AN EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 5:12-21

Chris Morrison, M.A.
INTRODUCTION

The following paper examines Romans 5:12-21. After setting the passage in its literary context, both its place in Romans as a whole and its relationship to its immediate context, the paper argues that the main thrust of the passage deals with the death brought about by each person’s sin and how Christ’s life overcomes that death. To do this, most of the discussion is centered around three grammatical issues in 5:12: the nature of ἐφ’ ὧν, the proper translation of καὶ οὕτως, and syntactical force of πάντες ἡμαρτόν. After the main arguments have established the defensibility of the main thrust of the text, some personal application is considered.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Romans 5:12-21 is set near the beginning of a unit dealing with sanctification—the deliverance of the Christian from the power of sin.¹ Having just completed a unit on justification (Rom. 1-4), Paul is now interested in showing how believers overcome sin in daily life.

In the immediate context, Rom. 5:1-11 declares that believers have peace with God. This raises the question of what to make of the fact that believers still sin and die. Chapter six begins describing how God delivers the believers from the power of sin; the foundation for that argument is laid in Rom. 5:12-21.² It ultimately concludes in 8:18-30, where Paul shows that the believer’s sanctification is completed in glorification, which results not only in his own final deliverance, but also in the deliverance of the whole of creation from death and the curse.

Rom. 5:12-14

The Greek text of Romans 5:12 says, “Διὰ τοῦτο ὁσπερ δι’ ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος δηλήθη ἐφ’ ὧν πάντες ἡμαρτόν.” While the text appears straightforward, there are several serious grammatical problems in this verse, all of which bear major influence on the interpretation of the entire passage. The first issue is the translation of ἐφ’ ὧν. Not much will be said regarding this except that although a number of scholars have begun to argue that ἐφ’ ὧν should be rendered “with the result that”—thereby picturing death as the cause of sin—the general scholarly consensus of seeing it as a conjunction meaning “because” is here affirmed.³ Not only has that view long been accepted, but it alone makes proper sense of the relationship between sin and death, as will be argued below.

¹ Moo cites linguistic evidence to argue that Rom 5-8 are a unit: Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 290-95
The second issue is the translation of καὶ οὕτως. Despite the attention given to ἐφ’ ὧν, the translation of καὶ οὕτως is far more important. As a causal understanding of ἐφ’ ὧν is reflected in all major English translations, so too is the general scholarly consensus of reading καὶ οὕτως as “and so.” A minority of scholars, however, have offered another view, namely, that καὶ οὕτως should be treated consecutively and thus rendered “even so” or “so in this way.” Thus Tobin says,

The first problem is the meaning of the Greek phrase καὶ οὕτως in 5:12, translated “even so.” Because 5:12 is part of a passage (5:12-21) dominated by comparison between Adam and Christ, most interpreters take the word ὡςπερ (“just as”) in 5:12 as the beginning of a comparison between Adam and Christ that is not completed by a “so too” (οὕτως καὶ) clause. The καὶ οὕτως in 5:12 is then translated “and so,” with the following clause taken as dependent on, rather than as coordinated with, the preceding ὡςπερ clause. Romans 5:12 is thus treated as an anacoluthon, and 5:13-14 is the digression that occasions the anacoluthon. This rather complicated solution, however, seems unnecessary if one takes the phrase καὶ οὕτως as “even so,” an acceptable meaning of the Greek. The following clause, then, is coordinated with the previous ὡςπερ clause, and the anacoluthon disappears. This way of construing the passage also makes much more sense because the comparison and contrast between Adam and Christ begins only in 5:15.

As Tobin makes clear, the translation of καὶ οὕτως is closely related to how one sees ὡςπερ in 5:12a, so the principal question is whether or not καὶ οὕτως begins the apodosis for the protasis introduced by ὡςπερ. There are two reasons to affirm this is the case.

First, it is impossible to miss the fact that 5:12-21 is full of comparisons. Excluding the ὡςπερ clause in verse 12, there are seven other such comparisons in 5:15-21. They are:

1. ὡς . . . οὕτως (v.15);
2. εἰ γὰρ . . . πολλῷ μᾶλλον (v. 15);
3. ὡς . . . [οὕτως] (v. 16);
4. εἰ γὰρ . . . πολλῷ μᾶλλον (v. 17);
5. ὡς . . . οὕτως καὶ (v. 18);
6. ὡςπερ . . . οὕτως καὶ (v. 19);
7. ὡςπερ . . . οὕτως καὶ (v. 21).

