

Romans 5:12–21: Paul’s view of a literal Adam

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There are many theologians who embrace a non-literal view of Adam, asserting that their view does not compromise the integrity of Scripture overall. However, Scripture itself does not allow Adam to be taken non-literally; many passages in Scripture require Adam to be a historical individual. Among them is Romans 5:12–21, where a historical Adam is contrasted with the historical Jesus.

Romans 5:12–21 connects the argument that Paul is concluding with the next argument he makes in chapter 6. Witherington calls this passage ‘some of the most difficult material in all of Romans in terms of grammar and interpretation.’¹ Scholars differ as to the importance of the passage to the book, some calling it ‘the logical centre of the epistle’, with others dismissing it as ‘a digression’, and there is still further disagreement about whether it is more closely related to the preceding or following passages.² One of the things that most commentators *do* agree on is the importance of the historicity of Adam to *Paul’s argument*, regardless of the commentator’s personal view regarding Genesis.

Preceding context

In Romans 5:12, Paul is coming to the climax of an argument, and it is impossible to appreciate the passage fully without seeing what leads up to this climax. Paul begins his argument by asserting that God’s wrath is being poured out against mankind because of their sinfulness (1:18). The pagan outside the law has no excuse because God has made Himself manifest in His creation, and the pagan, instead of worshipping God, worshipped the creation (1:18–32). The Jew was given the Law through Moses, but the Jews are also sinners and break the Law, so they are also condemned; but even the Gentiles have no excuse because they have morality written on their hearts, thus a conscience (2:17–29). The law is not capable of saving anyone; it can only turn sin into willful transgression (3:19). No one is righteous, and everyone is under condemnation.

However, God has provided a means of justification through faith in Jesus Christ (3:21). Through Jesus’ sacrifice we can be saved; a person cannot become righteous through his own works, so no one can boast (3:22–29). Paul mentions Abraham as an example of a person who was justified through faith alone, not by works, long before the Law was given through Moses (4:1–25). Those who are justified by faith are reconciled with God and are spared from his wrath (5:1–11).

Parenthesis?

There is some disagreement about how Romans 5:12–21 fits into Paul’s thought in the letter. I take the view, along with many commentaries, that verses 12b–17 constitute a parenthetical thought: Paul interrupts his main argument to clarify the relationship between Adam and Christ, and comes back to his original argument at verse 18. A recurring grammatical construction in Romans, which also occurs in many Pauline letters, is a ὥσπερ (*hōsper*) clause followed by a οὕτως καί (*houtōs kai*) clause, translated ‘just as’ and ‘so’. However, in verse 12 we find a ὥσπερ clause with no οὕτως καί clause, indicating a break in Paul’s thought.³ Paul uses the construction καί οὕτως, which may have served to make the break less jarring. Paul begins to go off on a peripheral thought and will not return to his original thought until verse 18, where there is a nearly identical ὥσπερ clause to the one that was left dangling in verse 12.⁴

Two races of mankind

Paul argues that death spread to all men because all sinned, and death reigned from Adam until Moses, even in the absence of a law to transgress as Adam transgressed God’s command in Eden. The two words translated as ‘because’ in most translations, ἐφ’ ᾧ (*eph hō*), can also have one of several causative meanings, the most popular being ‘with the result that’. Some Church Fathers supported causative translations of the phrase, however, Witherington notes that whenever Paul uses the phrase, it simply means ‘because’, and so is the most probable correct translation.^{5,6}

Paul calls Adam a type of Christ; Cranfield notes that in this context:

‘The word translated “type” (it is actually the Greek word from which the English “type” derives) denotes ... a type in the sense of a person or thing prefiguring (according to God’s design) a person or thing pertaining to the time of eschatological fulfillment.’⁷

After noting that Adam is a type of Christ, it would normally be expected for Paul to elaborate on how the two are *similar*, but he instead *contrasts* them. The sole point of similarity that Paul draws is that Adam and Jesus’ action both ‘had far-reaching consequences for all those who came after him and had integral connection with him.’⁸ Paul is not so much comparing Adam and Christ as he is *contrasting* the effects of their respective actions; Adam’s disobedience resulted in death for all who came after him, and Christ’s obedience resulted in the free gift of life for all who trust in

Διὰ τοῦτο ὡς περ δι' ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσηλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διήλθεν, ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον· ἄρχι γὰρ νόμου ἁμαρτία ἦν ἐν κόσμῳ, ἁμαρτία δὲ οὐκ ἐλλογεῖται μὴ ὄντος νόμου, ἀλλὰ ἐβασίλευσεν ὁ θάνατος ἀπὸ Ἀδὰμ μέχρι Μωϋσέως καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς μὴ ἁμαρτήσαντας ἐπὶ τῷ ὁμοιώματι τῆς παραβάσεως Ἀδαμ ὅς ἐστιν τύπος τοῦ μέλλοντος. Ἀλλ' οὐχ ὡς τὸ παράπτωμα, οὕτως καὶ τὸ χάρισμα· εἰ γὰρ τῷ τοῦ ἑνὸς παραπτώματι οἱ πολλοὶ ἀπέθανον, πολλῶ μᾶλλον ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ δωρεὰ ἐν χάριτι τῇ τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐπερίσσευσεν. καὶ οὐχ ὡς δι' ἑνὸς ἁμαρτήσαντος τὸ δῶρημα· τὸ μὲν γὰρ κρίμα ἐξ ἑνὸς εἰς κατάκριμα, τὸ δὲ χάρισμα ἐκ πολλῶν παραπτωμάτων εἰς δικαίωμα. εἰ γὰρ τῷ τοῦ ἑνὸς παραπτώματι ὁ θάνατος ἐβασίλευσεν διὰ τοῦ ἑνός, πολλῶ μᾶλλον οἱ περισσεῖαν τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς δικαιοσύνης λαμβάνοντες ἐν ζωῇ βασιλεύσουσιν διὰ τοῦ ἑνός Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Ἄρα οὖν ὡς δι' ἑνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι' ἑνὸς δικαίωματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς· ὡς περ γὰρ διὰ τῆς παρακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἁμαρτωλοὶ καταστάθησαν οἱ πολλοί, οὕτως καὶ διὰ τῆς ὑπακοῆς τοῦ ἑνός δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται οἱ πολλοί. νόμος δὲ παρεῖσηλθεν, ἵνα πλεονάσῃ τὸ παράπτωμα· οὗ δὲ ἐπλεόνασεν ἡ ἁμαρτία, ὑπερεπερίσσευσεν ἡ χάρις, ἵνα ὡς περ ἐβασίλευσεν ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ, οὕτως καὶ ἡ χάρις βασιλεύσῃ διὰ δικαιοσύνης εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν.

