

Keith E. Durso
No Armor for the Back: Baptist Prison Writings, 1600s—1700s
(Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press/
Atlanta, Georgia: The Baptist History & Heritage Society, 2007), xii+292 pages.

This book deals with an idea that is once again coming to the fore in Baptist circles in the West: physical suffering for the sake of Christ. Of course, this is a biblical theme, even to the point of martyrdom being recognized as a gift of the Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 13:1–3). Consider, for example, Acts 14:19–22. After having survived an attempt on the part of certain Jews to kill him and so silence his preaching the gospel of a crucified and risen Lord, the Apostle Paul told the disciples in various congregations that he had planted in what is now Turkey that “we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” But a long stretch of time in which this type of experience was not part and parcel of the life of Baptist congregations (one has to go back to the days covered by this book) has dulled our memory and senses. Suffering for the sake of the gospel is all over the New Testament texts, but in days of peace, this element of Christian warfare had receded into the far recesses of our corporate memory. Not anymore though, as across our world militant Islam and Hinduism seek to curb the growth of the Church and in the West there are possible intimations that our freedoms may well be in for a rough ride in the days to come. In such a context, the themes and the figures covered in this book will be a very helpful guide to what it means to suffer for Christ.

All in all, this work is a very helpful study of the experiences and writings of Baptist forebears who were imprisoned and even beaten for the sake of their biblical convictions. Most of Durso’s examples come from the seventeenth century—those years from 1660 to 1688 in the British Isles when the Baptists and other Nonconformists knew what it meant to be the Church under the cross—but there are also two chapters dealing with Baptist suffering at the hands of the Puritan leaders in New England and Virginian Anglicans (pages 190–251). In fact, unlike our present situation, the vast majority of the persecutors of these early Baptists were professing Christians—which itself was a strong argument in favor of the Baptist perspective on religious liberty—but the lessons these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baptists can teach us have not diminished one whit.

Abraham Cheare (1626–88), for instance, who was the pastor of the Baptist work in Plymouth, was arrested, cruelly treated and imprisoned on Drake’s Island, a small island in Plymouth Sound in the early 1660s (see Durso’s treatment on pages 149–154 that focuses on Cheare’s poems written for children). Fearful that some of his flock might compromise their Baptist convictions to avoid persecution, he wrote a number of letters to his church during the course of this imprisonment, which was his second. In one of them he cites with approval a statement from the *Irenicum* (1646) of “holy Burroughs,” that is, the Puritan author Jeremiah Burroughs (c. 1599-1646). “I desire to be a faithful Minister of Christ and his Church, if I cannot be a Prudent one,” Cheare quotes from Burroughs’ “Epistle to the Reader,” “standing in the gap is more dangerous and troublsome [*sic*] than getting behind the hedge, there you may be more secure and under the wind; but it’s best to be there where God looks for a man.” (*Words in Season* [London,

1668], 250). Like the other prisoners of conscience Durso examines in this book, Cheare was more afraid of displeasing God than dying.

Durso treats a number of these Baptist prisoners through the poetry they wrote in prison (pages 143–189), though a number of these prison poets, including Cheare, Hercules Collins (d.1702), and the inimitable John Bunyan (1628–88) also wrote prose tracts. It is a little surprising that this latter vein of material was not more extensively used. Obviously there are limits to what one can examine in a work of this size, though I must also confess missing any mention of William Mitchel (1662–1705), a tireless evangelist in the Pennines from the Rossendale Valley in Lancashire to Rawdon in neighboring West Yorkshire. Mitchel was twice arrested for preaching illegally during the reign of James II (r.1685-1688). On the first occasion he was treated with deliberate roughness and spent three months in jail at Goodshaw. On the second occasion he was arrested near Bradford and imprisoned for six months in York Castle. The enemies of the gospel who imprisoned Mitchel might have thought they were shutting him up in a dismal dungeon. To Mitchel, though, as he told his friends in a letter written from York in the spring of 1687, the dungeon was a veritable “paradise, because the glorious presence of God is with me, & the Spirit of glory & of God rests on me” [see 1 Peter 4:14]. He had been given such a “glorious sight of [God’s] countenance, [and] bright splendour of his love,” that he was quite willing to “suffer afflictions with the people of God, & for his glorious Truth.”

This omission of any mention of Mitchel is a minor quibble, though, for Durso has provided an excellent overview of the primary sources pertaining to a key facet of early Baptist life. This, together with an extensive familiarity with the relevant secondary sources, makes this book a highly recommended introduction to a subject that can no longer be ignored.

Michael A.G. Haykin