isaiah to Revelation. No less than Dr. Andrew David Naselli affirms this interpretation of Leviathan in Job 41. Some, he notes, "identify Leviathan with Satan, a serpent and dragon who embodies evil and whom God will crush (Gen 3; Rom 16:20; Rev 12:9; 20:2–3, 7–10)… The evidence for larger cosmic realities is too strong to dismiss."[29] There is much to affirm in the patristic account so far!

Nevertheless, the issue of "divine deception" is a serious charge, and it does appear to be too "outrageous" a hook to swallow. Anselm was one of the first to voice this objection, and the objection still stands: "Truth deceives not any one."[30] John Stott says it simply: "To attribute fraudulent action to God is unworthy of him."[31] If it is indeed true that God "cannot lie" (Titus 1:2) then it becomes hard to understand just how he could be involved in a willful deception, even of the devil. Irenaeus is right: God must deal justly even with the apostasy itself, by the rules of fair play, and to deceive the devil is hardly just. If you abandon Gregory of Nyssa's total

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[29] Naselli, Andrew David, *From Typology to Doxology: Paul's Use of Isaiah and Job in Romans 11:34-35* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 83.

[30] Anselm, *St. Anselm's Book of Meditations and Prayers* (London: Burns and Oates, 1872), 138.

[31] John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 115.

universalism, then his fishhook account lacks any justification for what he himself acknowledges would be unjust otherwise.

A further critique cuts against the motivation that lies behind the detailed elaboration of the fishhook, namely, the desire to explain away the shame of the cross or of Christ's anguish in the garden. These accounts which explain away his agony and weakness as merely a ruse and a tactic in order to trick the devil more than sniff of Docetism—one fears they contain a full dose. The writer of Hebrews, by contrast, gives great weight to Christ's genuine humanity: "we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weakneses, ut was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15); He "offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things he suffered" (Heb 5:8). Rather than an embarrassment to be explained away, the author of Hebrews draws on these moments of genuine weakness and suffering to give us hope and comfort: to "come boldly to the throne of grace" (Heb 4:16), having considered his endurance through suffering to "not become weary and discouraged in your souls" (Heb 12:3). Some of these fishhook theologians unfortunately gut the sufferings of Christ of any genuine weakness and suffering, and thus strip us of comfort and sympathy when we ourselves are enduring suffering.

An Alternative: Augustine (354–430)

Is there another way to account for what is good in the patristic accounts while avoiding some of their dangerous and heretical admixtures? There is, and no surprise, it's found in Augustine.

Augustine uses the phrase *muscipula diaboli* in several sermons beginning in 396 and continuing decades later.[32] The etymology of the word in Latin breaks down in two parts: *"mus*

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[32] David Scott-Macnab, "Augustine's Trope of the Crucifixion as a Trap for the Devil and Its Survival in the English Middle Ages," Viator 46.3 (2015), 2.

'mouse'+ *capio* 'catch', hence 'mousetrap.'"[33] Most writers, like Crisp, find the image of a mousetrap to be simply a variation on the bait and hook image, and just as bizarre.[34] Stott treats Augustine alongside Gregory of Nyssa with no distinction between the fishhook and the mousetrap and dismisses them both summarily.[35] Constas says that Augustine gives us "a variation on this [fishhook] theme in the form of a mousetrap baited with Christ's blood."[36] How is this an advance on the grotesque fishhook?

First, we need to dig deeper in to that etymology. David Scott-Macnabb has shown convincingly that the term *muscipula* is better translated simply "trap" and not "mousetrap," in spite of the prefix. He shows that the Old Latin used the term to translate παγις or simply "snare," and that Augustine himself uses the term for "the traps of hunters and fowlers," i.e., game and birds, not mice at all.[37] Though the idea of the "devil's mousetrap" took on a life of its own in medieval art and literature,[38] and was repeated in the highly influential *Sentences* by Lombard,[39] for Augustine, it should simply be understood as "a trap."

