

The IMPUTATION *of*
ADAM'S SIN

by
JOHN MURRAY

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Preface

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JOHN MURRAY

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CHAPTER ONE

THEOLOGICAL thought of the present day is not only hospitable to the notion of solidarity in sin and guilt; it is keenly sensitive to the fact of such solidarity. Dealing with the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, Emil Brunner can say: "I want to make it clear from the outset that I am in complete agreement with the twofold aim of Augustine: to represent sin as a dominant force, and humanity as bound together in a solidarity of guilt".¹ And C. H. Dodd, commenting on Paul's argument in Romans 5:12-21, says: "What lies behind it is the ancient conception of solidarity. The moral unit was the community . . . rather than the individual Thus the whole of humanity could be thought of as the tribe of Adam, and Adam's sin was the sin of the race. With the growing appreciation of the ethical significance of the individual, the old idea of solidarity weakened. But it corresponded with real facts. The isolation of the individual is an abstraction."² "Adam", he continues, "is a name which stands to him (Paul) for the 'corporate personality' of mankind."³ Yet of Romans 5:12 Brunner also says: "It does not refer to the transgression of Adam in which all his descendants share; but it states the fact that 'Adam's' descendants are involved in death, because they themselves commit sin".⁴ And C. H. Dodd can also say: "Thus Paul's doctrine of Christ as the 'second Adam' is not so bound up with the story of the Fall as a literal happening that it ceases to have meaning when we no longer accept the story as such. Indeed, we should not too readily assume that Paul did so accept it."⁵ We thus

¹ *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption. Dogmatics*, Vol. II (London, 1952), p. 103.

² *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London, 1934), p. 79.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

see that the recognition of and the emphasis upon solidaric or corporate sin and guilt in our present-day theology are not to be interpreted as identical with the classic protestant doctrine of the imputation of Adam's sin. And it does not advance the cause of theology or of exegesis to regard Paul's appeal to the fall of Adam as but the mythical form in which the fact of solidaric unity in sin is expressed. It is not a work of supererogation, therefore, if we address ourselves anew to this question of the imputation of Adam's sin to posterity and to the study of the passage upon which, more than any other, the doctrine is based. It is encouraging to find in so brilliant a scholar as Anders Nygren so appreciative an assessment of the pivotal place which Romans 5:12-19 occupies in this major epistle. "The parallelism which Paul draws between Adam and Christ has seemed so strange and unmanageable that it has made scholars the more willing to treat this section as a parenthesis. More or less consciously interpreters have acted on the assumption that something, which is so foreign to today's thought as to seem unreal, cannot have been of decisive importance to Paul either. To explain how he happened in on the digression, reference has, for instance, been made to the important place which the 'Adam-speculation' came to play in rabbinical thought. . . . We should not forget that Paul read about Adam on one of the first pages of his Bible; so it is not necessary to look for remoter sources from which the idea might have come. . . . Paul does not look on Christ as an Adam redivivus. He sets up Adam and Christ in this parallel, not to affirm their identity, but contrariwise to point out the contrast between them. When once one comes to realize what that means to Paul, he forthwith discovers that this passage is by no means a parenthesis or a digression in the apostle's thought. Rather do we here come to the high point of the epistle. This is the point where all the lines of his thinking converge, both those of the preceding chapters and those of the chapters that follow."⁶

In studying Romans 5:12-19 as it bears upon the question of the imputation of Adam's sin to posterity we shall subsume

⁶ Anders Nygren: *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia, 1949), pp. 207-209.

our discussion under the following main subdivisions: I Syntactical Construction; II The Sin Contemplated; III The Union Involved; IV The Nature of the Imputation; V The Sin Imputed.

I. SYNTACTICAL CONSTRUCTION

It is scarcely necessary to argue the fact that verse 12 is an unfinished comparison. Few interpreters dispute this fact. *καὶ οὕτως* in the middle of the verse does not have the effect of closing the comparison introduced by *ὥσπερ*. In that event we should have *οὕτως καὶ* and not *καὶ οὕτως* (cf. vss. 15, 18, 19, 21 and 6:4, 11). *καὶ οὕτως* is coordinative or continuative and does not mean "even so" but rather "and so" or "and in like manner" (cf. Acts 7:8; 28:14; I Cor. 7:17, 36; 11:28; Gal. 6:2). Even Pelagius did not suppose anything different as far as the syntax of verse 12 was concerned. The Latin text on which he based his comments was faithful to the Greek in this particular — *et ita in omnes homines [mors] pertransiit.*⁷

