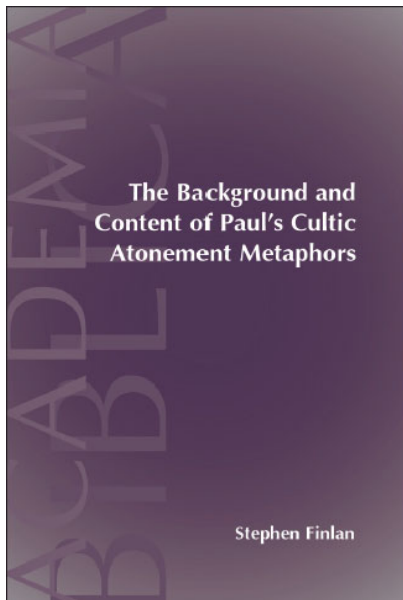


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Finlan, Stephen

The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors

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In his book, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, Stephen Finlan reassesses the cultic and redemption metaphors that describe the soteriological significance of the death of Jesus. The problem with most current interpretations, he claims, is that they do not address the metaphysical logic of Paul's metaphors, especially the implied logic of the rituals that he uses metaphorically. Thus, for example, Paul's cultic metaphors picture the death of Jesus as either a sacrifice (1 Cor 5:7) or an expulsion ritual that carries away sin (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13). Similarly, the image of redemption also describes this saving event, as well as its beneficial aftereffects (Rom 3:24–25). These metaphors imply that the death of Jesus has some cultic or social effectiveness, yet it is not clear *how* Paul understood this soteriological transaction to work. For Finlan, the key to explicating Paul's logic is through an investigation of the cultic background and ideology behind the metaphors that he deploys.

Finlan begins his analysis with a helpful survey of the various scholarly theories of sacrifice, offering comments throughout on the theoretical strengths and shortcomings of previous approaches. Drawing on this scholarship, he offers his own cross-cultural theory of sacrifice that emphasizes elements of gift-offering, spirit-mediumship, and substitution.

Having established a general conceptual framework, Finlan turns to a discussion of the historical and theological development of Hebrew sacrifice. Here he focuses on the two Levitical sacrifices that provided expiation in the postexilic period, the **תאטק** and **אשם**, as well as the priestly notion of **כפר**, atonement. Finlan contends that pentateuchal sacrifice was based on two essential concepts. The first is a notion of animistic temple-cleansing in which the blood or life-force of the sacrificial victim is perceived as cleaning away the antilife force of pollution. The second is an economic transaction in the form of a tribute payment to God. According to Finlan, these two pentateuchal concepts were present to *some* degree in the mind of Paul, whose own emphasis was legalistic in nature. A pertinent example may be found in the sacrificial metaphor in Rom 3:25, in which Paul states that God put Jesus forward as the **ἱλαστήριον**, the ark-lid where the sacrificial blood was sprinkled on Yom Kippur. Finlan suggests that the implied ritual action that takes place at the **ἱλαστήριον** is the purgation of sin. Metaphorically, Christ's shedding of blood becomes the new *place* where sin is cancelled. That this transaction also has an economic element is verified by the use of the technical term **ἀπολύτρωσις**, redemption, in Rom 3:24 (cf. 1 Cor 1:30; Col 1:14) to describe salvation in Christ.

Essential to Finlan's analysis of Paul's cultic metaphors is his careful distinction between sacrifice and expulsion rituals. Whereas sacrifices are pure offerings that are sent to God, expulsion victims or scapegoats are impure sin-bearers that are forced out of the community. They are not directed to God but to a wilderness demon. Finlan observes that at times Christian interpreters erroneously assimilate the two rites under the dominant notion of "substitution," yet the scapegoat ritual is in no way substitutionary, since the blame is never shifted to the animal. The rite does not effectively pay an individual's debt or purify the temple; it merely removes the collective sin by a means that is "representative" and not substitutional. For Finlan, making a clear distinction between sacrifice and expulsion ritual is fundamental to understanding the dynamics underlying Pauline soteriology, especially in instances in which there is a conflation of both models. A prime example is found in Rom 8:3, in which metaphors of sacrifice and punishment are juxtaposed. Here, the use of the technical phrase **περὶ ἁμαρτίας**, "sin-offering," in connection with the Son evokes imagery of a spotless purificatory sacrifice. Yet at the same time there is a notion of the Son carrying the burden of all flesh, much like the scapegoat. For Paul, Christ's death is the ultimate cultic ritual, for he is both the true sacrifice and the final scapegoat.

