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THE EMERGENCE OF SIN: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans by Matthew Croasmun. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 190 pp. + notes, references, and index. Hardcover; \$74.00. ISBN: 9780190277987.

SIN is a person, a being, an entity exercising tyrannical dominion over all human persons since the dawn of humanity's emergence. This is the provocative claim that Matthew Croasmun, Associate Research Scholar, Director of the Life Worth Living Program at the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture, and Lecturer of Divinity and Humanities at Yale University, advances in his book *The Emergence of SIN*. Based on his doctoral dissertation (which won the 2015 Manfred Lautenschläger Award for Theological Promise), Croasmun masterfully weaves together interdisciplinary research from the fields of biblical studies, theology, ancient Greco-Roman culture, and scientific and philosophical contributions to emergence theory. He puts forth a case that is stimulating, enlightening, and, for the most part, clear and convincing, with important implications for theological anthropology, ecclesiology, ethics (social and personal), politics, and the dialogical, mutually enriching relationship between science and Christian faith.

The context giving rise to his thesis is Paul's discussion of sin in Romans 5–8, and more specifically Paul's personification of sin as Sin, a cosmic agent exercising power and control over the human beings it enslaves. His question is whether "Sin as a cosmic agent" has "a basis in fact" for Paul. He then surveys three ways of answering this question in modern theological literature.

The first option, represented by Bultmann and existentialist interpreters, is that personified Sin is a literary device, not to be taken literally but pointing to a deeper truth that confronts the reader with questions about human existence. The claim is not so much that Paul intentionally employs personification in strictly a literary sense, but that modern readers (who know they must separate myth from kerygma) must read Paul this way to read the text responsibly (reasonably). This idea is the result of "Bultmann's assumption that Sin as a cosmic power does not correspond to 'the actual state of affairs'" (p. 8), whether

or not it has a "basis in fact" for Paul. Bultmann is suspicious of mythical interpretations not only for epistemological reasons, but also for ethical reasons. He is concerned to preserve the culpability of the sinner (emphasizing the point of decision), which he believes is compromised by accounts that lean toward cosmic determinism. Thus, Bultmann argues that Paul's position is that sin *came into the world by sinning*; it is inherited socially, not biologically or spiritually. "Original sin" is a pre-Pauline gnostic myth that Paul accommodates.

The second option, represented by Käsemann, is that by personifying Sin, Paul is claiming that human beings are under the dominion of real spiritual powers that transcend human beings ontologically. For Käsemann, Paul's mythological language cannot be fully explained away; it is not "just" metaphor. Quoting Käsemann, a person "is in the grip of forces which seize his existence and determine his will and responsibility at least to the extent that he cannot choose freely but can only grasp what is already there" (p. 11). Thus, for Käsemann, Sin "is a very literal demonic power" (p. 12). Croasmun points out that both Bultmann and Käsemann make legitimate points and that the biblical text has room for elements of both views. Paul makes two claims that seem paradoxical to the modern reader: sin is both something that human beings commit (thus, confirming Bultmann) and yet Sin is a transcendent entity, acting upon humans who are thus enslaved (as per Käsemann).

A third option, represented by various liberation theologians, is that personified Sin refers to social and political structures that perpetuate evil and oppression in human societies. For Oscar Romero, such structures "are sin" because they produce the characteristic fruit of sin, namely death. Elsa Tamaz points out, in light of Romans 7, that "sin needs the law to hide its wickedness with legitimacy." As such, Sin is both "a personified and enslaving power" and a structure "constructed by unjust practices of human beings" (p. 16). Similarly, according to José Ignacio González Faus, "When human beings sin, they create structures of sin, which, in their turn, *make human beings sin*" (p. 16, emphasis original). Juan Segundo likens Paul's language of Sin to the demonic in the gospels, specifically in that sin "is a condition that subdues and enslaves me against my own will" (p. 17). Yet, these powers operate through sinful social and political structures. For Bultmann, Sin is a myth pointing existentially to the culpability of the individual and leading the importance of individual decision, and, for Käsemann, Sin is a spiritual entity influencing individual human beings; for liberation theology, Sin points to the fact that individual human

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sinners participate in corporate structures of sin, not only committing sin but also becoming socially conditioned by such structures to commit sin.

Croasmun touches briefly on two attempts to synthesize individual-corporate and mythical-existential dimensions of Sin (Jerome Murphy-O'Connor and Derek Nelson), but he finds that both lapse back into reducing one side of the duality (e.g., individual or corporate) into the other (pp. 18–20). These attempts at synthesis share the same basic problem of all previous proposals: they all struggle to articulate an adequate ontology of social entities.