It is not difficult to discover the reason why the comparison introduced in verse 12 had been broken off. The development of Paul's thought required a parenthesis after the concluding clause of verse 12. This parenthesis begins at verse 13 and continues through verse 17. It may well be that we should not regard these five verses as one parenthesis but as two, the first consisting of verses 13 and 14 and the second of verses 15-17. On this construction of the parenthetical portion we should have to say that the thought expressed in verse 12, especially in the last clause, dictated the necessity of appending without delay the data expressed in verses 13 and 14, and then, in turn, the typological datum enunciated at the end of verse 14 — "who is the type of the one to come" — necessitated the setting forth of the series of similitudes, but particularly of contrasts, instituted in verses 15-17.⁸ However

⁷ See Pelagius's *Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul*, ed. Alexander Souter (Cambridge, 1926), No. 2, p. 45 in *Texts and Studies. Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature*, ed. J. Armitage Robinson, Vol. IX, No. 2.

⁸ Cf. Heinrich A. W. Meyer: *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans* (E. T., New York, 1884), pp. 193 f. "The illustration,

we construe these five verses, as one parenthesis or as two, it is quite apparent that Paul does not return to the type of syntax which had been begun in verse 12, but had been broken off, until we arrive at verse 18. Here we have a finished comparison with both protasis and apodosis, the former intimated in *ὡς* and the latter in *οὕτως καί*. "Consequently then, as through one trespass judgment came upon all men unto condemnation, even so through one righteous act judgment came upon all men unto justification of life."

It is not of much consequence to determine whether verse 18 is resumptive or recapitulatory.⁹ It is sufficient for us to know that Paul does not leave us in any doubt as to what the apodosis of verse 12 would have been if it had been completed in terms of the protasis which verse 12 supplies. The completed comparisons of verses 18, 19 place beyond all doubt what the governing thought of this passage is and it is in terms of that governing thought that the comparison of verse 12 would have to be completed.

This parenthesis of verses 13-17, which at first seems to be so awkward and perplexing, proves on closer examination to be eloquent in determining for us the precise import of the clause which, after all, is the most crucial in the exegesis of this whole passage, namely, the last clause in verse 12. The interpretation is established by the eloquent repetitions of the succeeding verses and, as we shall have occasion to note, no consideration is more pertinent to the question than the fact that verses 13-17 are in the form of a parenthesis.

namely, introduced in vv. 13, 14 of the *ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἡμαρτον* now rendered it impossible to add the second half of the comparison *syntactically* belonging to the *ὡς* part, and therefore the Apostle, driven on by the rushing flow of ideas to this point, from which he can no longer revert to the construction with which he started, has no hesitation in dropping the latter . . . and in subsequently bringing in *merely* the main tenor of what is wanting by the relative clause attached to *Ἀδάμ: ὅς ἐστι τύπος τοῦ μέλλοντος* in ver. 14."

⁹ Meyer (*ibid.*, p. 194; cf. p. 215) argues against other interpreters who hold that in verse 18 the first half of the comparison is resumed and urges in support of his view "not only the unprecedented length, but still more the contents of the supposed parenthesis, which in fact already comprehends in itself the parallel under every aspect" and he concludes: "In ver. 18 f. we have *recapitulation*, but not *resumption*".

II. THE SIN CONTEMPLATED

The crux of the question in connection with this passage is the reference in the clause *ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἡμαρτον* in verse 12. This clause informs us why death passed on to all men and should be rendered "in that all sinned".¹⁰ Hence the question is: to what does Paul refer when he says "all sinned"? As far as form is concerned the expression itself could refer to the actual sins of men (cf. Romans 3:23). Furthermore, if Paul meant the actual sins of all men, this is without doubt the expression he would have used; no other would have been more suitable to express that thought. The meaning, however, is not to be determined by grammatical possibility but by contextual considerations. There are various views of the force of this expression.

1. The Pelagian view.

This view is that the clause in question refers to the actual sins of men.¹¹ In this event the thought of Paul would be that as Adam sinned and therefore died so in like manner all men

¹⁰ It is unnecessary at this stage in the history of exposition to argue that the Vulgate rendering, *in quo omnes peccaverunt*, though, as we shall see, it is theologically true, is nevertheless grammatically untenable. The force of *ἐφ' ᾧ* is causal and it means "in that", "by the fact that", or simply "because".

¹¹ Cf. Pelagius: *op. cit.* "Propter ea sicut per unum hominem in hunc mundum peccatum intravit et per peccatum mors. Exemplo uel forma. quo modo, cum non esset peccatum, per Adam aduenit, ita etiam, cum paene aput nullum iustitia remansisset, per Christum est reuocata . . . Et ita in omnes homines [mors] pertransiit, in quo omnes peccauerunt. Dum ita peccant, et similiter moriuntur" (p. 45). "Sicut enim per inoboedientiam unius hominis peccatoris constituti sunt plurimi, ita et per unius oboedientiam iusti constituentur multi. Sicut exemplo inoboedientiae Adae peccauerunt multi, ita et Christi oboedientia justificantur multi" (p. 48).

