

Reversal of the Curse of Genesis 2:17

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In his letters Paul uses various types of argumentation, but primarily, he uses the rabbinic form of argumentation called *midrash*. The arguments found in rabbinic *midrash* often take a very loose form of what modern logicians would call a hypothetical syllogism or argument; i.e., an "if/then" form: a conditional sentence with an affirmation or negation of an "if" clause, with the argumentation proper developed in the "then" clause, which is called the consequent. This is not the Greek form of an Aristotelian argument, but it is very much what is found in the literature of the rabbinic community of Israel.

We may construct Paul's argument of Romans 5:12a, 17-18 as follows: "If it is the case that God has decreed that all men who sin shall die (Gen 2:17 / Ezekiel 18:4, 20), **then** it follows that the curse of death is applicable to all men who sin." Paul makes this argument in a subtle fashion and then spends several paragraphs developing the "then" clause of his argument. This would not be what logicians would call a structurally valid and sound argument, but it is what one would experience if he were in a discussion with someone trained in the art of rabbinic argumentation.

In the Day You Eat Thereof

Another argument that could be drawn from Genesis 2:17, which is a presupposition of Paul primary argument, is as follows: "If it is the case that God decreed that in the day that Adam sinned he would surely die, (Gen 2:17), **then** it follows that the curse of death was applicable to Adam from the moment that he sinned. But here someone might say, in diatribe fashion, "Adam did not die the very

moment he sinned." In fact, Adam lived to be 930 years old (Gen 5:5). How does one explain this?

The error here is that of assuming that a curse placed upon someone must be fulfilled immediately upon the activation of that curse. This is not necessarily the case at all. The nature of a curse is that it is fulfilled in its own good time and the one who enacts the curse is not in default if he does not impose the final effects of the curse immediately.

This is the nature of "blessings and curses," in ancient Semitic cultures as reflected in their literature. In fact, they will be fulfilled at the discretion of the one who administers the consequences or effects of the blessings and/or the curses. This is the very nature of the "blessings and curses" pronounced by God in the giving of the *Torah* of the Mosaic Covenant (Deut 11:26-32; 28:15-19, 45-46; 29:18-28; 30:15-20). All blessings and curses were fulfilled by God as he chose in his own good time and the fact that he often did not bring swift destruction on those who violated the covenant let many to believe that there would be no consequences resulting from their disobedience. Anyone with a school-boy knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures knows that this did not prove to be true.

The Curse of Death

Now, to the point Paul is making and what we can conclude from his argument. In the larger context (Romans, chapters 3-6,) of his argument here in Romans 5 he works from the above stated argument concerning Adam and reasons, by implication, that a curse of death was placed upon man because of the statement made by God in Genesis 2:17, and Adam's consequent violation of this prohibition of God (Gen 3:1-24), resulted in consequent mortality for Adam and all his descendents by virtue of the fact that he was expelled from a paradise, in which longevity of life was always a possibility, into a world where death was now a certainty; which is seen in the curse placed upon Cain for his sin in Genesis 4:1-16. The curse of death was, then, passed upon all of Adam's descendents as a result of his expulsion from the presence of God and the environment

which God had provided for the first human beings created.

In all of this we are working from the assumption that the word "death," as used here in Gen 2, is physical death or mortality. There are, however, other views as to how death should be understood in this text. Some would say that the death of Genesis 2:7 is to be understood as "spiritual death," meaning "separation from God?" We may ask whether the expression "spiritual death" a biblical phrase or even a biblical concept? If so, where is it found? There is a good bit of diversity concerning how this expression is to be understood. In a spiritual death what dies or ceases to live? Is it the spirit that dies? Is the second death of Revelation 20:6 the death of the spirit after it has been separated from the body in physical death, which would be the first death?

It would seem that Paul's discussion of death in Romans 5 makes much better sense if understood as mortality rather than spiritual alienation from God. In fact, Paul argues that the justification for the mortality of all of Adam's descendents is found in the fact that all who participate in the choice of Adam (i.e. disbelief of God's word and consequent disobedience) are also subject to the curse of death (e. g. Ezekiel 18:4, 20, "the soul that sins, it shall die"), and is so stated by Paul in Rom 5:12, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned." The context of Paul's statement here in no way warrants the conclusion that he is speaking of death as separation from God rather than human mortality.

That man's mortality is the result of Adam's choice is the presupposition underlying Paul's whole line of reasoning in Romans, chapters 3-6. In Romans 5:17-18, he reasons:

If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. 18: Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. 19: For as by one man's disobedience many

were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. 20: Law came in to increase the trespass [to define sin as transgression of the Law]; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21: so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

From what Paul argues here, it follows that: **(1)** because of one man's trespass, death (physical death) has consequently reigned over mankind through the transgression of that one man, **(2)** one man's trespass led to the mortality of all men, **(3)** as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, and **(4)** sin reigns through death and death is the curse of sin; thus, all men who have sinned are amenable to the curse of death. This is Paul's line of argumentation in Romans 5.

Those Who Have Not Sinned

The question usually presented at this point concerns those human beings who have not sinned yet are subject to death, (e.g. infants and little children). This is a very difficult issue to resolve, but its answer must lie in the fact that all offsprings of Adam are born into mortality (i.e., they are subject to physical death).