From his survey of the three main options, Croasmun argues that each makes important contributions and that all three can fruitfully describe Romans 5–8 and coexist, but only with the addition of an appropriate ontology that they all currently lack. What is needed is not simply a middle ground (an attempted synthesis or compromise), but “a both-and solution, an ontology that permits us to conceive the ‘actual state of affairs’ in a rich enough way to hold the various entities and various agents in Paul’s language together, all at once” (p. 21).

In the next two chapters of the book, Croasmun turns to emergence theory to help him construct an ontology of social entities that can fruitfully make sense of Paul’s personification of Sin in the “both-and” kind of way just described. Thus, for Croasmun, emergentism “provides the framework we need to hold together the multilevel picture of Sin which Paul paints for us” (p. 23).

In chapter 2, Croasmun offers a fairly standard account of emergence theory as it has arisen in several scientific and social-scientific disciplines. As is common, he presents emergence as a theory that opposes various forms of reductionism (ontological, methodological, epistemic) and substance dualism (mental and vital). Regarding the latter, he writes that for emergentists “there is only one kind of stuff in the universe; there are no special ‘mental’ or ‘vital’ substances ... [on] this point, emergentism and reductionism agree” (p. 28). Moreover, he claims that “ontological monism—the belief that the universe consists of only one kind of substance—is scientific (and, to a lesser degree, philosophical) orthodoxy” (p. 27). This naturalism, it seems to me, is overstated. For one thing, while it can accurately be said that monism tends to be popular at the moment, it is quite another thing to claim that it represents a new orthodoxy (Croasmun cites John Searle as a philosophical authority, but there are important philosophers who remain convinced of dualism—for example, Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, and Eleonore Stump).

In addition, it is not clear to me precisely how emergence theory definitively rules out nonphysical substances as such (i.e., as part of one’s overall worldview, including metaphysical considerations). At the very least, orthodox Christians must affirm that some nonphysical entities exist—most importantly, God, the divine nature of Christ, and angels—and that these nonphysical entities can interact with the physical world (though we do not understand how, given that we have no unmediated access to God’s essence or purely spiritual entities). Perhaps Croasmun only means that human beings, more specifically, are composed of “one kind of stuff.” Well, perhaps. But I do not see how emergence theory can know this so confidently. Of course, it is appropriate that, in the context of scientific study, emergence theory is researched within the confines of methodological naturalism; but it also seems obvious that within these confines, emergence theory will necessarily bracket out non-material factors and explanations such as souls and other immaterial substances or powers. But the outcome here is determined in advance by the method, not by the nature of Reality as such, which is only partially accessible to the methods of science. I find the critical realism of Christian Smith (see his *What Is a Person?*), and the epistemic humility it entails, instructive on this matter: we must hold together as related, but not conflated, what we personally experience through our senses (the empirical), all that happens (the actual), and all that is (material and nonmaterial; the real). “Thus, what we observe (the empirical) is not identical to all that happens (the actual), and neither is identical to what which is (the real).”¹ If we limit our methods of inquiry to the first two domains, philosophically not just scientifically, then we remain open to the charge of reductionism.

Croasmun continues chapter 2 with a survey of the history of emergence theory, including a lucid and helpful discussion of supervenience, downward causation, and “weak” and “strong” forms of emergence. The chapter includes an incisive case study to show how an emergent account of social entities illuminates the insidiousness and complexity of racism in America, thus providing theoretical and scientific substance to the claim that racism can exist without racists.² Sound provocative and paradoxical? Let this be a teaser to entice you to read his insightful analysis.

In chapter 3, Croasmun employs emergence theory in order to rethink the meaning of “person” such that it can be capable of describing entities that transcend individuality. He argues that since corporate entities can exercise “agency” and demonstrate the operations of “mind” (superorganisms and group minds—e.g., bee hives, altruism operating at the group level, insti-

tutional persons, multi/many-authored scientific experiments), they can legitimately be considered as “persons” in some sense, from an emergentist perspective. Croasmun’s discussion is fascinating and illuminating in many ways, pushing at the boundaries of individualistic and atomistic notions of personhood. However, questions remain. Croasmun describes complex corporate entities as persons; why then does the evil we experience from corporate entities seem so impersonal? And it is precisely the *impersonal* nature of the evil (whose source we can broadly identify but not specify) that makes it so dehumanizing. I also wonder if superorganisms or group minds that are emergent from individual human beings bear the image of God. Do they possess inherent and inalienable dignity? Human rights? Is the ontology of a social structure as real as human consciousness (or the human “self/soul”)?

