

Omondi F 2024, Review of *Spectacular Atonement: Envisioning the Cross of Christ in an African Perspective*, R Falconer, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 236-238

Review

Falconer, Robert, *Spectacular Atonement: Envisioning the Cross of Christ in an African Perspective*. Langham Partnership, London, 2023. ISBN 9781839737367, 166pp.

Review by Francis Omondi, PhD¹.

In *Spectacular Atonement: Envisioning the Cross of Christ in an African Perspective*, Robert Falconer, a lecturer at South African Theological Seminary, wrote a fascinating account of an African perspective of the Christian atonement. The book is divided into two parts. In Part 1 (pp. 7-59), Falconer describes atonement in depth, drawing from scriptures and African theologians' discourse to lay the ground for his atonement in African Christianity. He discusses atonement in scriptures (pp. 7-27) demonstrating the harmony of penal substitution with *Christus Victor*, which he understands as a drama in the grand narrative of scripture. Falconer argues that in the scriptures God through his Son triumphed over Satan and the evil spirits, defeating them and liberating humanity from the bondage of sin and death (Heb. 2:14-15). Falconer anchors his discourse on the atonement in early church theology, where again he explains the harmony of penal substitution and *Christus Victor* through historical theology (pp. 29-53). Falconer explains the African cultural context's influence on African Christianity's atonement theology (pp. 53-59).

In Part 2, Falconer focuses on African concerns (pp. 63-140). He begins by exploring African spirituality and its worldview (pp. 63-64). For the Africans, the 'physical' and the 'spiritual' worlds are interwoven (p. 65). Having laid this foundation, Falconer discusses the core of his thesis:

¹ Canon Francis Omondi (PhD) is a Lecturer at South African Theological Seminary, a Research Tutor at Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life, and an Adjunct Lecturer at St. Paul's University Limuru.

African sacrificial ritual, [in which] an animal suffers and dies on behalf of the offender, [is] similar to what we saw in the sacrifices of the Old Testament. (p. 70)

He argues that the traditional African atoning sacrifices and rituals, in their wide array, fulfil Africans' spiritual and practical needs (p. 73). Central to Falconer's argument is the African idea of God, in which he discusses God's presence in all the lives of Africans (75-78). This God is greater than anything created. Falconer observes:

While Africans believe in God, they also believe in other spiritual beings, some of which are closely associated with the Supreme Being. (76)

It is on the relationship of God and ancestral intermediaries that Falconer premises Christ and his atoning work. Yet he identifies the cross of Christ as the key distinction between the God of Scripture and the African idea of God (p. 79).

The atonement of Christ and the mediation role of the African ancestors are critical in Falconer's argument. Hence, 'the outcome and reconciliation in Christ were simply spectacular!' (p. 71), which gives him the title *Spectacular Atonement*. In the instances of African traditional sacrifice and ritual, penalties paid for a substitutionary atonement are the parallel that he draws between the atonement of Christ and the ancestors' mediatory function (pp. 81-86). Falconer emphasises Christ's superiority, who provides the spectacular atonement through his cross (p. 87). Falconer addresses actual fears he thinks many Africans experience. These include evil spirits, sin, witchcraft, and suffering (pp. 105-111). He suggests that understanding Christ's cross from an African perspective may offer Africans hope (pp. 113-120). Falconer closes with a discussion of cosmic harmony and African hope (pp. 131-137). He argues that the cross of Christ, though physical, is intrinsic, considering the new creation. It fulfils the yearnings of African peoples espoused in their myths and traditions (p. 140).

Although Falconer presents an African perspective of God and atonement from an outsider's perspective, he compensates for this by dialoguing with an array

of African indigenous theological thought. This validates the positions he takes on the African worldview and experience.

Falconer falls into the trap of numerous analysts discussing God. God in an African context is discussed in terms of abstract ideas, the 'concept of God'. Meanwhile, God in the Bible is discussed in concrete terms, such as the God of Abraham. Thus, the point of disagreement is in discussing the African God through the prism of the cross of Christ and the God of the Bible. Falconer affirms God's presence in the African pre-Christian life (p. 75), believed to be the Supreme Being, not dissimilar in some respects to the God revealed in the Old Testament.

Falconer maintains that the African understanding of God is both transcendent and immanent. He adopts the idea of God as the father of the ancestors: he is their Great Ancestor, the Ultimate Ancestor, they can turn to. So, Falconer claims (p. 77): 'I believe that God can be (or is) understood as both Creator and Ancestor by almost all African people'. For Falconer, 'The atonement is the factor that distinguishes the God of the Bible from the African idea of God' (p. 79). He then characterises God in terms such as 'mysteries of Trinity', 'incarnation', and 'redemption'. Would the same position be reached if these characterisations applied to Judaism?

This book will be useful to scholars interested in reconciling African traditions and worldview with Christian theological concepts. It will generate a robust dialogue for a clearer understanding of God from an African perspective. It is highly recommended.