In the latter part of the book Finlan convincingly demonstrates that Paul's mixing of metaphors often extends beyond the cultic realm. First, Paul combines cultic metaphors of sacrifice and scapegoat with noncultic images of redemption, payment (economic substitution), and punishment (penal substitution). Finlan emphasizes that Paul is not tied to any one of these metaphors but rather combines them in various ways in order to

convey the idea that salvation had to be *obtained* for the believers through Christ's death. For example, In Gal 3:13 there is a blending of the scapegoat image with penal substitution in the idea that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us." Commenting on this passage, Finlan suggests that "there seems to be both a literal sin-carrying and a legal penalty-bearing" (191). Second, Paul blends the cultic metaphor of the scapegoat with the model (not metaphor) of martyrdom in order to emphasize the sacredness of Christ's heroic death for the sins of others. According to Finlan, the idea that Christ "dies for us" indicates that he is both a heroic and cultic victim: "he is victimized by people, but the meaning is turned around by God so as to accrue to people's benefit, when God acknowledges this event as a *cultic* event" (227).

The book succeeds in underscoring the importance of cultic atonement metaphors in Paul's soteriological reasoning. Particularly helpful is Finlan's deconstruction of the cultic imagery into its component parts. The systematic analysis of these cultic elements not only gives insight into the complexity of Paul's metaphors but also offers a new and informed perspective. This is particularly apparent in Finlan's analysis of Rom 8:3, in which he establishes that there is a conflation of sacrificial and scapegoat imagery. This claim is significant, for it highlights the enormous influence that Paul's metaphors have had on the Christian community. As Finlan correctly points out, "even to this day, when some people say Christ gave himself 'as a sacrifice,' they often really mean 'as a scapegoat'" (121).

Finlan's work is well researched, and his arguments are for the most part systematically developed. There are some aspects of his analysis, however, that are problematic. Most crucial is his lack of attention to definition. Finlan sets out to discuss Paul's cultic atonement metaphors, but at the beginning of his study he neglects to define what exactly he means by the term "metaphor." It is not until the end of the fourth chapter that he states, "I define metaphor as the usage of terms and ideas from one realm to describe an event in another realm or category of existence" (192). Prior to this statement, Finlan offers only two observations regarding the effectiveness of a metaphor: the referent must be recognizable (50), and there should be sufficient simplicity to enable the imagery to be grasped quickly (144). Given the nature of Finlan's investigation, it may have been useful for him to have offered a more systematic analysis of the basic characteristics of metaphor and to have commented on its use as a rhetorical device.

Another related area of difficulty is Finlan's use of language. For example, Finlan may be correct in transliterating the Hebrew verb כִּפֵּר as *kipper*, but his usage of the Anglicized *kippering* (e.g., 40) is not only disconcerting but erroneous, since in the English language the verb "kippering" has a meaning entirely unrelated to atonement. Perhaps more serious

is Finlan's inconsistent use of categories such as "Hebrew," "Jewish," and "Gentile." At times it appears as if Finlan is correctly distinguishing between Hebrew/Israelite practices and Jewish cultic practices of the first century. At other times, however, this distinction is not readily apparent. The discussion on Hebrew sacrifice in section 1.2 is referred to as a survey of "Jewish sacrificial practice" (44), and Jewish (not Israelite) expulsion rituals are compared to those of the Assyrians and Hittites (76). Moreover, the category of Gentile is sometimes used to refer to non-Jewish followers of Jesus but at other times indicates any group that is not Jewish. Unfortunately, this lack of precision is often confusing and misleading.

In spite of these drawbacks, Finlan's scholarship makes an important contribution to the discussion of Paul's metaphors. The author's analysis and explication of Paul's cultic metaphors will be of value to students of Pauline theology as well as to those who are interested in ancient concepts of atonement.