Excluding (2) and (4), the five remaining comparisons are either ὡς/οὕτως or ὡςπερ/οὕτως, and since ὡςπερ is built on ὡς, it seems the five should be taken together. In each of these cases, ὡς/ὡςπερ introduces the protasis and οὕτως the apodosis. As Paul uses the same terms in 5:12, it appears that the same reading should be applied there as well.

---

5 Vickers, 271.
7 Tobin, 177-78.
One may, with Cranfield, object to this reading by noting that 5:12 uses καὶ οὖν rather than οὖν καὶ as (5-7) have above. Yet this objection hardly seems persuasive for three reasons. First, it is well known that word order in Greek is not strictly defined, so such an argument is probably weak on its face. Second, it is well known that καὶ can be translated “even,” meaning the passage can be translated “even so,” as per Tobin above. Finally, rendering the phrase “and so” leaves Paul with a grammatically incomplete sentence. Supposedly Paul interrupts his thought with v.13 and does not pick it up again until later. Thus, Lloyd-Jones says, “Is this bad literary style? It is, but the Apostle frequently forgot all about style.” Assuming Lloyd-Jones is correct that Paul “frequently forgot all about style,” it should go without saying that the exegete should assume that Paul used good style wherever possible.

The issue of style constitutes the second reason for adopting “even so” as the best translation. Put simply, it makes 5:12 a complete sentence and clarifies the logic of vv.13-14 (see below). In fact, at least one major English translation has now recognized this: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all men, because all sinned” (HCSB). Apparently for reasons relating to English style, the HCSB simply leaves καὶ untranslated, offering simply, “in this way,” although it is clear that it could have said “even in this way” without affecting the meaning of the text.

If, then, καὶ οὖν is translated along the lines of “even in this manner,” the logic of Paul’s statement in this verse becomes clearer. He begins with a well-known fact: “Just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin . . .” Though Second Temple Judaism presented no unified view on the relationship between Adam’s and his descendants’ sin, it seems that Paul had in mind an idea similar to that offered in passages like 4 Ezra 3:7, 21-22, and 7:48, which say respectively,

And unto him thou gavest commandment to love thy way: which he transgressed, and immediately thou appointedst death in him and in his generations.

For the first Adam bearing a wicked heart transgressed, and was overcome; and so be all they that are born of him. Thus infirmity was made permanent.

O thou Adam, what hast thou done? for though it was thou that sinned, thou art not fallen alone, but we all that come of thee.

Thus, Paul starts by bringing up a well-known theological tradition regarding Adam—namely, that Adam’s sin was in some sense responsible for the deaths of all of his descendants. This, however, is not the point Paul wishes to make. He assumes that view (“Just as through one man’s sin . . .”). The point he wants to get to is in 5:12b. As Runge notes, “dislocation [that is, the protasis as introduced by ὡσπερ] provides the frame of reference for the clause that follows,

10 Tobin, 172.
with the pro-adverb οὕτως signaling the end of the dislocation and highlighting the information."\(^{12}\) That which is highlighted is the apodosis introduced by καὶ οὕτως, namely, how death spread to all men. In order to understand, however, Paul’s intended point, one must look carefully at the protasis. The word ὥσπερ is a comparative conjunction used to introduce an analogy.\(^{13}\) There, Paul says that death entered the world through Adam’s sin. Thus, *in the same manner* (οὕτως), death spreads to men.\(^{14}\) That manner is sin.

At this point, however, a third grammatical issue needs to be raised. Most scholars take ἡμάρτων to be a comprehensive aorist ("all sinned").\(^{15}\) This, however, makes little sense, for it suggests that all people were somehow “in Adam” or participating with Adam in his sin. Yet it is unclear how such a view can be squared with the fact that future generations were not in Adam in the garden in any real sense (unless one posits some form of human preexistence). Popular appeals to passages like Heb. 7:9 are not helpful, for the author of epistle does not say that Levi really was in Abraham, but only that he was “in a sense” (HCSB), or merely that one “may say” (KJV). Standing against this are the well-known Old Testament guarantees that a son will not be charged with the sins of his father (cf. Deut. 24:16; Eze. 18:20).

