

Adam J. Johnson. *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury Guides for the Perplexed. New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. viii+212 pp. \$86.00 (hbk); \$29.95 (paper).

Kevin W. Wong
Wheaton College

I have long been a fan of the *Bloomsbury Guides for the Perplexed* series simply because I qualify as their target audience. (I suppose I should not also admit that I am a fan of another series with a less flattering name.) And so I read with great expectation Adam Johnson's contribution on one of the most contentious, yet fertile doctrines of Christianity—the Atonement.

In chapter one, Johnson begins his book by illustrating a familiar but flawed approach to the study of the atonement—pitting one model against the other. Johnson instead contends that the atonement should be as thought of as multifaceted as God himself. All of the models can and should work together to contribute to an overall portrait of salvation. In fact, Johnson claims that that is a better portrayal of the tradition than Gustaf Aulén's now standardized (but now challenged) story of the dominance of just one theory of atonement for each era of the Church—*Christus victor* for the early Church, satisfaction for the medievals,¹ and exemplarism for the modern era—since Athanasius, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin each seem to support all three of the aforementioned models. Johnson then suggests the revelation theory of the atonement—the atonement is revelation for the sake of knowledge of the Father, in which the divine light enlightens us. In other words, Jesus lived, died, and rose again so that we might know God.

With the second chapter, Johnson explicitly expresses the purpose of the atonement, as he understands it, to more clearly display why each atonement theory fails on its own and to guide us toward a more comprehensive understanding of Christ's work. Johnson argues that the atonement is God's way of saving us, others, and the world *from* sin and its consequences, and *for* life in and with God. He then proposes five aspects that are essential to explaining the necessity, efficacy, and meaning of Christ's work: the cast (who is involved), the doctrine of God upon which the theory is built (which attribute—Justice? Love? Honor?), that which denies and perverts the will by bending it in on itself (what is the character of sin?), that which

¹ Johnson sees satisfaction as something like a genus under which are various species like penal substitution and Anselmian honor satisfaction. The latter clearly belongs to the genus. The former does as well since God's justice and wrath requires satisfaction, and thus Jesus Christ takes humanity's place of punishment to satisfy it.

Christ came to save us *from* (what is the outcome of the life of sin?), and that which he came to save us *for* (what are God's glorious purposes for his children?).

With the remainder of the book, Johnson expands the scope of the atonement on multiple fronts. He correctly observes the tendency is to narrow down the atonement into a myopic distortion. For example, the atonement is really meant only to solve a strictly human problem (our sin), is only enacted by God the Son, and concerns only his justice (in the case of penal substitution).

In chapter three, he contends that the atonement is not merely a Christological work, but is in fact Trinitarian. Concurring with Athanasius, Johnson recalibrates the problem of the atonement from being an exclusively human problem (e.g., we are headed to hell) to a divine dilemma: either let humanity die and thus have created something destined for destruction or not let humanity die and thus defy his own proclamation that punishment results from sin. Further, if God is to be known through his creation, our failing to know God is a perceived failure on God's part. So God became Incarnate, a part of creation, in order to make himself known to us.

Johnson acknowledges that this Trinitarian atonement looks suspiciously like divine child abuse, an objection raised particularly by feminist theologians. Johnson responds by demonstrating how the indivisibility of the external works of the Trinity (*opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*) can defuse those worries. It is not the case that the Father exacts punishment on an unwilling Son, but instead the one God acts in the three Person with a single, harmonious will. So writes Johnson:

Accordingly, we might say that the one God wills the passion of Christ triunely—which is to say, the one God willed the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and yet did so according to his triune mode of living as Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the Father by willing the death of the Son, the Son by willing his own death and suffering and the Spirit by willing to accompany the Son in obedience to the Father (71-72).

He then concludes the chapter with *theosis* as what the atonement is *for* as most theories concentrate on what atonement is *from*.