In chapter 4, Croasmun seeks to provide an emergent account of Sin in the book of Romans to address the question,

How does this understanding of the self reframe not only our questions about the personal language Paul employs with regard to [Sin], but also our questions about the overlapping agencies at the individual, social, and mythological levels? (p. 103)

He suggests that emergence illuminates what Paul signifies when he describes Sin as entering the world (Rom. 5:12), increasing (5:20), exercising dominion (5:21; 6:12,14), producing desire (7:8), and reviving (7:9) and dwelling in the bodies of sinners (7:17, 20). It does so as an emergent person, specifically a cosmic tyrant that enslaves the human race. This account is emergent, because “Sin not only gains power over people’s lives through their cooperation, but also, Sin depends ontologically on this cooperation, as Sin’s supervenience base consists precisely of this cooperation” (p. 111). Co-opted by Sin, human beings are drawn collectively into constituting the Body of Sin (“in Adam”) that Paul contrasts with the Body of Christ, another emergent entity created by the redemptive and sanctifying work of Christ and the Spirit and constituted by the supervenience base of redeemed human persons. Thus, to summarize the effects of Sin’s emergence: “The primary role Sin plays in the cosmic drama of Romans is that of exercising dominion over the members of its Body” (p. 124). In the final pages of the chapter, Croasmun returns to the issues of race, the law, and the dominion of Sin, as well as a brief discussion of original sin and the transmission of sin. His proposal is that only an emergent approach that accounts for the ontology of Sin at the individual, social, and mythical levels is capable of adequately explaining the mechanism of the transmission of sin in a way which eludes

Augustinian, Liberal/Ritschlian, and scientific/epigenetic proposals.

In the final (and probably, most controversial) chapter, entitled “Sin, Gender, and Empire,” Croasmun seeks to specify in greater detail the identity that Paul attributes to Sin in Romans. In dialogue with first-century Greco-Roman scholarship (especially concerning devotion to the goddess Roma) and gender and post-colonial theory, Croasmun presents Sin, or Hamartia, as a goddess that subjugates and dominates human beings in a way that violates the “natural” order of things (sexual connotations of tribadic penetration are present here, in line with the kind of “unnatural” sexual expression Croasmun thinks Paul has in mind in Romans 1). Thus,

Paul exploits the identification of effeminating conqueror and effeminate conquered in Roman imperial ideology manifest in tribadic Roma (that is, Roma-read-as-tribas). The implication is this: perhaps the imperium of Roman ideology is not the paradigm of an impenetrable masculinity, but rather the natural consequence of greater and greater degrees of enslavement to feminine desire. (p. 165)

In contrast, Paul, through parody and irony, presents Christ (via the cross) and the life of Christ’s Body (the church) as subverting this oppressive vision of (apparently) successful worldly power.

Ironically, it is within this effeminate Body of Christ that true masculine self-mastery is possible ... The effeminate Body of Christ delivers what the tribadic Body of Hamartia could not: mastery of the passions (Rom. 6:12, 13:14), the renewal of mind (12:2), and the establishment of imperium (5:17). Obedience in imitation of the “dominated,” “effeminate” Christ yields everything that the masculine Roman ideology was supposed to deliver. (p. 170)

It is difficult to know what to make of Croasmun’s final chapter. On the one hand, he offers an interesting and creative (too creative?) case that Paul accommodates Roman mythology (combining religious and sexual themes) as a subversion of Roman imperial ideology. On the other hand, he appears to assume a very Roman (not Jewish) audience for Paul’s readership. For example, this reading seems quite disconnected from the rest of the canon generally and the Old Testament and its own ancient context in particular (he seems to interpret Paul as reading the Old Testament exclusively through Philo and other select Hellenistic sources). It also leaves unaddressed the overarching concerns of Romans, especially the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and the resolution of God’s covenant promises given Gentile inclusion. I am left wondering how Croasmun’s arguments on Sin, gender, and empire fit within Paul’s broader purposes and narrative in

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Romans. I raise these concerns tentatively, leaving their adjudication to experts in New Testament and Pauline studies.³

Croasmun's aims in *The Emergence of Sin* are ambitious and, by and large, successful. The book invites and stimulates interdisciplinary engagement and discussion from scientists, social scientists, biblical scholars, theologians, and cultural critics. Perhaps most helpful is the clarity, lucidity, and accessibility with which Croasmun presents emergence theory (I plan to assign one of his chapters to my theological anthropology students), both in its own right and as insightful and illuminative in drawing out more fully than past interpreters the full significance of Paul's personification of Sin in Romans. This, in turn, allows for incisive analysis and critique of social evils, such as racism, going beyond approaches that fall into reductionism due to their inadequate (or lacking) ontologies of social entities. While I have reservations about some of the claims Croasmun makes as discussed above, I heartily recommend his book to all PSCF readers and look forward to seeing more critical engagement from biblical scholars.

Notes

¹Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 93; cf. 90–98 for the larger discussion.

²Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

³Scot McKnight, for one, is not convinced by Croasmun's final chapter (especially his presentation of Sin as Roma-tribas), though he is quite impressed with the first four chapters of the book. See his review, posted on his blog on June 11, 2018, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/06/11/sin-as-tyrant/>.

Reviewed by Patrick S. Franklin, Associate Professor of Theology, Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, ON M2M 3S4.