Before examining the four sermons in which Augustine uses the image of the *muscipula*, it is important to review his own concern for the justice of God in the redemption of mankind, which he articulates in *The Trinity*. Interestingly, Augustine is an early proponent of a combined *Christus Victor* and penal substation account of the atonement: "By his death he offered for us the one truest possible sacrifice, and thereby purged, abolished, and destroyed whatever there was of

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[33] David Scott-Macnab, "St Augustine and the Devil's 'Mousetrap,'" Vigiliae Christianae 68.4 (2014), 411.

[34] Crisp, 5.

[35] Stott, 114–15.

[36] Constas, 146–47.

[37] Scott-Macnab, "Augustine's Trope," 5.

[38] See for example Meyer Schapiro, "'Muscipula Diaboli,' The Symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece," The Art Bulletin 27.3 (1945): 182–87; Charles Ilsley Minott, "The Theme of the Mérode Altarpiece," *The Art Bulletin* 51.3 (1969): 267–71; James W. Marchand, "Leviathan and the Mousetrap in the Niðrstigningarsaga," Scandinavian Studies 47.3 (1975): 328–38; Kathleen M. Ashley, "The Guiler Beguiled: Christ and Satan as Theological Tricksters in Medieval Religious Literature," *Criticism* 24.2 (1982): 126–37;

[39] Scott-Macnab, "Augustine's Trope," 17.

guilt, for which the principalities and powers had a right to hold us bound to payment of the penalty."[40]

Later, in Book XIII, Augustine explores the inner justice of the whole arrangement. Our captivity to Satan was just: "By a kind of divine justice the human race was handed over to the power of the devil for the sin of the first man." Yet, God was not directly involved here, but by permission: "As for the way in which man was handed over into the devil's power, this should not be thought of as though God actually did it or ordered it to be done, but merely that he permitted it, albeit justly. When he withdrew from the sinner, the author of sin marched in." Here Augustine brings out a point that one does not see in the other accounts: man remains under the control of God, and even the devil is under God's control. "Nor did he lose man from the jurisdiction of his own law when he let him be under the devil's jurisdiction, because not even the devil is cut off from the jurisdiction of the Almighty."[41] This reminder immediately relativizes any language about warfare between God and the devil. Anything the devil does he does at the permission of God, and once again we are reminded of Job.

Next Augustine makes a crucial contribution to atonement doctrine, one similar to Irenaeus "fair play." He insists that "the devil would have to be overcome not by God's power but by his justice." The devil fell because he abandoned justice and pursued his own power, and men followed him there, seeking power (to be like God) but abandoning their proper place as creatures (injustice). "So it pleased God to deliver man from the devil's authority by beating him at the justice game, not the power game, so that men too might imitate Christ by seeking to beat the devil at the justice game, not the power game."

Augustine elaborates on just how this works.

"What then is the justice that overpowered the devil? The justice of Jesus Christ—what else? And how was he overpowered? He found nothing in him deserving of death and yet he killed him. It is therefore perfectly just that he should let the debtors he held go free,

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[40] Augustine, *The Trinity,* ed. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 4.13.17.

[41] Augustine, *The Trinity*, 13.12.16.

who believe in the one whom he killed without his being in his debt. This is how we are said to be justified in the blood of Christ.

Christ could have overpowered the devil, and one day in the future he will, "but he postponed what he had the power to do, in order to do first what he had to do." Here the incarnation is necessary: "this is why he needed to be both God and man." If he weren't man, he couldn't die, but if he were not God we wouldn't have seen that he preferred justice over power, "but simply that he lacked power." The whole passage is deeply instructive, but the payoff is this: "we are delivered from the devils jurisdiction through the remission of sins; this is a matter of the devil's being overcome by Christ with justice, not with power."[42]

Augustine goes even deeper. The devil lost his claim on sinners when he overextended himself to kill the innocent Christ. This is how "the devil was overcome when he thought he himself was overcoming, that is when Christ was killed… This was the justice that overcame the strong man."[43] Augustine makes explicit the mechanism for how this works: union with Christ:

> "the devil was holding on to our sins, and using them to keep us deservedly fixed in death. He who had none of his own discharged them, and was undeservedly led away by the other to death. Such was the value of that blood that he who killed Christ even with a momentary death he did not owe would no longer have the right to hold anyone who had put on Christ in an eternal death he did owe.[44]

For "anyone who had put on Christ" his death is their death, and since Satan has no claim on Him, he no longer has any claim on us.

