

Sin: A History

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Sin: A History

Gary A. Anderson
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Gary Anderson, professor of Old Testament at the University of Notre Dame, has written an astonishing book that, in ways typical of his work, moves from close

textual reading to the widest vistas of interpretation. As usual, he exhibits uncommon erudition, careful method and disciplined imagination that evokes connections his readers surely would not have otherwise noticed. The general idea of the book is that “sin has a history”—that over time understandings of sin reflected in the Bible and in nonbiblical literature changed in dramatic and significant ways.

Anderson identifies three ways of speaking of sin in the Bible—as stain, as burden and as debt. He scarcely mentions stain (only in his introduction), and he handles burden in one brief chapter, so the focus of his compelling study is on sin as debt. He judges that the transfer of interpretive energy from burden to debt can be traced chronologically, with burden evident in the earlier materials and debt becoming dominant in the Second Temple period and exercising immense influence on rabbinic and early Christian interpretation.

He suggests, in too offhand a way, that the change from burden to debt happened because of the move from Hebrew to Aramaic, and that the vocabulary for sin in Aramaic tilted in the direction of economic imagery. Anderson is a most capable scholar of linguistics, but I find his explanation of the change less than persuasive. Whatever may have been the cause of the transfer from one meaning to another, however, his attention to a mass of detailed texts makes clear that meaning does shift in exactly the way he reports.

In pursuit of his thesis regarding sin as debt, Anderson pays attention to the economic vocabulary of credit, debt and loans. Such a trajectory seems to be anchored in the familiar text of Isaiah 40:2: “Her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” The central idea is that sin has a cost, a fine that must be paid. This leads to Anderson’s close reading of economic matters, with suggestive forays into rabbinic interpretation, and leads to his judgment that God “holds a bond” against the sinner that requires payment. The economic metaphor permits vivid rhetoric from Anderson. He suggests that God is not averse to “cooking the books,” refers to “doing business with God,” says that the kingdom of heaven doesn’t seem to be a “zero-sum affair,” and asserts that God has “gamed the system” by allowing “our small donations to count against the immeasurable debt of our sins.”

The dominant imagery is of God as a bookkeeper keeping a ledger. Thus a pivotal text is Colossians 2:14: “erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands.” But Anderson also shows us the texts whereby that imagery is eased, not

only by God's acceptance of small payments but by God's readiness to provide the funds from which payment is made, so that "we give thee but thine own." The payee, Anderson writes regarding King Nebuchadnezzar, "is returning to God what is God's. God is repaid with funds he provided in the first place." Thus the demanding divine Creditor is also generous in settlement.

When Anderson addresses repayment, he rallies more evidence, with a special appeal to Daniel 4:27. In that verse Nebuchadnezzar is urged to give alms as a way of correcting the imbalance of his guilt before God. Anderson finds that almsgiving is a primal commandment, and the primary strategy whereby sin is paid off. By the time he finishes, Anderson has taken up the vexed conflict about works in the Reformation; he ends with the assertion that Anselm's satisfaction theory is deeply rooted in biblical imagery.

This book merits wide and sustained attention. The general idea that sin has a history is an important one, because there is hardly any doubt that the current disputes in the church over sexuality and other matters spin off from very different notions of sin. I regret that Anderson has not yet done more with the idea of sin as stain because I suspect that a conservative view of sexuality is informed by such a notion of sin, whereas a liberal view is almost certainly centered on an economic question of justice. Perhaps we may expect two more volumes from Anderson on the other two dominant images of sin that he has identified. The older views have not been superseded.

Protestants are bound to respond to the way in which he dismisses the Reformation critique of merit and of indulgences. Happily, he cites the recent Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification as the sign of an important new shared awareness about these matters. More over, he notes Luther's careful distinction between alms as good works and as merit. But no one ever thought that Luther opposed good works. What he opposed was the idea that good works could save people. Anderson judges that the dispute about alms was "hardly church-dividing" and that the problem was only about who would "have some say in how these merits are distributed." This misses the point completely. Anderson would be on firmer ground if he saw that Luther understood better than the church of his time that repayment was all about God's boundless generosity and not about the merit of alms.

The other, more important issue that may concern readers is that while Anderson (in an appeal to Paul Ricoeur) sees that he is dealing with an economic metaphor, he seems too easily to permit it to become a theological (vertical) idea. That is, he does not take seriously enough that this understanding of sin frames the entire reality of human life as an economic transaction.

Anderson does speak of “redressing economic injustice” and of the danger of “accumulation of wealth.” But he does not pursue these matters and is content to reduce the general mandate of righteousness to almsgiving without any sustained attention to the matter of systemic justice that is surely intrinsic to the notion of righteousness. He becomes a literalist about alms without considering that alms may be a metaphor for the entire responsibility of the moneyed for the health of the community. No doubt a prophetic understanding of righteousness entailed much more than almsgiving, but there is nothing here drawn from a liberationist hermeneutic about the broader issues of economic redress that might be buttressed by a reference to, say, Daniel 4:27. There is more work to be done, particularly as we think about how metaphor in biblical ethics is regularly extrapolated in a variety of directions.

In any case, Anderson presents the idea that redress for sin concerns a neighborly responsibility and that christological claims are shaped differently given economic imagery. There are few books available that offer as many generative insights as this one. It bubbles with interpretive possibilities. While the Anselm tradition has often been captured in a reductionistic manner, Anderson suggests how it might be recovered in ways that are socially alert and systemically demanding.