

## DISCUSSIONS

# Debating the Heart of Christianity: Review of Daniel Spencer's book

Daniel H. Spencer: *Forsaking the Fall: Original Sin and the Possibility of a Nonlapsarian Christianity*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023. 203 pp.

In *Forsaking the Fall*, Daniel Spencer argues that a Christianity which takes the Bible as authoritative for faith and which holds continuity with the deep tradition of the Church can still dispense with Original Sin and the lapsarian reading of Genesis and Romans 5. While not explicit in the introduction, the motivation for this move to reject the Fall and Original Sin seems to be a desire to account for humanity's evolutionary origin. Without a historical Garden of Eden or Adam and Eve, can a fully satisfying account of soteriology, Christology, and faithfulness to the biblical text still be held?

In Part I, Spencer asks whether a lapsarian approach, including the doctrines of Original Sin and the Fall, is necessary to the orthodox Christian tradition or to Scriptural interpretation. Chapter 1 compares three versions of Original Sin and tries to extract an "essential" essence of the doctrine. Spencer retrieves Eastern Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic positions and concludes from these that across the Christian traditions, some concept of the Fall and of Original Sin is universal, and thus forms part of the traditional orthodox presentation of Christian belief. He sets out to show that the idea of an original innocence and freedom from the realities of "sin, death, and suffering, weakness and ungodliness" (35) can be forsaken without compromising orthodox Christianity. His conclusion, overall, is that the Fall and Original Sin are

much more like a *pocket* on the garment of Christian orthodoxy: a very convenient adjunct which has historically served as a temporary shelter for various important theological ideas and concerns, but whose absence ultimately proves inoffensive to the integrity of the overall garment (173, italics original).

Chapters 2 and 3 are primarily hermeneutical. Chapter 2 looks at the Garden of Eden narratives in Genesis 2–3 while Chapter 3 looks primarily at Paul’s comparison between Adam and Christ in Romans 5. In Chapter 2, Spencer argues that the primary concern of Genesis 2–3 is not about sin or disobedience to divine command, but is centrally concerned with the motifs of knowledge and immortality (45). The nearly-comic nature of the account, and the lack of mention of sin (not mentioned until Gen 4:7), are used as indicators that the narrative is not primarily about the origins of sin and guilt (57–58). Instead, Spencer argues “that Gen 2–3 deals primarily with the *hominization* of humankind, with the progression of the human species from an earlier, thoroughly affective existence to a state in which it becomes the more rational, morally responsible and self-determining animal we recognize today” (59). Spencer goes so far as to identify the eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as “how the *imago dei* [*sic*] is born in human persons” (60, italics original). It is easy to see how this account is far more amenable to an evolutionary account. In many ways, Spencer parallels the arguments made by Patricia Williams in *Doing without Adam and Eve* (Fortress Press 2001), who—surprisingly—is never mentioned.

In terms of Spencer’s reading, the massive cosmos-wide results of the Fall often described in Reformation writings (Calvin thought even the tilt of the earth’s axis, and therefore the existence of seasons, could be blamed on the Fall) and immortalised in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* are certainly not present in the Biblical account, and Spencer is right to drill down to the text. However, the identification of gaining the *imago Dei* (only mentioned in Gen 1) as a result of eating from the Tree of Knowledge seems equally insensitive to the text. God willingly creates humans in God’s own image in Chapter 1; it is emphatically a divine and not a human act. Furthermore, God does not seem to be particularly pleased with the discovery of the transgression, and the curses pronounced over the snake, the earth, and the couple would be an odd result if their disobedience was part of their intended formation into God’s image. Spencer’s overall point in this chapter, that neither the Fall nor Original Sin is found in the Garden narratives, is very well made. Trying to tie the narrative to an evolutionary narrative instead is far less satisfying.

In Chapter 3, Spencer looks closely at the primary locus for Original Sin in the New Testament: Romans 5:12–21. He first outlines that there are two major camps in the interpretation of this passage: those who argue that Paul intends us to understand a concept of Original Sin, and those who argue instead that Paul’s argument extends only to an original death (69). Following Douglas Moo’s reading of the text, Spencer acknowledges that there is some concept of Original Sin in Paul’s thought (70); however, he

argues that Paul *employs* Original Sin to illustrate Christ but does not *teach* Original Sin (77). We are therefore not obliged to accept Original Sin, since it is merely illustrative of the point Paul is trying to make about Christ. Spencer gives two helpful analogies: the account of the Angel Michael fighting over the body of Moses in Jude 1:9 and Paul's attempt to say it was Isaac who was persecuted by Ishmael in Gal 4:28–29 (80–81). These are helpful examples of where Biblical writers hold assumptions about the Biblical text that most modern readers would not share, but in both cases, the overarching point being made in either passage is still able to be held without accepting the historicity of the example.

After establishing in Part I that a nonlapsarian approach is not ruled out by either the tradition or the Bible, Part II is the more constructive side of the book. Spencer argues that an orthodox view of sin, redemption and salvation can be held without adherence to a concept of Original Sin. Chapter 4 surveys the use of the words translated as “sin” most often in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (*châtâ'* and *hamartia*, respectively). Spencer argues that the overlapping meanings, while diverse, can all be summed up as the “refusal to do and be what God desires; or, positively, sin is doing and being what is contrary to the purposes of God” (96). While that may not tell us what actions are or are not sinful, it does show that neither the Fall nor Original Sin are required from the outset for salvation—an adequate biblical notion of sin can be expressed without reference to Original Sin (107).

