

Romans 5 applied to pre-Adamic man

With the best will in the world Romans 5.12ff has some difficulties of interpretation. To my mind the best reading of v12 is the classic Reformed view that Adam's disobedience was imputed to the whole race, who sinned (aorist) in him. This also makes sense of Eve's omission from the discussion: Adam is the federal head of the race, whatever his biological position.

V13-14 cover different ground. They show that men sinned between Adam's time and the giving of the Mosaic law, despite the absence of disobedience to a specific law of God. Yet Paul seems to have departed from the subject of the imputed sin of Adam, because he contrasts these people with Adam who broke a law – whereas he might have said they died because of that first sin in which they participated.

Instead he says sin is not imputed where there is no law, but uses the evidence of their death (plus implicitly the judgements and condemnation of God on various sins in Genesis) apparently to imply that there *was* in fact a law in force, despite the lack of direct command from God.

The Westminster Confession, etc, consider this to be the moral law which, together with the sinful nature itself, was passed on to all Adam's progeny. The question then arises why Paul deals with this actual sin as a parenthesis, when the aim of the passage is to compare sin imputed by the one sin of Adam with the righteousness imputed by the Lord's one act of obedience. To me it seems quite likely he's filling in detail on 2.12-15, where those gentiles not under the law have already been implicated in sin on the basis of *conscience*.

Conscience

“Conscience” then appears to be a better concept to employ of ch5 than “moral law”. It is a word occurring 29 times in the NT, all but 6 used by Paul. The meaning covers both human consciousness of having sinned before God, and the actual guilt before God regardless of human feelings. What is significant for us is that the concept has its roots not in the OT but in popular Greek psychology. The NT adopts a word in common use, much like English “conscience”, and simply gives it some theological and specifically Christian content.

But the OT has no such concept, instead generally using “the heart” as the seat of conscience, so that, for example, Abimelech takes Abraham's wife “with a pure heart” rather than “a clear conscience”.

Nevertheless Paul's thinking must relate back to the OT since he is dealing with the origin of sin and its early history, so is there any link?

Conscience and the Garden

Let's abstract some data from Genesis 2. Adam is placed in God's space to serve him. Although he is formed from God's breath as well as dust, he does not have an “eternal soul” – or, in more correct use of the text, he *is* not an eternal soul. Rather he has access to eternal life because he has access to the tree of life – eternal life therefore comes by gift, not by nature. I would argue that the tree is metaphorical, simply

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because it is throughout the rest of Scripture, symbolising God as the source of eternal life. But it's not too important – a literal tree could be an effectual symbol just as the OT sacrifices were. However, see later.

The forbidden tree is that of the knowledge of good and evil; which knowledge can only be obtained (unless God planned to make provision later, which is quite likely) by breaking the direct command of God. Once the fruit is eaten, the couple realise their nakedness and avoid God. Can not “knowledge of good and evil” be simply summed up in Pauline terms as “conscience”? Adam in one act both became a sinner before God, and became conscious that he was a sinner, the same two aspects covered by “conscience” in the New Testament. From then on, Paul implies, all men acquired the same double curse – they all knew by conscience what was good and what was not, and they all went against that “law” and sin was imputed to them, so they died.

So much for our understanding of Paul on Genesis.

Sin not imputed where there is no law

It would seem likely that Paul uses this phrase from theological first principles: sin is lawlessness: no law = no sin: therefore there must have been a law (of conscience) for post Adamic man to be guilty.

He does not imply that such a case (ie an absence of any law) could actually happen. Indeed in the cosmology of his culture it probably couldn't: we have shown that Adam received the law of conscience in the same moment that he became a sinner. Paul might, I suppose, apply the “non imputation” rule to the unborn, the mentally damaged etc where the law of conscience does not exist. But basically he's elucidating a theological truth from a hypothetical situation.

However, in our day it seems very likely that Adam was *not* the first man in the biological sense. Even if he were the first *H. sapiens* questions arise about the status of *H. erectus* or *H. neanderthalis*, seemingly with significant cultural and even spiritual similarities. The problem is even more acute if Adam's historical setting is taken as literally true – well into the neolithic culture, when there was ritual and so on.

But what if the role of Adam was to be the first *H. sapiens* to be placed in personal relationship with God, gifted with eternal life by grace, and sadly fallen into sin and consciousness thereof by disobedience?

“From the dust of the ground” could bear the sense either of “directly created anew” or “indirectly, as all men are”. In other words, he could have either a miraculous origin or (better in terms of solidarity) be chosen as an ordinary example of *H. sapiens*.

But let us run with the latter, as interacting with more difficulties. We can observe now, and in scientific terms can observe from before Adam, that animals do things that in themselves are “sinful”. For example chimps kill each other, steal from each other, act promiscuously, covet status – even usurp their parents' leadership. But chimps have no law of conscience – and so these things are not imputed as sin to them. Indeed, Christ did not need to die for animals because they are not guilty of sin – not because their actions are legally or morally good, but because they are not under

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any law, even that of conscience. They do not have eternal life because it was never given to them, and nor is it any loss to them.

If, indeed, Adam was the first human to sin, by breaking a command, resulting in the endowment with conscience, then prior to his fall any behaviour arising from his animal nature would not have the character of sin, because Adam had no law of conscience. His original innocence would then be the innocence of an animal rather than the innocence of an angel: sin not imputed rather than sin absent. He would, of course, have been an intelligent and socially advanced animal.