It is within this matrix of developed atonement doctrine that we must interpret Augustine's image of "the trap" in four sermons (Sermon 130, 134, 263, 265D). In these sermons, Augustine calls the cross "a trap" and the bait varies between Christ's mortal flesh or simply his blood. The image plays on a background irony using the word "trap," because this word is more

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[42] Augustine, *The Trinity*, 13.13.17.

[43] Augustine, *The Trinity*, 13.15.19.

[44] Augustine, *The Trinity*, 13.16.21.

commonly used to describe how the devil has "trapped" those who are in sin. Scott-Macnab claims that "these sermons assert a familiarity with that idea for their full effect to be apparent."[45] Indeed, "the trap that the devil has hitherto wielded has become the trap into which he has fallen."[46]

Sermon 263 is the earliest, and perhaps "the most ambitious and sophisticated in its exposition of the crucifixion as a trap for the Devil."[47] Augustine puts it concisely: "The devil was defeated by his own victorious achievement…. by killing the last man, he lost the first from his snare."[48] In the next section he brings in the image of the trap:

> The devil was exultant when Christ died, and by that very death of Christ was the devil conquered; it's as though he took the bait in a trap. He was delighted at the death, as being the commander of death; what he delighted in, that's where the trap was set for him. The trap for the devil was the cross of the Lord; the bait he would be caught by, the death of the Lord.[49]

The death of the Lord is the bait, and the reason this works involves nothing about a deception on the part of God, but simply the fact that the devil is "the commander of death," and that he "delights in it."

Sermon 265D expands on this character flaw in the devil: "The devil was greedy for death, the devil was a hoarder of death. The cross of Christ was the trap; the death of Christ, or rather the mortal flesh of Christ, was like the bait in the trap. He came, he swallowed it, and was caught."[50] The devil loves death so much, that he just can't help himself when given the chance to kill Christ. As Jesus himself tells us in John, he "was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44).

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[45] Scott-Macnab, "Augustine's Trope," 4.

[46] Scott-Macnab, "St. Augustine and the Devil's Mousetrap," 414.

[47] Scott-Macnab, "Augustine's Trope," 8.

[48] Augustine, Sermon 263.1, in *Sermons (230–272B): Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons,* tr. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1993).

[49] Augustine, Sermon 263.2. In using Edmund Hill's translation, I have replaced his use of "mousetrap" with "trap" following Scott-Macnab.

[50] Augustine, Sermon 265D.5.

Scott-Macnab notes that it is this reason, "his uncontrolled desire to wield power through death… that can be understood as contributing directly to his downfall."[51] No injustice in God causes this, simply the unjust abuse of power by the devil.

Sermon 134 gives us an analogy similar to Origen's, that of someone redeeming a slave. Even if someone were to buy a man out of slavery they wouldn't be truly free because "perhaps they are both slaves together under that mistress, iniquity."[52] In this sermon Augustine speaks directly to the devil as he considers the cross:

> The prince of this age found flesh in him, he did find that; and what sort fo flesh? Mortal flesh, which he could get his claws on, which he could crucify, which he could slay. You're making a mistake deceiver, the Redeemer hasn't got it wrong; you're making a mistake.You see in the Lord mortal flesh; it is not the flesh of sin, it is the likeness of the flesh of sin.[53]

He addresses the devil as in a courtroom or maybe a marketplace, demanding that he give up his captives. Here there is no apology for an injustice or deceit on the part of God, but an argument that the devil *must* give them up:

> You deceived the guiltless [Adam] and made them guilty; you slew the guiltless one, did away with one you had no right to; surrender what you were holding in you grip. So why at that hour did you clap and rub your hands with glee, Just because you find own Christ mortal flesh? It was your bait; what you were so glad about is what you were caught with.[54]

In the fourth sermon (130), Augustine weaves multiple strands together again, the strands of justice, of the bonds of sin, and of the trap set for the devil. Here is the internal logic of justice:

> Along came our redeemer, and conquered the deceiver. And what did our redeemer do to our captor? To pay our price, he set the mousetrap of his cross; as bait he placed there his own blood… because he shed the blood of one who was not a debtor, he was ordered to

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[51] Scott-Macnab, "Augustine's Trope," 10.

