The brokenness of Christology

Sarah Coakley explores ruptures on the cross, in the Eucharist, in Spirit-filled people, and between Judaism and the church.

by Lauren F. Winner
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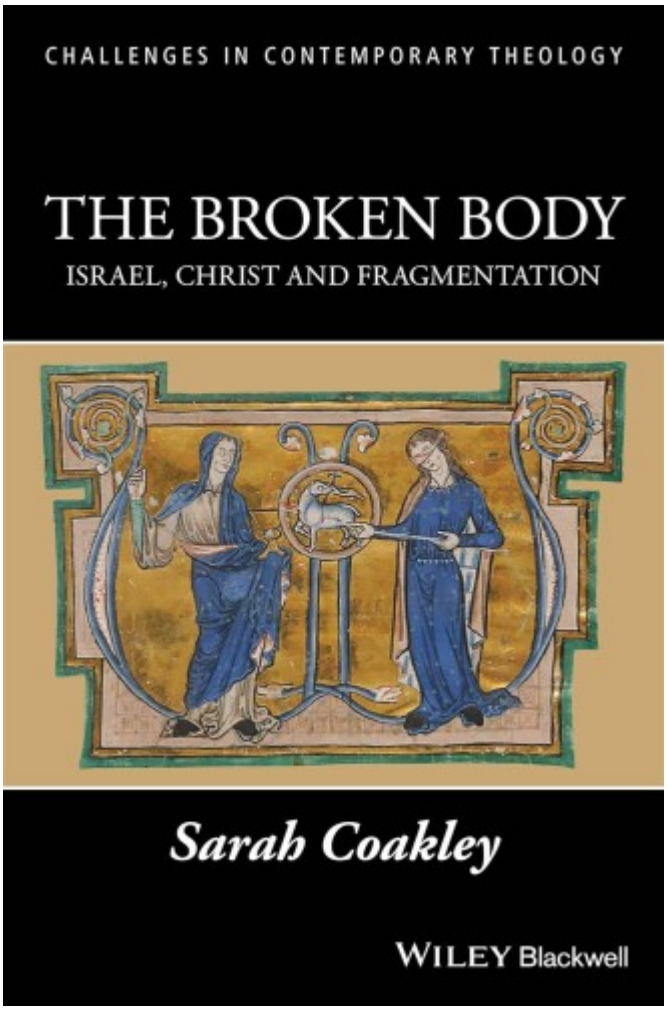
In Review



The Broken Body

Israel, Christ and Fragmentation

By Sarah Coakley
Wiley Blackwell
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Sarah Coakley's characteristically layered and learned inquiry into Christology uses brokenness as the central thread to stitch together accounts of often disparate doctrinal inquiries: the cross, liturgy, and asceticism. The brokenness of Jesus' body on the cross moves to and through the fraction of the bread in the Eucharist. Underneath that dyad is Coakley's abiding interest in the apophatic. Christians need to be broken open by the Spirit, our presumptions and feints displaced, so that we might receive and encounter the Lord who was broken for us. And though Coakley is herself writing theology, she cautions at every turn that any attempt to systematize and say all this would overwrite brokenness with a completion that is only available eschatologically.

Three ruptures, then—on the cross, in the liturgy, and in us through the Spirit. To these, Coakley adds a fourth rupture: that between Judaism and the church. Judaism and Christianity have been broken apart from each other, but Christians must hope for their "ultimate eschatological re-convergence." In dilations of themes common to Judaism and Christianity, Coakley finds "an extraordinary hidden nexus of ongoing shared theological insight, arguably the harbinger of a deeper unity that is still being worked out through and between the two traditions."

For example, prayer. Long attentive to Romans 8, Coakley here observes that Paul's "proto-trinitarian" explication of prayer and divine action "immediately precedes Paul's excursus on Jewish/Christian relations in Romans 9–11" and that the internal order of Romans is "significant." This is a simple but startling and productive observation. In a rich archive of rabbinic sources, Coakley finds resonances with Romans 8, including a wonderful passage in the Talmud in which the rabbis pursue the "(ostensibly odd) question of whether God prays to Himself." Coakley argues that there is, perhaps, a "triadic" impulse in Jewish prayer, and the sympathies between Romans 8 and various rabbinic texts suggests to Coakley a new avenue into—or new evidence for—"the indissoluble relatedness of Judaism and Christianity in this fundamental arena of worship."

