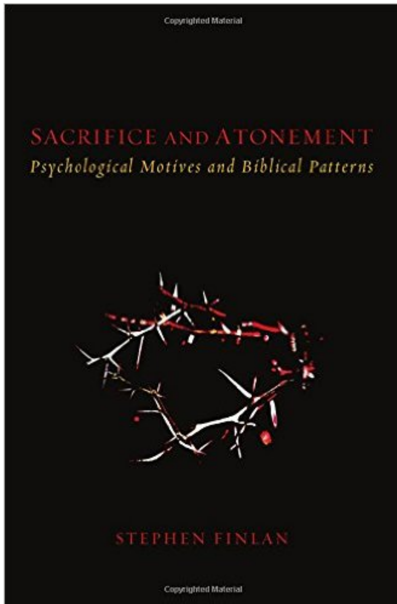
RBL 04/2018



Stephen Finlan

Sacrifice and Atonement: Psychological Motives and Biblical Patterns

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016. Pp. xx + 234. Paper.
$39.00. ISBN 9781506401966.

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This study of the origin, significance, and consequences of the Christian doctrine of atonement takes a decidedly psychological approach. Finlan, who is adjunct professor of theology at Providence College in Rhode Island, lays out his fundamental thesis in the opening pages of his work: "A major thesis of this book is that atonement theology is largely based on childhood strategies for satisfying moody and explosive parents by 'paying for' infractions (or having someone else pay for them)" (xvi). The author will embark on an analysis of pertinent Old and New Testament texts and practices regarding atonement, as well as a scan of postbiblical theological traditions, but his premise and conclusions rest on this basic assumption.

Finlan notes at the outset that the intended effect of atonement that permeates much of ancient religion and has echoes in the Bible has multiple dimensions. The opening chapter deals with the notion of "atonement as purification." In ancient Judaism, one of the major functions of sacrificial rituals was to provide purification or expiation from cultic impurity and thus restore order. Taking his cue from Mary Douglas and other cultural anthropologists, Finlan believes that ritual conformity helped maintain societal boundaries between chaos and order. Disruption of order could occur through "ritual impurities" such as contact with the dead or through "moral impurities" such as idolatry, homicide, and sexual sins. Atonement in the form of various sacrificial rituals brought

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both purification and forgiveness. This notion of purification is also used metaphorically in some New Testament traditions, such as Paul in Rom 8:3 and even more prevalent in Hebrews (10:12, 20). Taking his lead from the clinician Paul Rozin, Finlan asserts that the psychological basis for the need for purification is "disgust" and "fear" at the prospect of incorporating an offensive or threatening object (e.g., symptoms of death or the demonic) into one's world. Sacrificial atonement ensures purification and protection by the God who controls the purification system.

Another dimension of atonement seen in the Hebrew scriptures is that of "compensation" or "payment," as, for example, in the so-called reparation offering prescribed in Lev 7:1–7. The purpose is to avert God's wrath caused by sin. Such a notion can be extended to conceive of violence against one's enemies as a sacrificial offering to appease God's anger, as in Deut 13:13–15. A similar notion is to conceive of sacrificial atonement as a kind of "reciprocity," drawing on the system prevalent in ancient cultures whereby gift-giving and gestures of respect are techniques for procuring favor from a patron, in this instance, from God. Such perspectives are found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, such as in Exod 33:16, 34:9, and Ps 119:58.

Throughout his review of the biblical materials, Finlan introduces various psychological hypotheses that he believes offers insight into the origin and purpose of atonement. For example, "attachment theory" developed by psychologist John Bowby and others illumines the parent-child relationship. Parents who are kind and consistently available to their child "create a pattern of secure attachment in their children" (61), whereas parents who are not regularly available or who are "moody and unpredictable" or even "cruel and threatening" create a damaging attitude of fear and anger in their children, but that anger that must be suppressed for fear that the parent might abandon them. Such childhood experiences of their parents can have a profound influence on how an adult views God in a similar vein. Here again, Finlan sees this kind of dynamic between parent and child as fueling the meaning and function of atonement. "A theology that teaches that the wrath of God was averted by the sacrificial death of Jesus replicates the conditioned behavior of averting parental wrath by being seen to 'take your punishment' (or have somebody take it *for* us)" (69). This kind of perspective, Finlan believes, leads to disastrous consequences for Christianity: "The biggest threat to Christianity is not any hostile external ideology or power, but the internal threat posed by a manipulative psychology of sacrifice, which turns God into a payment-demanding tyrant, a corrupt judge, or a temperamental spirit" (70).