Cf. also Edouard Reuss: *La Bible: Traduction Nouvelle avec Introductions et Commentaires* (Paris, 1898) ad Romans 5:12-14. "Tous les hommes issus d'Adam péchèrent également . . . Il n'y a pas un mot dans le texte qui puisse servir à étayer les thèses scolastiques d'un changement opéré dans la nature de l'homme, de la nécessité de pécher, de l'imputation du péché de tous. Mais il tient aussi à le prouver. Comment le prouve-t-il? Par un autre fait également général et tout à fait incontestable. C'est que tous les hommes issus d'Adam sont morts." Emil Brunner (*op. cit.*, p. 99),

die because they sin. Adam is the prototype — he sinned and brought sin and death into the world. Others in like manner sin and they also are afflicted with death. The coordination of sin and death, exemplified in Adam, applies in every case where there is sin.

It needs to be observed that the construction of verse 12 does not disprove this interpretation. Even though on this view we should have expected Paul to use *οὕτως καὶ* at the middle of the verse rather than *καὶ οὕτως*, yet it is possible to think of Paul as enunciating the parallelism between the entrance of sin and death through Adam and the passing on of sin and death through all without closing the comparison in terms of the analogy that obtains in the opposite sphere of righteousness and life. In other words, the syntax of verse 12 cannot of itself be pleaded as a conclusive argument against the Pelagian view. There are, however, conclusive objections on factual, exegetical, and theological grounds.

(i) The Pelagian view is not actually or historically true. Not all die because they actually and voluntarily sin. Infants die. But they have not actually transgressed after the similitude of Adam's transgression.

(ii) In verses 13, 14 Paul states the opposite of the Pelagian view. For here we are told that death reigned over those who did not sin after the similitude of Adam's transgression. What or whom Paul has in view is difficult to determine, but it is obvious that he is thinking of death as exercising its sway over persons who did not sin as Adam did. It is futile to try to evade the direct bearing of this fact upon the Pelagian interpretation. Paul is saying the opposite, namely, that death reigns universally and therefore reigns over those who are in a different category from that of Adam.¹²

while right in recognising that *in quo omnes peccaverunt* is a mis-translation, puts himself in the Pelagian category as far as interpretation of this text is concerned when he says that "these words mean the exact opposite: namely, that each of us becomes a sinner by his own act".

"This consideration that not all men are in the category of Adam militates against Brunner's conception that we are all "Adam". For if we all are "Adam" in respect of Paul's teaching in this passage, then how can Paul speak of some as not sinning after the similitude of Adam's transgression? In other words, in terms of the datum which is the pivotal

(iii) The most conclusive refutation of the Pelagian interpretation is derived from the repeated and emphatic affirmations of Paul in the immediate context, affirmations to the effect that the universal sway of condemnation and death is to be referred to the *one sin* of the *one man* Adam. On at least five occasions in verses 15-19 this principle is asserted — "by the trespass of the one the many died" (vs. 15); "the judgment was from one unto condemnation" (vs. 16); "by the trespass of the one death reigned through the one" (vs. 17); "through one trespass judgment came upon all men unto condemnation" (vs. 18); "through the disobedience of the one man the many were constituted sinners" (vs. 19). We might think that Paul has needlessly repeated himself, but it is a repetition which establishes beyond dispute that Paul regards condemnation and death as having passed on to all men by the one trespass of the one man Adam. It is quite impossible to construe this emphasis upon the one sin of the one man as equivalent to the actual personal sin of countless individuals. It is indisputable, therefore, that Paul regards the universality of condemnation and death as grounded upon and proceeding from the one trespass of the one man Adam. And the Pelagian insistence that death and condemnation find their ground solely in the personal voluntary sin of the individuals of the race cannot be harmonised with this sustained witness of the apostle.

(iv) The Pelagian exegesis destroys the force of the analogy which Paul institutes in this passage as a whole. The doctrine Paul is illustrating by appeal to the analogy of the condemnation and death proceeding from Adam is the doctrine that men are justified by the free grace of God on the basis of the righteousness and obedience of Christ. What Paul has been controverting in the earlier part of the epistle is that men are justified by their own works. He is establishing the truth that men are justified and attain to life by what another has done, the one man Jesus Christ. How vacuous and contradictory

one in the analogy which Paul is using, namely, the one trespass of the one man Adam, we are not all "Adam". It is to waive exegesis altogether if we do not take account of the uniqueness, the "oneness" of Adam in respect of the position he occupies in this passage.