The Greek text of Romans 5:12–21 shows that Adam was a historical individual.

Him. However, this contrast would be meaningless without the underlying similarity.⁹

Some have argued erroneously that Paul is teaching universalism in this passage; that just as Adam's transgression affected all who came after him, so Christ's sacrifice affects all, resulting in universal salvation. But this charge is easily refuted. First, Paul uses the quantifier πολλοὶ (*polloi*) for the people affected by Christ's sacrifice, which sometimes means 'all' but also means 'many'. However, Paul has earlier used the word πάντες (*pantes*), which means 'all' or 'every', for those affected by Adam's sin, indicating that he wishes to distinguish between 'the many' and 'all'.¹⁰ Second, as noted above, Paul never tries to argue that Adam and Jesus are alike in all ways, in fact, the theme become how much *greater* Christ's action was than Adam's (*a fortiori* argument).

Christ's action is greater than Adam's for two reasons: first, it only took one sin to enslave man to sin and death. It is just and reasonable that sin be judged. However, the free gift resulting from Christ's sacrifice came after centuries of sins; such mercy is truly amazing. It is also greater in the result. Second, Christ's action produced a greater result; Adam's sin brought death, whereas Christ's sacrifice results in life for all who believe.¹¹

Until this passage in Romans, Paul has used the terms Jew and Gentile. He discards these labels in this passage, having shown that all are equally under condemnation. Instead, he divides people into two 'races'; the race of Adam and the race of Christ. 'All people, Paul teaches, stand in relationship to one of two men, whose actions determine the eternal destiny of all who belong to them. Either one "belongs to" Adam and is under sentence of death because of his sin, or disobedience, or one belongs to Christ and is assured of eternal life because of his righteous act, or obedience.'¹²

Sin and righteousness

In both cases, it is important to stress that one is counted as sinful not because of one's own individual sinfulness (though every individual *is* sinful) or righteousness, but because of one's relationship to Adam or Christ. In this passage Paul

treats 'sin' and 'righteousness'/'justification' as *forensic* or *legal* terms. The legal aspect of justification (δικαίωμα, *dikaiōma*) can be shown by its contrast with 'condemnation' (κατάκριμα, *katakrima*), obviously a legal concept, in Romans 5:16. Thus 'justification' means *legal* declaration of righteousness, or *acquittal*, not an infusion of personal righteousness.¹³ Moo summarizes:

'Paul is insisting that people were really "made" sinners through Adam's act of disobedience just as they were really "made righteous" through Christ's obedience. ... To be righteous does not mean to be morally upright, but to be judged acquitted, cleared of all charges, in the heavenly judgment. Through Christ's obedient act, people became really righteous; but "righteousness" itself is a legal, not a moral, term in this context.'¹⁴

Adam and Christ must be equally historical

Paul is using a typology in this passage which requires Adam and Christ to be equally historical; he is arguing that both individuals acted in ways that had real and lasting consequences in human history. It is impossible for either to be symbolic for Paul's argument to be coherent. Paul sees Adam and Christ as history's two most important figures: Adam causing humanity's downfall by his disobedience, and Christ triumphing over that downfall by his obedience.¹⁵ Using Adam as a type of Christ sets the stage for the contrast between 'I' in chapter 7 and the person in Christ in chapter 8.¹⁶ A literal interpretation of the first few chapters of Genesis, then, underlies a fairly large section of Romans.

This passage is not the only place where Paul clearly regards Genesis to be a historically accurate document. Three chapters later, Paul points out that the whole creation was subjected to futility because of the Fall.¹⁷

Also, in another epistle, 1 Corinthians 15, Paul calls Jesus 'the Last Adam', bringing resurrection from the dead, in contrast to 'the first man, Adam', who brought death. And in 1 Timothy 2, Paul teaches on the role of men and women in church by appealing to the order of creation, Adam being created before Eve and the fact that Eve was deceived and Adam was not.¹⁸

Conclusion

It is not uncommon to read commentaries on Genesis that argue that the first 11 chapters are poetic, or that Adam was just a symbol for all mankind. However, as shown here, Paul's argument depends completely on a historical individual man called Adam, who committed a real sin bringing real death. Otherwise, why believe in a real historical Jesus who brought justification from sin? No, it is clear from this passage, and many others in both the Old and New Testament, that Scripture itself takes Adam to be a historical person, and the Fall to be a historical event.¹⁹ Without these historical facts, the Gospel itself has no foundation (cf. Psalm 11:3).

References

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