In chapter four Johnson continues the previous chapter's thread and proceeds to overturn each atonement theory's myopic emphasis on one particular divine trait by applying the Trinitarian indivisibility and the doctrine of appropriations to the divine essence itself. According to the doctrine of appropriations, every work of God is properly done by all three Persons, though it is nonetheless appropriate to attribute that action to just one of the Persons, e.g. speaking of the Father as Creator when the Father creates through the Son and by the Holy Spirit. Appropriations, then, is a summarization. Although we know that none of the Persons can act autonomously from the other two, we must exercise some linguistic and cognitive economy lest we be (even more) wordy and lofty as theologians. Relying on this widely accepted strategy, Johnson maintains that although God acts with all of his attributes to bring about the atonement, nonetheless it is appropriate to attribute the atonement to just one of his attributes. So it is not the case that God is only just but not merciful in the atonement, even if only one of those attributes is emphasized in any given theory of the atonement.

Even with all of the Persons of the Trinity and the entirety of the divine being is involved with the atonement, nonetheless Johnson maintains that it is appropriate

to attribute the atonement as a work of Christ. But in chapter five, Johnson contests that it is the entire length of Christ's human life—resurrection included—that procures our salvation against the persistent overemphasis on his crucifixion.

Like a biblical *inclusio*, Johnson once again addresses the problem of the atonement in chapter six. Although he had previously located the problem as being a divine dilemma, he shows how the problem affects all else, from humans to animals to creation and even angels and demons. Animals and creation suffer as a consequence of human sin, so the atonement is for them as well. Nature, red in tooth and claw, is healed by the one who is both the Lion and the Lamb.

But what of the angels and demons? Johnson contends that the work of Christ reveals the character of God in an unprecedented manner that alters the worship of the angelic hosts—no small thing for beings whose primary telos is to worship God. Further, Johnson argues that the atonement acts as a sort of confirmation for the unfallen angels and brings order to the angelic ranks as the incarnate Christ becomes their head. The atonement affects the demonic in at least two ways. First, it is a sort of mercy for them since Christ puts an end to their evil works so that they need not continue in them, and, secondly, it grants them knowledge of the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10).

Even for so slim a volume, Johnson nonetheless provokes deep thinking about the subject matter. It was unexpected and refreshing for Johnson to disregard the standard framework that fragments all of the different models and pits them against one another. In so doing, he has confirmed a long suspicion of mine that the moral exemplarist model is not complete without its conjunction with other models. Is it really morally exemplary to needlessly die to demonstrate love? My wife would certainly think it unloving and unhealthy if I hit myself on the head with a hammer just to show her I love her. The embracing of pain and injury and even death makes more sense against the backdrop of something akin to substitution, say if I threw myself in front of my wife to intercept oncoming gunfire.

On the other hand, Johnson has rightly prompted me to reconsider the many ways in which I too truncate the full breadth of the atonement by focusing on this or that aspect, such as seeing the atonement as primarily solving a human problem and benefitting only humans. Further, his locating the atonement as a properly Trinitarian activity frees the atonement from being land-locked to Christology's typical categories of the person and work of Christ. Johnson does well to show it to be a properly Trinitarian activity.

But, alas, no book is perfect. And is so often the case with so slim a book, there are the obvious and expected limitations with the historical survey. The professor who might use this as a course text will have to supplement with primary source readings, some of which are highlighted by Johnson himself. So there is nothing Johnson could have done differently here (other than inflate the book beyond the confines of what the series dictates). Additionally, one area of great strength doubles as an area of weakness. Johnson does well with integrating the Trinity with the atonement. But in so doing, he makes claims that some, such as classical theists, will find uncomfortable. One can certainly understand God the Son being made capable of suffering by his assumed human nature, but it is less clear how the Father is able to suffer given the doctrine of impassibility. Although Johnson does not and cannot

pursue such a tangent, it certainly raises important questions about whether Johnson's portrayal of God's action renders God changeable.