One solution to this problem is to follow the KJV and take ἡμάρτων as a consummative aorist, rendering it “have sinned.”\(^{16}\) While such a reading seems theologically driven, it does have in its favor that it takes the clause here (πάντες ἡμάρτων) in the same way as it is found in 3:23 (πάντες γὰρ ἡμάρτων), which is almost always so rendered.\(^{17}\) Another solution, though, is to take ἡμάρτων in both verses to be a gnomic aorist, thus rendering the phrase, “because all sin.” Regarding this usage of the aorist, Dana and Mantey say, “A generally accepted fact or truth may be regarded as so fixed in its certainty or axiomatic in its character that it is described by the aorist, just as though it were an actual occurrence.”\(^{18}\) It certainly seems appropriate for Paul to describe the reality of sin in human life “as so fixed in its certainty . . . that it is described by the

---


14 It is worth noting here that there are some who argue that “the world” here (κόσμος) refers only to humanity rather than the entire creation. If the reading of καὶ οὕτως defended above is correct, however, that view must be rejected for two reasons. First, it renders the ὥσπερ/οὕτως comparison meaningless, since Paul would essentially be saying, “Just as death came to humanity through sin, so death comes to men through sin.” Second, the linguistic argument for this view is that κόσμος can refer to humanity alone. While technically true (cf. *TDNT*, sv. “κόσμος”), it only does so by metonymy. If, then, one is take κόσμος in a figurative sense (i.e., by metonymy), one would expect to find linguistic or contextual markers indicating as much, which are entirely lacking in this passage.


16 Wallace, 241-42.

17 Indeed, though it is not unfeasible, it would be difficult to defend translating Rom. 3:23, “For all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

In fact, they go on to note that ‘it is very plausible to take ἧμαρτον [in Rom. 3:23] as a gnomic aorist, and construe the passage as meaning, ‘As a general rule all sin and so fall short of the glory of God.’ This fits exactly into the present of ὑστεροῦνται.’ Though they go on to accept ἧμαρτον there as a cumulative aorist (thus embracing the traditional ‘all have sinned’), it seems their initial observation should be seriously considered. Just as it makes sense of Romans 3:23 to say, “For all sin and fall short of the glory of God,” so it makes good sense of Romans 5:12b to say, “Even in this manner death spread to all men, because all men sin.” On this view, the death of all men is caused by their own sin, which is consistent with a wide range of biblical passages (e.g., Deut. 24:16; Rom. 6:23; Jas. 1:5, etc.), indeed with the entire biblical witness.

If the grammatical proposals discussed above are accepted, Rom. 5:12 can be translated, “For this reason, just as through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, so even in the same manner death spread to all men, because all sin.” The logic is clear. Just as Adam brought death into the world—by his sin—so people still bring death to themselves—by their sins. Thus, Paul begins dealing with the reality of sin in the believer’s life. Having shown in 5:12 that it leads to death, he explains his proposition in vv.13-14. He begins by saying, “for (γὰρ) sin indeed was in the world before the law was given.” It is clear from even a cursory reading of Genesis that “sin was in the world” before Moses. Yet γὰρ introduces background information that explains the previous clause, so it is important to see how 5:13a explains 5:12. That connection may be obscured when translating all of 5:13 as a single verse. In fact, 5:13a should stand alone. All men die for their sins (5:12b) because sin was in the world, and that even before the Law. Thus, even pre-Mosaic “Gentiles” perished apart from the law (cf. 2:12).

