

Adam in the Argument of Romans — Synopsis

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This paper discusses the degree of Adam's importance in the argument of Romans. It commences with a presentation of the purpose and argument of the epistle, followed by a brief assessment of allusions to Adam in 1:18-23 and 7:7-12, before focusing in on the connections of 5:21-21 to various parts of the letter. In doing so, the measure of Adam's importance is explored in six sections of Romans: 1:18-4:25, 5:1-11, 5:12-21, 6:1-8:39, 9:1-11:36 and 12:1-15:13. It is concluded that whilst scholars assert Adam's importance in the letter, they do not deal explicitly with the *degree* of his importance, thus highlighting the need for further research in this area. This paper concludes that Adam is of foremost significance in the edifice of Paul's argument to ensure a correct understanding of the gospel – and also the law – in order to bring unity to the church at Rome.

The seventeenth century Puritan, Thomas Goodwin, said, 'In God's sight there are two men – Adam and Jesus Christ – and these two men have all other men hanging at their girdle strings.'¹ Whilst most commentators assert Adam's importance in the argument of Romans, this essay will explore the degree of his importance. We concur with Kreitzer that the Apostle Paul assumes Adam's historicity² and therefore this will not be our concern; neither will the issue of original sin.³ After presenting Paul's purpose and argument, followed by a brief discussion on the passages concerning allusions to Adam, we will focus in on 5:12-21 and its connections to the argument of Romans. In doing so, the measure of Adam's importance will be presented, along with some concluding reflections.

Paul's purpose in writing to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles in Rome⁴ is multi-faceted: self-introduction (1:1-6); strengthen the church (1:11; 16:25); explain the gospel, particularly in relation to the role of the law (1:1-5, 15-17;

¹ Cited in F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; London: The Tyndale Press, 1963), 127.

² L. J. Kreitzer, 'Adam and Christ', *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*: 10. Also, A. A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 57-58.

³ Paul does not deal in 5:12-21 with *how* sin was transmitted from Adam to mankind, but simply states it as an objective fact. For a discussion on the various views of original sin see Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 154-62; and Robert L. Reymond, *Paul: Missionary Theologian* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 323-29.

⁴ James C. Miller, 'The Romans Debate: 1991-2001', *CR:BS* 9 (2001): 327, who states that it is a generally held consensus amongst scholars that Paul wrote to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles.

3:19-20, 31; 5:13-14, 5:20; 7:7-25; 8:2-4); resolve the Jew / Gentile conflict and bring unity (3:22, 29-30; 11:17-24; 12:3-13, 16-18; 15:1-7); ensure support for his Spanish mission (15:23-24).⁵

Paul's argument in Romans is united by the overriding theme of the gospel, which frames both ends of the letter (1:1, 9, 15; 15: 16, 19; 16:25). At the heart of the epistle is the issue of Jew / Gentile conflict in the church, and in particular the Jewish opponents who accused Paul of proclaiming a fictional gospel of justification that was outside the realm of proof, required no change in one's life, and provided no security for the future.⁶ Throughout the letter Paul refers to the Jew / Gentile divide showing that all have sinned (3:9, 19-20, 23; 5:12, 15-19; 11:32), and all can receive grace through faith in Jesus Christ (1:5, 16; 3:22-24, 29-30; 10:11-13; 11:25-26, 30-32; 15:8-13, 16, 18-19; 16:26). The words 'all' and 'everyone' dominate the letter highlighting Paul's direct confrontation of the sectarian issue.⁷ He exhorts the church to serve each other (12:3-8), in un-hypocritical love (12:9-13, 16), not passing judgement on anyone but living considerately with others who are weak (14:1-23), being united in worship (15:5-6), and welcoming each other (15:7).

The other main emphasis in the letter is the role of the law in salvation history. Paul confronts the Jews' wrong understanding of the law: all perish and die with or without the law (2:12); the law condemns the world bringing sin to the fore (3:19-20); the law brings wrath (4:15), comes after the fall of Adam (5:13-14), and only serves to intensify sin (5:20, 7:7); highlighting the sinfulness of sin (7:13). The problem is not with the law, which is good (7:13), but with the flesh, which is weak and unable to submit to the law (8:3, 7). The nation of Israel has not understood the law: thinking that they could obtain righteousness through obedience they have not submitted to God's righteousness in the gospel (9:31-32a; 10:3-4). They have failed to see that the law pointed to Christ encouraging them to trust in him (3:21, 31; 10:4-13), and that love for fellow believers is the fulfilment of the law (13:8-10). The Scriptures were given that they might have hope (15:4), and pointed forward to the time when Gentiles too would hope in God and glorify him (15:8-13).

