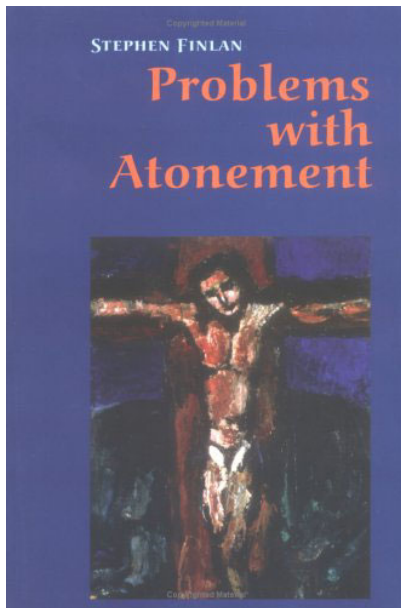


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Finlan, Stephen

Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine

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In *Problems with Atonement* Stephen Finlan makes an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of a core doctrine of Christianity. He both encapsulates and expands upon his earlier monograph entitled *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, published in 2004 in the Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica series. In his new publication Finlan examines a highly complex and notoriously difficult area of Christian doctrine in an accessible and overall well-written fashion. He provides a broad overview of the topic, describes various problems of traditional interpretations, and offers his own solution by suggesting that incarnation is a more central and essential aspect of Christian doctrine than atonement.

Finlan notes in the introduction (1–10) that scholars of the past 150 years have strongly debated traditional doctrines of atonement because they convey a problematic image of God. Finlan does not intend to offer a new atonement doctrine but instead seeks to identify “the pattern of correction, rationalization, and spiritualization that has dominated both scholarly and confessional discourse on atonement” (3). He then provides a concise outline of his investigation that mainly employs a comparative approach and the method of tradition history.

In chapter 1, “Sacrifice and Scapegoat” (11–38), Finlan identifies the lack of knowledge of both the Hebrew (which he also calls “Jewish”) and Gentile cult practices as one problem with the Christian understanding of atonement. He therefore explains the function of sacrifice and expulsion rituals as the basis of traditional atonement doctrines. According to Finlan, the original notion of sacrifice as a “food-bribe” for the deity (J) evolved into the function of “spiritual detergent” (P), which was finally refined into the concept of ritual payment (H). What is important, however, is that sacrifice was linked to forgiveness, which became the prerogative of priests. Finlan then describes the phenomenon of spiritualization as a gradual process of the “transformation and eventual abandonment of sacrifice, through substitution, moralizing, interiorization, metaphor, rejectionism, and philosophic reflection that shifts the focus of religion toward spiritual transformation” (28–29). In this section Finlan insists that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible categorically criticized the sacrificial cult and that Jesus shared this attitude. Paul, however, appropriated Hebrew Bible cult traditions by means of typological interpretation, which resulted in a new cult ideology. Finlan also turns to expulsion rituals as another aspect of ancient Near Eastern cult practice. Involving elimination of evil, disease, or curse, the mechanics of such rituals stand in diametrical opposition to the function of cultic sacrifice.

In chapter 2, “Paul’s Use of Cultic Imagery” (39–62), Finlan rightly acknowledges that Paul uses and combines metaphors of mixed origins; the problem, however, is whether “Christians really understand the complexity of doctrines and metaphors that are now labeled ‘atonement’” (59). Finlan insists on the importance of understanding every metaphor individually. He scrutinizes the meaning of images derived from the temple cult while providing shorter comments on images derived from other, noncultic backgrounds. He argues, for example, that the Greek term *hilastērion* in Rom 3:25 refers to a place, not to a sacrifice of atonement; that the idea in 2 Cor 5:21 of Christ without sin made sinful is a ritual interchange according to the logics of cultic expulsion rituals; and that in Gal 3:13 the notion of Christ who redeems us by becoming a curse combines motives of slave manumission and transmission of curse upon the righteous. Finlan makes important observations by noting that the concept of martyrdom applied to Christ’s death is not a metaphor but an interpretation of the actual event, because no foreign imagery is applied. He also makes a helpful distinction between “the martyr model and cultic and economic metaphors for the saving transaction and social metaphors for the resulting new status of believers” (56). Finlan concludes this chapter with reflections on various meanings of dying-formulas, which all seem to imply that God must be paid off in some way. Considering that Jesus proclaimed the free availability of forgiveness and salvation, Paul emerges as having linked forgiveness and salvation to the acceptance of a specific soteriological mechanism.