I don't think Scripture precludes this, even if it sits uneasily with our traditional presupposition that "good" in creation means "morally perfect". This interpretation is in any case doubtful. If we ask how Adam could have eternal life yet do sinful acts, the answer would be, "by the grace of God, as in our own case." The difference would be that unlike ours, his sin would not be rebellion, but from innocent ignorance, "from a pure heart" in OT terms.

Yet I don't think we need insist that God would have left Adam in his animal behaviour. He was dwelling, after all, with God in the garden. The breath of God in him may well mean the Holy Spirit, who is the very means God uses to mould our behaviour. We may safely say that God either endowed him with moral perfection, or was moving him towards it in preparation for his role as co-ruler of the world.

Meanwhile, outside the garden?

On this understanding the world outside would have been populated by many humans who, whatever their intellectual or cultural accomplishments, were *theologically* speaking animals. They had never known God personally, they died naturally and carelessly because they had never had access to the tree of life, and they were innocent of sin because they had no law of conscience.

Is it, then, possible to imagine what would be a neolithic human culture without conscience? At first sight it seems impossible – like some vision of hell. But even if we consider the animals in our present age, we see that a society can work well without the restraint of conscience (understanding that it would also be without the escalation of evil seen in post-fall man, spoken of in the Bible).

Film of chimps planning a war on a neighbouring tribe, or of a gorilla hounding its own father to death make us uneasy, because they resemble the similar, sinful, occurrences in human societies. Not only are our assumptions of animal innocence challenged, but our own consciences make us uneasy on their behalf. Yet the same films overall make us feel good about other things we see in ape society like parental concern, cooperation, harmony with the environment and so on. Indeed, this mixed picture is not so different from our own society: the differences are that humankind can commit true genocide, deliberate torture, and perversion which are only constrained by conscience. (Conscience may itself be seared: but a man who has suppressed his conscience, unlike an animal without one, remains guilty before God). At the same time conscience sometimes produces altruism not seen in the animal kingdom (though one must not underestimate the influence of religious law here).

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So I propose that quite advanced human societies before Adam could have existed without relationship with God, without the moral law, and so of course without sin, showing the same mixture of goodness and savagery that is exhibited further down the evolutionary line. Technology, art, and even superstition can be seen as an expression of theologically animal behaviour. Neither will we be fazed should we see signs of these in lower human, or even non-human, animals.

What defines man as sinful man, in need of redemption and in search of eternal life, is, through Adam, a lost relationship with God (and with it the loss of the creation role of vice-regent), original sin imputed, the existence of conscience via the tree of knowledge and, consequent to that, the escalation of animal “vices” into the black pit of corruption that we see amongst humanity now.

Many will argue that this view makes God responsible for a creation that contains evil before the fall. But to those accepting an old-earth view, our theodicy has to cope with this anyway, for the whole history of life shows animal (and even plant!) activity which, in a human, would be seen as immoral.

I would take the view that “sin” is different from “natural evil”. I would see the latter as that which, in a world fitted for purpose (ie good), man was intended to subdue but, in the end, sinfully submitted to. Indeed, Genesis says as much, in that the woman submitted her judgement to that of a mere animal, the serpent.

The transmission of sin

The biggest hurdle left, to me, is to understand the transition from an intelligent but godless and morally sinless humanity prior to Adam, to the universality of sin and conscience that we see today, and which is essential to the message of the Gospel.

Old earthers cannot take sin as being passed on by genetics because no single gene is carried by every human being. And if it were, sin could be eradicated by genetic engineering rather than requiring the death of the Son of God. There can on several counts, then, be no sin gene, and what other mechanism is there for the inheritance of character?

Augustine posited sin as passed through the concupiscence of the generative act after the fall – but few would be happy with that now, and it suffers the same problems for old-earthers as genetic transmission. However, leaving aside Augustine’s contaminated sexuality, non-genetic inheritance is inherently possible – see my article on MRCA studies [here](#).

Purely cultural transmission is also generally considered a sub-Christian, Pelagian, idea, and begs the question of why sin should be spread more than righteousness. One still has to explain the inherent bias towards sin. To put it down to evolved selfishness is inadequate biologically and places the blame on God, our Creator. It would also lead to the dangerous heresy that isolated primitive cultures were sinless and therefore outside the pale of the Gospel.

The only remaining plausible answer is that Romans 5 suggests original guilt arises because of the *federal headship* of Adam, which isn’t necessarily tied to his being

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physical progenitor. It may be that, by divine fiat, conscience was transferred to the rest of the race at the same time on the basis of solidarity with the federal head. Effectively, that would put young- and old-earthers who accept the Bible on a level playing field: the Bible's theme of salvation is true for all mankind from 4004BC (or whenever) and we need not be concerned about the salvation of man before then, for they were effectively no more than intelligent animals, and had no concept of eternal life or of sin. True manhood is a privilege from God above nature, not a natural endowment of the species *Homo sapiens*.

One other theme of relevance is the stress possibly laid on the "legitimate" line of descent from Adam in Genesis, though I for one am unable to make a coherent scheme to encompass this. But clues are the separation of Cain's line from Seth's; the selection of a specific line from Adam to Noah; the mention of men's first "calling on the name of Yahweh", the "sons of God/daughters of men" passage (freed from its later Jewish explanation as the origin of demons) and, of course, the fact that a limited flood, which may be supposed to have eradicated Adam's line apart from Noah's family, was deemed by God an appropriate, if incomplete, solution to the corruption of the earth. This may hint at a progressive incorporation of the world's humanity into the *Homo divinus* camp, though once again the existence of isolated communities across the world makes this a risky path to explore without the incorporation of the conclusions of Most Recent Common Ancestor studies.

[The Hump of the Camel](#)