Finlan's most extensive and systematic analysis of the New Testament materials is his consideration of Paul's notion of sacrifice. Paul's view in general is similar to contemporary perspectives on sacrifice that have moved away from the cultic dimensions of sacrifice in

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favor of a more abstract and moralizing perspective. "'Sacrifice' now signifies effortful self-giving involving some loss or pain" (75). The aspect of self-giving for the sake of the common good or a great cause has roots in antiquity, such as the martyr tradition recounted in Maccabees, also found in ancient Greek drama. Paul also drew on the martyriological tradition in speaking of Jesus's death, as in 2 Cor 5:14, 1 Cor 8:11, Rom 5:8, and 1 Thess 5:10. A similar notion is that of the "noble death," which links martyrdom and sacrifice: one gives one's life for the many. Finlan concludes that, while Paul at times uses cultic sacrificial imagery (e.g., the reference to the mercy seat in Rom 3:24–25), his focus is more on the moral and spiritual dimensions of "sacrifice." Furthermore, Paul views Christ as a "representative" figure whose example leads the way to life with God, rather than as a "substitutionary" figure who dies inplace of guilty humanity. He quickly scans some modern interpretations of Paul (E. P. Sanders, Ted Grimsrud, and Michael Gorman) that propose different, nonsubstitutionary ways in which the believing Christian is affected by the death of Christ. A cursory examination of Hebrews, however, shows the lingering effects of a cultic view of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice.

Finlan asserts that Luke-Acts attributes little if any redeeming value to the death of Jesus (he considers Luke 22:19–22 as an interpolation). He also seems to believe that Luke's alleged portrayal of a "nonbloody and non-atoning" Eucharist overrides the portrayals of Paul and Mark (e.g., 14:22–25). It is perplexing that Finlan seems to view the Lukan interpretation of the death of Jesus as more fundamental than that of the creedal formula cited by Paul in 1 Cor 15:3–5, a text to which he gives scant attention. Mark 10:45, which most interpreters see as this gospel's key link between Jesus's mission of service (*diakonia*) and the meaning of his death, is described by Finlan as "unusual and out of place" (123).

Finlan concludes his study with a scan of Christian theological traditions such as Augustine and Luther. Even though the cruder forms of atonement theology are mainly left behind, Finlan notes that metaphors have an "after life" and that the negative connotations linger. Over Christian history, he contends, some theologians and theological traditions have come "halfway" (184), that is, "a paradoxical restatement of a concept that is really (and unconsciously) on its way to being rejected, but which the thinker is not ready to reject outright." Finlan himself is willing to go all the way in rejecting the notion of atonement: "Salvation needs to be detached from the crucifixion. We have gone on too long, covering up the message of Jesus with a mythology about his death, a death caused by his enemies. To some degree, we have allowed his enemies—the hypocrites, the power brokers, the conductors of sacrifice—to set the agenda. We need to be saved from cruel doctrine. God saves us *in spite of* the crucifixion, not because of it" (189–90, emphasis original).

Finlan's rejection of a crude form of atonement theology that presents God as avenging sinful humanity by killing his son or as the price of ransoming humanity from the grip of

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the demonic, or as the work of a petulant tyrant is laudatory. As he notes, it would be impossible to reconcile this image of God with Jesus's portrayal of the father of the prodigal son. But is the origin of the various forms of atonement theology comprehensively explained by the post-Freudian theory of coping with an angry or moody parent? Is the pervasive New Testament conviction that the death (and resurrection) of Jesus is salvific so easily put aside? Do the New Testament texts that Finlan cites as not attributing salvific power to the cross (e.g., Luke-Acts, James) override Pauline theology and that of Matthew, Mark, and John? Attempting in a single, pastorally oriented study to do justice to the complexity of the biblical notion of sacrifice and the New Testament theologies of the cross may be too ambitious, even when its intent is salutary.

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