Chapter 5 tries to answer some of the theodicy questions that arise out of a nonlapsarian approach, like whether God is responsible for sin in a nonlapsarian account. Spencer starts with F.R. Tennant's account, according to which sin can be understood as the expression of our evolutionary animal instinct—a view that could be problematic if it leaves God as the originator of evil in the world. Spencer shows, however, that the typical doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin also leave God as responsible for sin in the exact same way (120). If this is sauce for the goose it is sauce for the gander. Spencer argues that on a Molinist account of divine knowledge and freewill the traditional account of the Fall is liable to exhibit the same problems as Tennant's evolutionary account of making God responsible for the emergence of sin.

For me, this was the least convincing chapter so far, in that it dealt with only one small set of objections: the group of those who ascribe to God middle knowledge may be prevalent amongst a set of evangelical or Reformed thinkers, but it cuts out the significant conversations around evil and free will amongst numerous Roman Catholic and Open and Relational theologians, which is where such a large part of the conversation around

evil has taken place in recent years. Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness* (2011), or Thomas Jay Oord's many writings (2023, 2021, 2019, 2015), present theodicies that rely on libertarian readings of free will but reject Molinism, while other significant writings that take a Thomistic approach (Brian Davies 2011, Herbert McCabe 2011) hold a compatibilist position. If Spencer had adopted an approach not reliant on Molinism, it could have been useful to a far wider audience.

Chapter 6 explores salvation. The purpose of this chapter is not to show that all atonement models are coherent within a nonlapsarian framework, but only that at least one model is. To this end, Spencer shows how Tim Bayne and Greg Restall's participatory model of the atonement fits the bill (139–141). In this chapter we see a heavier emphasis on combining an evolutionary anthropology with the nonlapsarian approach. Spencer reiterates Tennant's position that what is wrong with humanity is that our good evolutionary desires, fit for survival, are now in conflict with the supernatural goal to which we are called in Christ. This evolutionary account explains the origin of human evil and gives a viable alternative to the traditional account of Adam and Eve's sin (137). Bayne and Restall's atonement by participation is used to show how salvation could be understood as a process by which Christ remakes humans, replacing the earlier nature with a new one through baptism and the Eucharist (140). What is replaced is not the stain of Original Sin, but a reconstitution from a natural animal to a supernatural Christlike figure. Spencer then articulates that goal as a form of "deification" which relies on Gregory Palamas's distinction between divine essence and energies. Sin and death are the "old order" to be made new in Christ; however, the "ancient explanations" (150) for why sin and death reign in humans—Original Sin—could be replaced with an evolutionary account. This chapter was, for me, the strongest of the second half of the book. I think the case he made was compelling. Interest in deification has been growing in recent years, and this is one more valuable addition to that conversation.

One of the pieces along the way that is central to Spencer's argument is that his overall account of a nonlapsarian approach is consistent with orthodox Christianity. This, of course, raises the question in the reader's mind about what is precisely meant by the term "orthodox." In the last substantive chapter Spencer sets out his account of orthodoxy: it is an ontological commitment to a Biblical Metanarrative (articulated by Cyril O'Regan) and, more specifically, to the articulation of that metanarrative as set out by N.T. Wright as the "Dominical Micronarrative" of Jesus's work (165–168). Wright's view rests heavily on what he thinks Jesus's self-understanding is in relation to the history and calling of Israel, and the establishment of the Kingdom of

God. However, what strikes me as odd is that Spencer's account of orthodoxy is one that not many (if any) would have used throughout history, and few would hold to now. Spencer acknowledges that his view of orthodoxy "is not exactly minimal, as authentic Christianity so rendered is seen to entail ontological commitment to a good deal that many theologians today would deny" (168). By using such a specific and narrow articulation of orthodoxy, it made the rest of the book seem like an exercise within a very small group. While I was glad the author did try to deal with the question of orthodoxy, as it was a question that arose a number of times in my mind while reading, I thought this chapter was unnecessarily exclusive. A much simpler view of orthodoxy—the aforementioned minimal view—would have allowed Spencer's overall argument the much more expansive audience I think it deserves. Still, I think that the arguments he makes could be usefully read and appropriated by many who do not ascribe to his narrow view of orthodoxy.

This book is clear and carefully argued. Each section builds on the last in a pleasingly systematic way. Similarly, presuppositions, premises and variations on arguments are all perfectly clear. Opposing viewpoints, when brought up, are treated fairly and engaged with respectfully. All this is done without sacrificing pace, interest, or rigorous argument. In this sense, the book is marvellously well-judged, with extraneous pieces of argument retained in the pages of endnotes. At the same time, there are odd lacunae. I mentioned earlier the missing work of Patricia Williams, but another missing work is Daryl P. Domning and Monika K. Hellwig's *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution* (Routledge, 2006). Given the similarity in the overall argument over how an evolutionary account of human origins can replace the need for a doctrine of Original Sin, it is a pity not to have seen Spencer's engagement with these major works, let alone less well-known accounts like Andrew Elphinstone's *Freedom, Suffering, and Love* (SCM, 1976).

Each chapter constitutes a stand-alone argument, and later parts could likely be read in isolation, so the chapters (particularly those in the first half) could be used in classrooms quite easily. Some of the later chapters, which engage in analytic theology, would be harder going for an undergraduate audience. I would strongly recommend this work to anyone interested in how evolutionary origins can have effects on doctrinal construction, but I think its emphasis on the Scriptural tradition and the sorts of systematic arguments it makes will find its home most easily in Evangelical and Reformed circles.