Chapter 3, “Atonement after Paul” (63–83), deals with the problem that the apostle’s ideas were already difficult to comprehend for his contemporaries and successors. Thus a typical feature of the Pastoral Epistles is not only the domestication of Paul’s radical gospel but especially the simplification of his creative use of atonement imagery, which was eventually reduced to doctrinal formulas. In this process, certain motives (e.g., redemption) became dominant, while others (e.g., expulsion mechanism) were neglected. Finlan continues with an overview of post-Pauline atonement theories in subsequent centuries. These are characterized by the theological tendency to focus on only one metaphor: Irenaeus, Origen (despite his insistence that Christ’s life and teaching are salvific), Augustine, and Luther, for instance, favored the *Christus Victor* concept; Anselm developed the satisfaction theory; and Gregory of Nazianzus and Abelard are representatives of the moral influence theory. Finlan finally reflects on the attractiveness of atonement theories: “The pervasiveness of atonement thinking only makes sense if it incorporates fundamental instincts about reality that are shared by most people. There are certain notions about life, about reciprocity, that are ancestral to the complex of ideas we call atonement” (80). Atonement concepts have thus survived, perpetuating ancient cultic efforts to manipulate God and accounting for the peculiar focus on guilt within Reformation churches.

In chapter 4, “Rationalizing the Atonement Doctrine” (84–116), Finlan registers “embarrassment among Christians who recoil from the idea that the Son’s death was either a kind of payment or a divinely demanded penalty” (84). Problematic to all variations of atonement theories is their premise of a wrathful God, positing violence to operate at the core of the gospel. This can even lead to the assertion of conflict within the Trinitarian God, if the compassionate Son needs to be sacrificed because of a frightening and unrelenting Father. Discomfort with such theories has motivated various contemporary approaches of restating and redefining atonement. But when Finlan examines these closely, he concludes that all of them are flawed: either the underlying violence ultimately cannot be reconciled with the revelation of a loving God, or unacceptable magical mechanisms are perpetuated. When asking the necessary question whether the atonement metaphor is inherently defective, Finlan finds an alternative in the soteriology of Jesus himself, who never claimed that he came just to be executed but to proclaim that “the way to God is *already open*” (111).

The considerations of the previous chapter lead Finlan to the conclusion “that the death of Jesus was not a divinely planned ritual event” (119). He thus suggests that the mechanisms of sacrifice need to be removed from the death of Jesus. Atonement, after all, is not an essential Christian doctrine, so it can be abandoned. Incarnation, on the other hand, is unique to Christianity and provides the subject for some final reflections in this book (ch. 5 [117–24]). Finlan introduces the concept of *theōsis*, which, as a salvific dimension of

incarnation, has always been an important doctrine for Eastern Orthodoxy: “Even if we [people in the West] do not wish to use the *theōsis* concept, we need to recognize that God’s interest is in fostering spiritual growth and ethical progress” (124). Finlan’s book concludes with a bibliography and indexes of modern authors and of ancient texts.

In this remarkable resource Finlan covers a large scope of material and provides a keen assessment of *Problems with Atonement*. My primary criticism of the book pertains to some of Finlan’s key assumptions, such as his understanding of cultic sacrifice. First, does the Hebrew Bible really feature a chronological development from food bribe via detergent to payment (11–13)? All these concepts occur side by side in the same text corpora. It is worth exploring, therefore, whether they can be linked with different sacrificial elements, such as blood or burning rites. The result is a broader and more nuanced perception of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. Second, is the idea of providing food for the deity “crude” (12)? It is certainly an anthropomorphic concept, but is not every concept of God necessarily anthropomorphic and the idea that God might listen to prayer just as “primitive”? Third, the idea of providing food for God, given the ancient Near Eastern context, might rather be understood as an invitation to a feast, which means that its strong relational implications should not be neglected. Fourth, I would also challenge Finlan’s opinion that the Hebrew Bible prophets categorically criticized the sacrificial cult. Most of these critical passages occur in the context of accusations addressing social injustice. In addition, the prophets’ usage of metaphorical cult language suggests that an ideal concept of sacrifice as such was not being questioned. This is why the prophets could also emphatically affirm that God will accept sacrifices if offered by the righteous (e.g., Isa 56:4–7; Ezek 20:39–41; Mal 3:3–4). Finally, Finlan focuses on the interpretation of the death of Jesus and, in concluding, examines incarnation as an alternative for salvific meaning. Yet is not another problem of traditional atonement concepts that, according to the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus is an essential part of salvation? Finlan rightly observes that the New Testament Gospels do not interpret Jesus’ death as Paul does, but the main reason for this is that the victory celebrated by Christianity did not occur on Good Friday but on Easter Sunday.

I nevertheless consider Finlan’s new book stimulating, compelling, and well-written. I recommend it to all interested clergy as well as to students and teachers in the field.