Before assessing how 5:12-21 supports this argument we first need to briefly address the passages containing apparent allusions to Adam. Some have argued for a 'remarkable parallelism' between Paul's account of man's

⁵ Carson et al., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (1st ed.; Leicester: Apollos, 1992), 251. Also Paul Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God's Righteousness* (Focus on the Bible; Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 11-13; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 20- 21; and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 22.

⁶ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 295.

⁷ Paul Barnett, 'Why Paul Wrote Romans', *RTR* 62:3 (2003): 142.

wickedness (1:18-23) and the biblical narrative of Adam's fall.⁸ However, Moo and Schreiner argue that whilst the fall of human beings is in *some* way analogous to the fall of Adam, there is no warrant for concluding that the text is describing the latter.⁹ Secondly, there is the commonly held view that 7:7-12 refers to Adam; for who else in history can say, 'I was once alive apart from the law' (7:9a)?¹⁰ However, the notion is rejected on the basis that Adam did not encounter the Mosaic Law.¹¹ In both these cases, we should draw a distinction between Paul's use of semantic fields and an actual reference to the historic figure of Adam in 1:18-23 and 7:7-12.

Some think that 5:12-21 is 'the high point of the epistle'¹² whilst others view it as a 'digression'.¹³ Our position is that whilst there are connections in both directions, Paul is actually commencing a new section¹⁴ concerning the assurance of salvation on the day of wrath and the future hope of glory. The importance of Adam in 5:12-21 will be viewed with its connection to various parts of the epistle.

Firstly, in 1:18-4:25 Paul has shown the universality of sin and the availability of justification for all who believe (3:22). Using Adam as a representative head was a familiar notion to the Jewish mind¹⁵ Therefore Paul reiterates his argument by highlighting the solidarity of mankind with Adam (5:12, 15-19),¹⁶ thus erasing any distinction between Jew and Gentile¹⁷ and re-enforcing the promise that justification is for *all* who believe (3:22).

Secondly, the Jews thought the law would conquer sin, and faithfulness to the Torah would obtain the hope promised in the OT of a restored creation.¹⁸ By referring to Adam and Christ as the two formative influences in history Paul has relegated Sinai,¹⁹ assigning it a diminished significance in salvation history. In doing so, he confronts both the proud Gentile (5:13-14) and the law-dependent

⁸ Morna D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 77-78.

⁹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 110; and Schreiner, *Romans*, 82.

¹⁰ English Standard Version.

¹¹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 428-30; and Schreiner, *Romans*, 359-61.

¹² A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. C. C. Rasmussen; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949), 20.

¹³ James Denney, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (The Expositor's Greek New Testament);

¹⁴ See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 292-93, for a persuasive argument supporting this structure of the epistle.

¹⁵ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 327-28, mentions the Jewish text: '4 Ezra 7:118: "O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants."'

¹⁶ Richard Gaffin, 'Atonement in the Pauline Corpus', in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives* (ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 148.

¹⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 290.

¹⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 248.

¹⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 247.

Jew (5:13-14, 20). God's condemnation of death reigned prior to the law on all mankind so that the Gentiles have not escaped it. What Paul implies in 5:13-14 for the Jew he makes explicit in 5:20, stating that the law 'came in by the side'²⁰ after Adam sinned, and serves only to intensify sin. Thus, rather than the law acting as a bridge between God and mankind, it actually serves to increase the gulf.

Thirdly, in 5:1-11 Paul has stated the assurance of God's future glory for believers, despite the trials and tribulations they face (also 8:18-39).²¹ Paul concludes his paragraph with confident language of salvation on the day of God's wrath (5:9-11). The Jews relegated the verdict of justification to the day of judgement, but Paul has brought it forward in history as a present reality. However, the Jews remained suspicious since the verdict was unseen and could not be proved,²² being received only by faith. The question Paul had to address was: will God's present, unseen verdict stand on the day of his wrath?²³

Paul therefore introduces the Adam-Christ motif to show how believers can be certain of future salvation. This is why Paul uses the repeated phrase 'much more' in 5:9, 10, 15, and 17. The 'therefore' of verse 12 should be understood as follows: since the believers' union with Christ is more powerful than the union with Adam they can have assurance that on the day of judgement they will receive glory, not wrath.²⁴ Blocher aptly summarises: 'The grand parallel with Adam serves as the grounding of that assurance: if Adam's role was so dramatically efficacious in securing the condemnation of all people in him, and therefore the reign of death, how much more is Christ's work efficacious for those in him, leading to eternal life!'²⁵ The results of Adam and Christ's destiny-determining, epoch-inaugurating actions are diametrically opposed to highlight the triumph of God's grace over the sins of many (5:15-19),²⁶ thus allowing believers to rest secure in the work of Christ for their final salvation. In the Jewish mindset the two things that threatened this hope were sin and death, yet Paul has shown Christ's triumph over both (5:21).²⁷

²⁰ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 346-47, highlights that the verb *pareisercomai* was dominated by negative connotations during the New Testament period, and thus Paul is deliberately relativizing the role of the law in salvation history.