That 5:13a should stand alone is confirmed by the δὲ/ἀλλὰ contrast set up in vv.13-14. δὲ signals a progression or development of the argument, while ἀλλὰ marks no development but does offer a corrective against some aspect of the immediately preceding context. Thus, 5:13b-14 may be rendered, “Now sin is not imputed where there is no law, but death still reigned from Adam to Moses . . .” Paul reminds the reader that where there is no Law, sin is not imputed (ἐλλογεῖται; cf. 4:15), yet corrects a natural, though faulty, assumption that therefore there should have been no death prior to Moses. The assumed logic is that death is the punishment for (imputed) sin. That is certainly true as far as it goes, but Paul hopes to show more. Not only is death the punishment for imputed sin (παραβάσεως, “transgression”), but it is also the natural

19 Campbell’s comments further demonstrate the unique appropriateness of the gnomic here, saying, “Gnomic aorists are not just found in timeless concepts—they are often best translated as present in temporal reference. As such, the gnomic aorist provides a perfective aspect option for the presentation of events that are present in temporal reference in contrast to the (imperfective) present-tense form.” See Constantine Campbell, Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 88.
20 Dana, 197, emphasis original.
21 And this was known explicitly. See Gen. 4:7.
22 Runge, 52.
23 Ibid., 31.
24 Ibid., 56.
consequence of any and all sin—whether under the law, not under the law, or for that matter, even those under the grace of God in Christ.25

Moreover, Paul has now made an important distinction between παράβασις and ἁμαρτία. Παράβασις “does not refer to sins in general but specifically to sins against νόμος, against the revealed commandments of God.”26 In biblical theology, this is an important distinction, because the introduction of the Law made sin a transgression against the Law—it upgraded it, so to speak—which allowed the Law to establish “mechanisms of imputation, so that the Law makes sin-bearing possible.”27 Thus the Law plays an essential role in redemptive history. Moreover, this distinction allows Paul to contrast the gift of God in Christ with not simply sin generally, but with transgression specifically—a thought developed more fully below.

To sum up 5:12-14, then, it seems that Paul has argued that in the same way that Adam brought death into the world, his descendants bring death upon themselves: through their sin. That has always been the case, even prior to the Law, but this requires one to accept that while death may be a legal punishment for transgression, it is also the natural consequence of sin. By adding the Law, however, God has created the mechanism by which sin and death may be taken care of together, which Paul explains in the next section.

Rom. 5:15-18

Paul ends 5:14 by saying that Adam was a type of the one to come. This may suggest, then, that Adam and Christ are similar and their respective works can be compared. In this section, Paul offers two reasons why that is not the case. Though some commentators believe that “the comparison [between Adam and Christ] remains valid, and indeed is assumed already within qualifications,”28 one must take Paul seriously when he declares twice that they are not alike (v. 15, 16).

So this section begins with another corrective ἀλλὰ. The reason no one can say that the gift is like the trespass is that while Adam’s transgression of God’s command caused all men to die,29 the gift of God is freely available (to anyone who believes; cf. Rom. 1:16). The word “abounded” here is ἐπερισσευσεν, which carries the idea of having more than enough sufficiency to meet a need.30 The difference seems to be one of inheritance versus imputation. Because of Adam’s transgression, his descendants were “made sinners” (thereby bringing death upon themselves); that is, they inherited his sinful nature. Christ’s merits, however, are available and can be imputed to any who believe.31 The second reason that the two cannot be compared is simply the results were different (v.16). So Paul draws a contrast between “the reign of death set

25 It should be clear, then, that while some exegetes may wish to argue that spiritual death is in view, Paul is thinking primarily in terms of physical death, both in these verses and in the entire unit of chapters 5-8.
26 Leithart, 272.
27 Ibid., 271, emphasis original.
28 Dunn, 293.
29 It is probably best to take both ἀπέθανον and ἐπερισσευσεν as gnomic aorists for similar reasons to those suggested above with reference to ἡμαρτον.
30 TNDT, s.v., “περισσεύω.”
31 This view, then, rejects the argument that Adam’s sin is imputed to anyone. His sin nature is inherited, not the actual sin he committed.
into motion” by Adam’s sin and with those who receive God’s grace as the ones who will reign with Christ. As Johnston points out, “The unbalanced comparison emphasizes the difference between those who receive the gift and those who do not.” Again, then, the difference lies in the fact that all men inherit something from Adam (a sin nature) by virtue of being born, whereas they receive something from Christ (justification) by virtue of believing in Him. The difference is between inheritance and imputation.