[52] Augustine, Sermon 134.3, in *Sermons (94A-147a): On the New Testament,* tr. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1992).

[53] Augustine, Sermon 134.5.

[54] Augustine, Sermon 134.6.

release those who were his debtors; he shed the blood of the innocent one, he was required to withdraw from those who are by no means innocent.[55]

The way Jesus binds and defeats the strong man is by dealing with sin:

After all, the only thing he held us by was the bonds of our sins. These were the chains of our captivity. The other one came along, bound the strong man with the bonds of his passion, entered his house, and that is to say he hearts of those in whom he used to live, and plundered his valuable vessels.[56]

One finds in Augustine the best of the patristic accounts of the atonement, without the unnecessary baggage. God is assiduously just in all his dealings, and never once is said to deceive anyone. Rather the devil's on injustice is what drives him to kill Christ, and God has simply baited an irresistible trap with the mortality of the fully human Jesus. The logic of exactly how this works redemption is worked out: Satan's overreach forfeits his own claims; those who are united to Christ share in his own freedom and victory over death and the devil; the chains of our bondage was sin, and the sacrifice of Christ broke those chains for us. Far from any "lurid" or "grotesque" imagery of a so-called "mousetrap" we have in Augustine's "trap" a poetic reversal of the devil's trap for sinners through his murderous and unjust character. This is a doctrine of atonement with very few holes, indeed, almost none that this writer can find.

<div align="center">Fleshing Out the Account</div>

Are there key weaknesses in this account of the atonement? Perhaps. I am not full convinced that the devil rushed madly into the death of Christ as if he couldn't help himself. I think there is a deeper blindness going on here in his role as the "Accuser." The devil has always been this way. Even the the garden, the devil did not appear as a dragon seeking to kill Adam and Eve, but as a serpent, getting them to "kill themselves" by putting them in the path of God's judgment and

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[55] Augustine, Sermon 130.2.

[56] Ibid.

wrath. In the conflict between Satan and Jesus, I think there is more than just a bare "desire to kill Jesus." There were multiple attempts to kill him, and they all failed: Jesus escaped with his family to Egypt; when the synagogue members tried to throw him off a hill, he slipped away; every confrontation with demons resulted in their fleeing before him obediently, and crying out that "you are the Son of God!" Satan knows that, like with Job, he has no power of Jesus unless granted to him by God. Further, Satan knows of the power of resurrection. He had seen resurrections in the Old Testament (Elisha and the woman's son) and has seen the greater Elisha at work in Jesus: raising the widow's son, raising Lazarus. He had to know that if he got Jesus killed, God could easily raise him again from the dead.

No, Satan's greatest accomplishment would be not simply to kill Jesus any way he can, but to unite God's people against God's Son and force God to choose between them. He does this by rallying the priests, the leaders, the scribes, and even Jesus's own disciples against him. He is hoping to provoke a confrontation similar to that in the parable of the wicked vinedressers (Mark 12). When they kill the owner's son, what is the result? "Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9). If Satan can accomplish the death of the Son of God *at the hands of the people of God* he has forced God into an impossible dilemma: either the Word of God and his promises to his people will be to no effect (Rom 9:6) as he casts away his people (Rom 11:1), or God denies himself and dishonors his own son by leaving his death unpunished. Dallas Willard sees this same strategy: "With humanity under his direction, Satan used people to torture Jesus. His goal was either to see Jesus die in the beating or to provoke Jesus into asserting his miraculous powers against those who were harming him. In either case, Jesus' progression toward the cross, and the radical act of redemption in world history, would be prevented, and Satan would continue his rule."[57]

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[57] Willard, Dallas. *Life Without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 85.