Coakley also finds convergence between premodern Jewish and Christian interpretations of the binding of Isaac. With John of the Cross and Rav Kook as

reading companions, she spells out a notion of sacrifice—not the "patriarchal sacrifices of violence" but a "subtler" sacrifice that sorts one's desires and purges one's idolatries—that returns her to the Eucharist. In the sacrament, the church is given "the gift of Christ's body. . . by a desiring God who longs for our desiring, participatory response." Pursuing an account of the Eucharist that holds together sacrifice and gift, Coakley investigates, among other things, wealth and poverty: the wealthy are given Christ by "the down-trodden and despised," who thereby "complete the trinitarian logic of 'gift,' 'sacrifice' and 'presence' started at the incarnation, [and] re-instantiated every time bread and wine are shared." In the Eucharist, finally, we receive a transformative gift, and proper reception of that gift—reception that is accompanied and enabled by the Spirit's breaking open the heart of the recipient—is "*while sin still reigns in the order of the 'world' . . . inevitably* 'sacrificial.'"

Coakley's fundamental contribution to a Christian theology of Judaism is not her discovery of intriguing overlaps between Jewish and Christian texts, for the rift between Judaism and Christianity is too entrenched to yield to even the most creative series of individual readings. Her fundamental contribution is the suggestion that the break between Judaism and Christianity is, for Christians, properly christological—and that a Christian theology of Israel must unfold christologically. That's so because the church's separation of Jesus from Israel promoted and made possible anti-Jewish violence; in turn, that violence further cleaves a confession of Jesus' lordship from the practices of the synagogue.

The motif of brokenness is appealing and frustrating for the same reason: it's so very multivalent. The Spirit does not break us as, say, butter added too quickly breaks a hollandaise, let alone as an executioner breaks a body on a wheel. When the Spirit breaks us open, it's like a storm breaking so that the rain may soak the earth. Or, when the Spirit breaks us open, we become like those hills and mountains in Isaiah, breaking open in song. By contrast, whenever the church's practices break Jesus apart from Judaism (and they very often do), we break nothing open. When we break Jesus apart from Judaism—when we do Christology apart from Israel, which arguably the church has done as far back as Nicaea—we both obscure the eschatological resolution Coakley wants to reveal and uproot Jesus from the only context that gives him any sense.

Since reading *The Broken Body*, I have been thinking a lot about tulips—specifically, those gorgeous streaky ones, the tulips whose petals alternate gashes of magenta

and cream or purple and yellow. They are, of course, called “broken tulips.” Maddeningly popular in the 17th century—they were a major factor in Dutch tulipomania—broken tulips were desirable not only because of their physical beauty but also because no one could figure out how to cultivate them. Not until the 1920s did Dorothy Cayley finally determine that a virus, spread by aphids, was the cause of the strangely patterned petals. Broken tulips were so rare in part because the virus tended to weaken the bulbs.

Coakley helps me consider the tulip as an eschatological symbol. Just as the broken tulip is more beautiful than it would have been without its virus, the healing that occurs through the Eucharist produces something more beautiful than whatever could have been the case had that which precipitated the Eucharist never happened. Coakley helps me consider that the tulip blossom is the cosmos, healed by Jesus on the cross and on the altar.

Then again, I wonder if, to God, the twin bodies of God’s elect communities look like a broken tulip: if the agent that broke us apart (the virus, the aphid, which, at least since late antiquity, has been largely the repeated violence of the church) has weakened our constitution, but if we too make something that otherwise could not have been, something flaming and gorgeous.

Many of Coakley’s characteristic interests shape *The Broken Body*—feminism, Romans 8, “the silence of contemplative prayer.” The urgency of eschatological hope, however, seems more pronounced here than in Coakley’s past.

What end is betokened by the tulip, whose beauty is inseparable from its vulnerability? An eschaton flourished with broken tulips still requires hope—or, better, an eschaton flourished with broken tulips is an eschaton in which hope has folded into love and into the confidence that God will preserve that which remains more fragile than it was before.