A more serious deficiency, however, is that the most intriguing element of his book is sadly underdeveloped. Johnson argues that the doctrines of the indivisibility of God's work and of appropriation in Trinitarian theology can be imported over and applied to God's being and attributes regarding the atonement. This is a unique application of this rubric, one I find both compelling and confusing. It is compelling because many Christians wish to maintain some version of divine simplicity and it is often the case that, as Johnson observes, the various models fracture God's being in a distorting and dissatisfying fashion so that God is no longer recognizable (e.g. he is so merciful that he no longer seems just). Preserving the oneness of God is of primary concern and Johnson has found a unique way of doing so.

But it is confusing in that the simultaneous inseparability and appropriation of Trinitarian theology is conceptually opaque. Inseparability is not the same as identity. A standard formulation of the creation act is that the Father creates *through* the Son and *by* the Holy Spirit. Those prepositions are important in ensuring a proper distinction between the three Persons. It seems like what the Father does cannot be independent of what the Son and the Spirit do, but that is not equivalent to saying that the Father's action is identical with the Son and the Spirit on pain of obliterating the *through-ness* and *by-ness* of the Son and the Spirit. Further, why is it appropriate to describe creation as an act of the Father? Surely we do so because there is something distinctly emphatic about the Father in this activity without discrediting the Son and the Spirit's involvement.

One manner that seems to clarify these coordinate concepts is exercising precision in who the subject and who the object is of any divine action. So the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all act as one to bring about the Incarnation since causation is found in the divine essence which is numerically identical between the three Persons. Thus there is only one subject of the action—God who is the Father, Son, and Spirit. Yet, only the Son is incarnate, neither the Father nor the Spirit is, because the Son is the sole recipient, the exclusive object, of the action.² So although all three Persons act in the Incarnation, it is appropriate to characterize it as the act of the Son since neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit received that action. This is perhaps not the only way to clarify the simultaneous indivisibility of divine action and appropriation, but it is a very helpful way for me.

Perhaps this sort of strategy could work when imported over to the divine attributes in the atonement. The entire being of God—including his mercy and his justice—acts as one subject to enact atonement, but only one attribute is the proper object of that action. Thus it is appropriate to characterize the atonement as belonging to the particular attribute. However, going down this potential route still seems to fragment God's being, for the attributes sound almost personified or reified. And that would defeat Johnson's purpose for importing the inseparability and appropriation in the first place—to ensure the oneness of God. So while Johnson's adaptation of the Trinitarian inseparability and appropriation is fraught with potential, it is also

² A similar understanding is used by Richard Cross in his *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 150–155.

endowed with worries that cry out for further explanation. Although one ought not to be overly critical about what an author chooses not to include in his book, nonetheless it would have more strongly served Johnson's purpose of breaking Christians from their habit of isolating individual attributes of God in their theorizing about the atonement if he had explicated this matter in fuller detail.

Analytic theologians, among others, might also be disappointed by the lack of philosophical engagement. For example, Johnson does not wish to reject the penal substitution model outright but instead integrates it into other models. Yet he leaves unanswered questions concerning the possibility of transferring moral properties from Christ to the rest of humans and vice versa or how it could be just that an innocent suffer on behalf of the wicked in the first place. These are deep issues that no author can cover in great detail in an introductory book, yet these are questions that inevitably arise even among non-specialists.

Still, I highly recommend Johnson's book. Johnson began his book by describing the saving work of Christ as abounding in exceeding riches, a genuine treasure trove (5–6). Indeed, I think that analogy can be applied to the very book itself. It is truly a fine, thought-provoking introduction to a perplexing topic with the added benefit of a bibliography that is robust and multi-perspectival, including works that are classical and contemporary, biblical and systematic, and across the ecumenical spectrum. It can serve as either an introductory textbook for undergraduates or remedial reading for graduates in preparation for more advanced study. I would even venture to say that it would be useful in a Church context, either for adult Sunday school or supplementing Bible studies. In any case, it is a valuable book written in a way that I hope to emulate: thorough, insightful, integrative, engaging, and simple without being simplistic. I would love to see more development with the application of indivisibility and appropriation to the atonement, but that would require an entirely separate and technical piece. (Consider that to be an encouragement and a challenge, Dr. Johnson!)