**Rom. 5:18-21**

Paul concludes this thought by summarizing, saying, “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (5:18, ESV). The use of “all” here, however, can be problematic, but looking at it more closely can make the entire passage that much clearer. Rapinchuk asks,

If εἰς πάντας ανθρώπους in 5:18a means "all men without exception," then how can we make εἰς πάντας ανθρώπους denote something different in the very next clause? If there were solid contextual clues for this change in designation, it would not be problematic. But such contextual clues are lacking. It seems rather that Paul intends the force of εἰς πάντας ανθρώπους to be the same in each clause (as well as in 5:12).4

Thus, it seems that one must affirm that Paul is a universalist or that he means something other than “all men without exception” in this passage. Johnston argues that πάντας should be understood to mean “‘all without distinction,’ both Jews and Gentiles,” with which Rapinchuk concurs.36 This view fits nicely with and provides confirmatory evidence for the argument above that Paul does not have any so-called inherited Adamic sin in view in this passage. Rather, he is concerned with the inheritance of a sin nature that all men, without ethnic distinction (Jew and Gentile), experience, and therefore that salvation is available to all men, again without ethnic distinction.37

Moreover, this view is further bolstered by the fact that it was not foreign to rabbinical thought. Menahem Kister surveys several such passages that predate or are contemporaneous with Paul. To take but one example, he points out that Sirach (early second century B.C.) “is one of the earliest formulations of the concept of the ‘treasure of merits’ (explicitly mentioned in Sir 3:4), of the view that ‘merits offset demerits’ (see especially Sir 3:3, 15), and probably also of the notion of ‘transfer of merits’ from ancestors to their descendants.” These ideas are remarkably similar to what Paul says in 5:19. Christ’s obedience provides a type of “treasure of merits” from which believers can draw, which is a good illustration of Christ’s righteousness

---

34 Rapinchuk, 430.
35 Johnston, 142.
36 Rapinchuk, 433.
37 Ibid.
being imputed to the believer. The final sentence (vv.21-22) sums up the entire argument. Paul says the purpose of the Law was “to increase the trespass”—that is, to raise “sin” to the status of “trespass” so that it could be removed and ultimately Christ’s life could be imparted to believers. Thus Leithart says,

The Law intensifies sin, ratchets it up to the level of transgression and increases transgression in the sense that it sets Israel up as the scapegoat for the Gentiles. The Law enters a world under the reign of Death, and the result is that the Law places Sin on the throne along with Death (v. 21). With the wisdom of a serpent, however, Yahweh uses the Law to corral the reign of Sin in one place, in Israel, and also provides mechanisms for removal, for disposal of the Sin that it provokes and intensifies.39

Thus, whereas “sin reigned in death”—that is, sin was the means by which death reigned—so now in Christ “grace might reign through righteousness”—that is grace becomes the means by which righteousness reigns, and that unto “eternal life.”

CONCLUSION

The above paper has argued that the basic thrust of Romans 5:12-21 is that death, as brought about by Adam’s transgression of God’s command, has been overcome by the righteousness of Christ. The grammatical issues considered do not require the interpreter to find in the passage any references to “original sin” or any concept of all of humanity sinning “in Adam.” Moreover, the translation suggested for Rom. 5:12 not only seems to make the best sense of the Greek but also contributes to a significant unification of the entire unit (Romans 5-8), for what begins with as a discussion on the cosmic reign of death, especially over mankind, results in the final deliverance of the cosmos from death, especially by the deliverance of mankind. In all of this, the Law is seen to have a unique role to play in redemptive history that could very well anticipate some of the issues Paul sees fit to raise in Romans 9-11 (though such concerns are outside the scope of this paper).

Specifically, it was argued that ἐφ’ ὃ should continue to be taken in a causal sense but that καὶ οὕτως should be taken to introduce the apodosis to the protasis at the beginning of 5:12, rendering the passage a complete sentence. Moreover, ἡμαρτον should be taken as a gnomic aorist (also in 3:23), and that, therefore, Paul has individual sins in mind rather than a cosmic sin in Adam. From this, it was argued that the remainder of the passage distinguished between a sin nature all people have inherited from Adam and a righteousness imputed to those who have believed in Christ. Thus, while Adam truly is a type “of the one to come,” what comes from Christ really is not like what came from Adam. In the end, Christ was able to take sin, wrap it up in transgression, and through the Law die for sin, thereby bringing eternal life to all who believe in Him.

39 Leithart, 272.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


