

## University of Dayton eCommons

---

Marian Library Faculty Publications

The Marian Library

---

4-1-2006

# Review of Stephen Finlan's "Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine"

Jason Paul Bourgeois  
[jbourgeois1@udayton.edu](mailto:jbourgeois1@udayton.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri\\_faculty\\_publications](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_faculty_publications)

---

### eCommons Citation

Jason Paul Bourgeois (2006). Review of Stephen Finlan's "Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine". *Catholic Books Review*. ,  
[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri\\_faculty\\_publications/18](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_faculty_publications/18)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Marian Library at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Library Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

**Stephen FINLAN, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine*.** Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2005. pp. 144. \$15.95 pb. ISBN 0-8146-5220-4. Reviewed by Jason Paul BOURGEOIS.

This short book attempts to provide an overview of the biblical foundations of the doctrine of atonement, its problematic treatment throughout the history of Christian theology, and contemporary rationalizations of the doctrine, concluding with the author's own theological solution to the problem.

By far the strongest section of the book is its overview of the biblical foundations, particularly in the writings of Paul. Finlan begins by looking at the Hebrew sources of Paul's atonement metaphors. These include expiation rituals of blood sacrifice, and draw upon the ancient notion that blood has the power to be both a purifying force and a means of propitiating the divine. They also include the scapegoat ritual described in Leviticus. Finlan points out that the critique of these atonement rituals contained in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, and later in the words of Jesus, reflect a desirable progress away from primitive notions of the relationship of sin and God.

Finlan recounts the various atonement metaphors that Paul uses and mixes together, including expiation by blood, penal substitution (a version of the scapegoat theory), redemption from slavery, acquittal from judgment (justification and a declaration of righteousness), and the Hellenistic notion of heroic martyrdom (self-sacrifice to save another's life). He suggests that Paul's mixed metaphors have the unfortunate effect on his readers (throughout the Christian tradition) of suggesting that God *needs* something in exchange for sin, whether that be blood, or penal substitution, or ransom payment, etc.

The biblical foundations of the doctrine of atonement are found in the first two chapters, while the third chapter offers a sweeping look at the historical development of this doctrine from the patristic period through Luther. He characterizes the early Greek Fathers as focusing primarily on rescue theories, in which human beings are rescued from the power of sin by the Incarnation of Christ. With Anselm, atonement becomes understood more as a penal substitution on the part of Christ to repair the damage done to God's honor. Harsh words are reserved for Luther, whose influence upon the doctrine has been "absolute depravity, universal guilt, and a horrifying transfer of divine wrath to the undeserving Son" (p. 78).

The fourth chapter looks at contemporary rationalizations of the doctrine. Unfortunately, the text gives only an incomplete overview of contemporary theologians, focusing especially on radical theorists like Girard who see atonement as an expression of the violence inherent in religious systems. It would have been helpful

to include some strong examples of traditionalists who reinterpret the atonement doctrine in terms of the model of heroic martyrdom, which in Christian terms would include self-sacrifice out of love for another. From C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* to the example of persons like St. Maximilian Kolbe, the idea of dying to save another person has strong contemporary resonance.

Overall, it seems as though Finlan has accepted the straw man argument that atonement involves an angry God who demands the blood of his innocent Son as a magical substitution that provides forgiveness for sinful human beings. But as Finlan himself notes, such an argument is anti-Trinitarian, setting one person of the Godhead against another. It is possible to view atonement as a joint effort of Father and Son, in which God offers self-sacrifice in order to show humanity the depth of reconciling love. Metaphors of blood expiation and ransom payments can then be understood as expressions of that loving self-sacrifice, and not as demands on the part of an angry God.

Finlan's own solution to the problem of atonement is that it is a secondary doctrine that is centrally discussed in "the Pauline tradition... First Peter, Hebrews, First John, and Revelation... only 39 percent of the NT" (p. 120). It can be abandoned in favor of the primary doctrine, the Incarnation. He is sympathetic to the Greek patristic notion of *theosis*, exemplified in the writings of St. Athanasius, in which the Incarnation becomes the vehicle through which humanity returns to God. However, even a cursory reading of St. Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* reveals that the Incarnation is a response to the need for a God-man to suffer the penalty of sin (namely death) on behalf of a sinful humanity whom God loves. Even in Greek patristic theology, *theosis* is only made possible through the death on the Cross.

Finlan's book is well worth reading for a number of reasons. It contains a fantastic summary of Pauline metaphors for atonement. It contains fascinating side comments about questions such as the relationship of ritual to the moral structure of society. Finally it is a stimulating debate partner for those who wish to defend the biblical and traditional doctrine of atonement in some form or another.