²¹ See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 293-94, who argues for a chiasmic structure to Romans 5-8, with 5:1-11 paralleling 8:18-39.

²² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 293.

²³ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 293.

²⁴ So Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 318, paraphrasing the transition in 5:12: 'in order to accomplish this [namely, that God has promised to save all those who are justified and reconciled through Christ], there exists a life-giving union between Christ and his own that is similar to, but more powerful than, the death-producing union between Adam and all his own.'

²⁵ Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 80.

²⁶ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 338, 344-45.

²⁷ Schreiner, *Romans*, 267.

Fourthly, in 6:1-8:39 Paul deals with the realms of sin and law. The Jews were suspicious of Paul's gospel, thinking his emphasis on grace lead to rampant sinning (6:1). Having introduced the two realms of death and life in Adam and Christ respectively, Paul has laid the foundation for our new relationship to the realms of sin and law.²⁸ By being in Christ we are under his Lordship, not sin's lordship (6:6, 14, 17-22); under the power of grace, not law (6:14-15); in service under the new life of the Spirit, not under the old written code of the law (7:6, 8:2). We have died in our marriage to the law, and now live in a new marriage with Christ (7:1-6). With this break comes a transfer from the realm of the flesh, to the realm of the Spirit (8:1-13). The importance of Adam is seen in providing a contrast between the realm in which believers were in, to the realm in which believers now live; thus giving logic and weight to Paul's imperatives to fight sin and the flesh (6:12-14, 19; 8:12-13). These exhortations are vital, for although believers are no longer in Adam, there is always the temptation to continue to live as if they were in Adam.²⁹ By fighting sin believers will one day rule with Christ and assume the role that Adam forfeited through his fall (8:17).³⁰

Chapter 8 recaptures the same themes of chapter 5 drawing many strands of this section of the epistle together, ensuring believers that nothing will stand in the way of their glorification: not trials or tribulations (5:1-11), not death (5:12-21), not sin (6:1- 23), not the law (7:1-25), not the flesh (8:1-17); in fact, not anything! (8:18-39).³¹ The Adam-Christ comparison therefore stands as a significant pillar in the structure of Paul's argument, that believers must fight sin with the assurance of future glory on the horizon.

Fifthly, in 9:1-11:36 Paul picks up similar themes concerning law and the Jew / Gentile divide. Although Adam is not specifically mentioned in this section, the underlying currents of 5:12-21 continue as Paul emphasizes the need to submit to the gospel, not law; erase distinctions, and remain humble at God's mercy (9:31-32a; 10:3-4, 11-13; 11:17-24, 32).

Sixthly, Paul addresses the issue of unity specifically in 12:1-15:13. If the Jewish Christians do not grasp the inclusive gospel of God, then this would have far-reaching consequences for Paul's mission to Spain. For if the church in Rome were not united, then he would not receive the necessary support that he needs to bring the gospel to the Gentiles in Spain, so that they too might praise God (15:7-12, 24). And if Schreiner is correct – that the overarching goal of the epistle is God's glory (1:5, 5:2, 9:5, 11:33-36, 15:7-12, 16:27)³² – then what is ultimately at stake, if the church is not united, is the glory of God among the nations. Whilst Adam does not feature in this section, the Adam-Christ motif acts like a rock in

²⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 352.

²⁹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 375.

³⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 245.

³¹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 293.

³² Schreiner, *Romans*, 22-23.

the foundation of Paul's argument earlier in the epistle, providing significant strength to his practical exhortations for unity.

In conclusion, we have presented Adam's importance in six sections of Romans, highlighting his influence on Paul's argument in the following areas: the universality of sin and the availability of justification for all who believe; the assurance of final salvation and future glory; a correct understanding of the law; the new relationship to sin and the law; the need to erase distinctions by being humbled at God's mercy; and unity in the church to ensure the triumph of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Scholars have previously not addressed the degree of Adam's importance in the argument of Romans.³³ However, as shown above, we conclude that Adam's importance is foremost to ensure a true understanding of the gospel and therefore accomplish the purposes for which Paul wrote his epistle. In closing, Bartholomew and Goheen summarise our thoughts succinctly:

Two great figures stand at the entrances to two worlds: Adam stands at the gate of the old world, Jesus at the gate of the new. Adam's first sin inaugurated the old age and brought sin, death, and condemnation. Now in Jesus a new day of righteousness, life and justification has come (Romans 5:12-21). If we are "in Adam," we are part of the old age and under its sway. But if we are "in Christ," we are part of the age to come and can already experience God's life-giving power.³⁴

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³³ The literature deals with *why* Adam is important in the argument of Romans, but does not explore the *degree* of his importance in the argument, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

³⁴ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 189.

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