It is this that Satan is seeking to accomplish: the ultimate sin of God's people that will result in their complete and final abandonment by a holy God. And it is precisely here that Satan is deceived, or rather *blinded* to the deeper justice of God's redemptive work. Greg Boyd captures this perfectly:

> The principalities and powers that presently rule the world recognized who Jesus was but could not fathom why the Son of God had entered their domain, for they could not discern the wisdom of God, as Paul says. The wisdom of God centered on Jesus dying out of love for the race that Satan and the powers had held captive for ages, and these powers, being evil, apparently lack the capacity to imagine action that is motivated but this kind of self-sacrificial love.

Boyd makes the explicit comparison to patristic atonement imagery:

> God did, in a sense, deceive Satan and the powers, and Jesus was, in a sense "bait." But there was nothing duplicitous or unjust in God's behavior. To the contrary, God was simply acting in an outrageously loving way, knowing all the while that his actions could not be understood by the powers whose evil blinds them to love. Like an infinitely wise military strategist, God know how to get his enemies to use their self-inflicted blindness against themselves and thus use their self-chosen evil to his advantage. He wisely let evil implode in on itself, as it were, and thereby freed creation and humanity from evil's oppression.[58]

The core aspect of that Christ accomplished at the cross, the hidden wisdom which if he had seen it, he would never have killed the Lord of glory, is the element found in Augustine and elaborated by Boyd here: that the holy Son of God would so *unite Himself* to sinners out of unfathomable love for them, that rather than his death provoking their death at the hands of an angry God, his death *is* their death, and once accomplished, death, sin, and the devil, rather than having a strong a claim on them as ever before, now have *no claim whatsoever.* The very thing that Satan thought would be the final crime on a long and bloody rap sheet sentencing the criminal to eternity in prison without parole, instead is itself the undoing of the entire sentence. *This* is what Satan failed

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[58] Gregory A. Boyd, "Christus Victor View" in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 37. Ben Pugh endorses this aspect of Boyd's project: "In a nuanced way, he [Boyd] is even able to support from Scripture the patristic notions of God deceiving the devil and he successfully retrieves the notion from its notorious crudity." Ben Pugh, "'Kicking the Daylights out of the Devil': The Victory Motif in Some Recent Atonement Theology," European Journal of Theology 23.1 (2014), 37.

to comprehend, and what millions today still do, blinded by him lest they see the the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

Doctrinal Display

If I could sum up the lesson for the church in one single exhortation, it would be this: do not be ashamed of the suffering and weakness seen at the cross. J. Patout Burns draws the connection between Augustine's account of power and justice and the way Christians should live in the world: "Christ achieved his victory by righteousness rather than power, so that his disciples could imitate and participate in his action by divine assistance."[59] The way that Christ overcomes evil is not by overpowering it, even using unjust means if necessary, but rather by enduring evil done against him as a way of overcoming evil. This is what Christ's followers are now called to do, not to pursue power but justice; not to seek to overcome evil with evil, but with good; not to fight with weapons of the flesh, but of the Spirit; to follow the way of Christ's cross, laying down our "rights" and our very lives if necessary in order to overcome evil *justly*.

Greg Boyd gets the last word:

> The divine wisdom of self-sacrificial love is of course foolishness to the world, as Paul freely acknowledges (1 Cor 1:18). The way of the world—for it is the way of the powers that dominate the world—is the way of the sword not the cross. Indeed, nothing seems more absurd in our present age than following Christ's example—loving your enemies, refusing to retaliate when another does you wrong or serving those who persecute you. This perhaps explains why Calvary-like attitudes and behaviors are rarely seen, even among those who profess faith in Christ. Yet, according to Paul, a central part of the church's mission is to proclaim that it is the wya of self-sacrificial love, not he way of violent force. that in principle defeated the powers and that will ultimately win the day. As disciples of Jesus mimic Jesus' Calvary-like life (Eph 5:1–2), we remind the powers of their defeat on Calvary and manifest once again eh foolish-looking secret wisdom of God that is in the process of freeing the world from the death grip of the violent powers.[60]

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[59] J. Patout Burns, "How Christ Saves: Augustine's Multiple Explanations," in *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Church*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, Alexander Y. Hwang, and Ronnie J. Rombs (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 205.

[60] Boyd, 38.

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