

Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, second edition (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015). 138 pp. \$38.00 hardback; \$20.00 paperback.

This volume attempts to present a model of atonement that is meaningful and sufficient for a “sinless” society, that is, “a society that does not see itself in terms of the category of sin at all” (3 n. 7, italics removed). The book begins with a short introductory chapter, entitled “(More) Musings and Methodology,” and it ends with a brief conclusion, “The End of the Beginning: Some Closing Thoughts.” Sandwiched between these chapters, neither of which is numbered, are four parts consisting of three chapters each: Part 1, “The Stories We Tell”; Part 2, “The Function of Narrative”; Part 3, “The Intent of Jesus in the Gospels”; and Part 4, “Indwelling the Counter Narrative.” While the book includes a bibliography, it lacks author, subject, and Scripture indices.

The need for this project, according to the author, stems from the ever-changing context in which the Christian community must theologize (2, 4). In response to the contemporary context, Mann asserts, “Certainly, sin remains conspicuous by its absence, not only in the language of popular culture, but quite possibly in the interface between Christian communities and the world around them” (2). Consequently, Mann believes continued endorsement of penal substitutionary atonement as a complete explication of the death of Jesus “is most tragic, for despite our confidence that *we* have the atonement pinned down, it remains anathema to the majority of people who we encounter within our towns and cities because we insist on speaking a language that was once fruitful, but is now incomprehensible” (4; cf. 71–72 where Mann objects to both penal substitutionary atonement and giving preference to one model of atonement over all others). Notions such as guilt consequent to sin as moral wrong-doing or lawbreaking, and punishing an innocent substitute to appease the wrath of God lack meaning and usefulness in the present “sinless” society, according to Mann, and thus a different model is needed (36–41).

Conversely, Mann promotes a model of atonement that flows out of a postmodern view of truth as narrative: “Unfortunately, there is no reassurance that can be given to those who desire to make statements of fact derived from a particular metanarrative. There is ‘truth’ for the self: ‘This is my truth; now tell me yours.’ Relativism reigns” (54). In this approach, “all stories have equal and potential worth as narratives that may bring meaning and illumination to the life being lived” (61; cf. 55); all stories—including our stories of atonement—are legitimized or delegitimized by whether they prove useful and meaningful (55; 61). For this reason, “no one soteriological model is meaningful and sufficient,” and the ecclesial community ought to have on offer “a myriad of

narratives” of the atonement, which individuals can “tr[y] out as templates . . . to see how they fit” (72).

Mann posits that the real plight of the sinless self is chronic shame, and this is what drives his entire project. Mann defines the “sin” of the “sinless self” as “the absence of mutual, unpolluted relating” (96). Consequent to this, “sin becomes not a state of corruption, nor guilt to be wiped out, but alienation from the Other/other, requiring reconciliation” (96). Due to the author’s conviction that truth bears a subjective-relativistic nature, any account of how Jesus’ cross-work effects reconciliation “can only ever be a personal interpretation that may or may not be recognizable as a narrative of atonement to others” (98). He believes that “if the cross is to be a dying for others, as [Jesus] intends it to be, then those who follow him there must also live by prioritizing the other, for in doing so we open our lives to that same at-one-ness: the presence of relational, self-coherence” (104). For Mann, the goal is a “sensitive” narration of “the story of Jesus,” which leads to “the sinless self who lives with shame and incoherence recogniz[ing] it as a meaningful and sufficient counter-story. He learns that to live with coherence between his real self and his ideal self is to have an awareness of, and to include, even submit to, the other” (105).

While the author’s desire to present the atonement in a comprehensible and impactful way for his contemporary context are certainly commendable, it remains doubtful that the end result represents a truly Christian perspective that continues to reflect the truth of Scripture. Rather, it seems Mann has reconfigured the message so thoroughly as to leave little of the original apostolic *kerygma* intact. In fact, the author is fully aware that some will regard his re-readings as “*eisegesis* (reading into a text the meaning one wants to get out of it) of the worst kind” (120), but he counters that one must address the problem of “meaning and sufficiency” for the sinless self (121). Contra Mann, however, perhaps individuals comprising the “sinless” society actually stand in need of a confrontation with the discordant truth of the gospel or, in some cases, simply a more adequate elucidation of a biblical worldview rather than a presentation of a reconfigured narrative that more readily and amicably relates to their own preferred stories about themselves. Mann apparently believes that our narrations determine truth. The question left unresolved is this: If the God of the Bible exists in any objective sense, then should not one’s narration of reality be legitimized or delegitimized in light of the degree to which it harmonizes with the divine intent of Scripture as determined by interpretation adhering to normal conventions of communication? Simply put, what counts is the story that God tells about us, not the story that we tell about ourselves. All said, to those who endorse an exegetically driven

theology, the hamartiology, anthropology, and soteriology of this volume most probably will appear far removed from the theological vantage point found in the pertinent biblical texts—many of which are not even mentioned in the book.

In conclusion, the scholar, well-informed pastor, or serious student wishing to have a thorough grasp of various interpretive proposals regarding the atonement may want to read this volume. Those seeking elucidation of what the text of Scripture says about atonement, however, will have to look elsewhere.

Reviewed by Adrian P. Rosen