This problem was the primary cause of the development of the doctrine of original sin and Origin's doctrine of transferred or imputed guilt. Children die because of their own sins; rather, they die because they were conceived in sin through the sexual union of their parents? Such an idea seems inconceivable given the fact that God instructed those he created to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:27-28). The only way human beings can reproduce themselves is through the very act that this view suggests is an act of sin.

Physical death results from the inability of the human body to sustain the life force which makes it a living entity. It is not the case that all persons die because they are sinners, but that all persons die because they are mortal. It is not the sin that was imputed to the offspring of Adam (original sin), but the mortality (the consequence

of Adam's sin). All deaths are not the consequence of the sins of the one who dies, as in the case of an infant, but all deaths are the consequence of being mortal, and the sin of Adam is what resulted in man's mortality.

The Curse of Mortality

Death being defined as the cessation of life is the result of the separation of the life force (spirit) from the body. If the term "death" is to be understood differently, it must be considered a metaphorical or modified usage, which may be determined by the context in which it is used (e.g. we "die" to sin). It is the case that Adam did not actually die on the day he sinned; rather, he became subject to mortality or the demise of his body that occurred 920 years later, which means that the curse which was set in motion on the day of his transgression was the curse of mortality.

The death of a child, then, is a consequence of the child being born to a mortal being, not because he is born to a sinner. But the fact is the child is still mortal and will die maybe even before adulthood and accountability. The child's death cannot be the result of his sins if s/he is not of the age of accountability, but this is not the one of whom Paul is speaking in Romans 5.

The offspring of Adam of whom Paul is speaking in this text is one who is of the age of accountability for his sins. His physical death is his first death. There is an interesting argument by C S. Lewis concerning the concept of a second death. The death of the human body is what all human beings experience, his death as a spiritual being created in the image of God is what Lewis would call the second death (Rev 20:6, 14; 21:8), which he describes in *The Abolition of Man* as the death of the image of God in man, which is present through the breath of life breathed into him by God making him a living soul (Gen 2:7). If this being has become so godless that there is no trace of the image of God in him, then he has become as dead as ashes without the hope of being rekindled, this is spiritual death.

The Reversal of the Curse

To return to the reasoning of Paul in Romans 5, Paul affirms in this text that as the curse of death is the consequent of sin, the deliverance of God is the consequence of Christ reversal of this curse. Those who are no longer defined by their existence "in Adam," but are now beings of a new existence "in Christ," these are: **(1)** those who have received the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness and reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ," and **(2)** it is the case that one man's act of righteousness has led to acquittal and life for all men, that **(3)** by one man's obedience many have been made righteous, and that **(4)** as sin reigned in death, grace also reigns through righteousness and eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Each of these contrasts are set in juxtaposition to the above listed consequences of being the offspring of Adam and being defined by one's existence "in Adam."

Here is the heart of Paul's doctrine of divine reversal. What happened to all men because of the sin of Adam has been reversed because of the incarnation of God in Christ, who was "in Christ, reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive," (1 Cor 15:22), that's divine reversal. But how did that happen? If a curse of death was set in place by God because of Adam's disbelief of his word, then what has happened to cause the curse to be no longer applicable to all men? It would appear that the curse, of which Satan appears to have become the executor (i.e. the one who carries out the terms of the covenant), has in some way been nullified. How could that have been accomplished?

This appears to be what Paul is saying has happened. If the covenant or prohibition of God stated that the one who violated his word would die (Gen 2:17), then would such a consequence be applicable to one who did not sin? To carry this reasoning further, what if someone who had not sinned was put to death by a violent act of sin? If he was an Adamic being of the age of accountability and he had no sin, then the curse of death was not applicable to him as Paul applies the curse of sin and death here in Romans 5. The

application of the curse to him would have been a violation of the terms of the curse and would nullify the efficacy of the curse.

The death of Jesus of Nazareth was the result of the malignant, violent and sinful actions of his fellowman. He could not be held in death and could consequently be returned to life - a reversal of the curse. His death had been a violation of his Adamic existence and his new existence would no longer be amenable to the curse of Gen 2:17. His life was not a resuscitation of his life as an Adamic being; rather, it was a resurrection from the death of his Adamic existence into new existence.

If Satan was allowed to hold God to his word as suggested in Job 1:6-12, and could consequently claim every soul that sinned in death, then what would be the consequence of Satan trying to claim the soul of a human being of accountable age who had no sin? Would he not have to forfeit his claim and reverse the consequent effects of the curse?

New Existence through Regeneration

The conclusion that must follow from this is that if Satan had claimed the soul of Jesus by virtue of the word of God to Adam in the prohibition not to partake of the forbidden tree, then Satan had violated those conditions in claiming Jesus in death and had thus nullified the covenant as related to Jesus. For Jesus this brought about the death of death, and in the reasoning of Paul this nullification was applicable to all those who would become new creations in Christ in the same manner (*tupos* type of likeness) as men were created as offsprings of Adam.

Those who would become new creations "in Christ" through spiritual union with him would do so through regeneration (*palinge'nesias*) or renewal (*anakaino'seos*) as Paul reasons in Titus 3:5; or "new creations," as he explains in 2 Cor 5:17 (*kaine'kti'sis*), and 4:16 (*anakainou'tai* - being renewed). So also Eph 2:10 (*ktisthen'tes en christo* - created in Christ), 2:15 (that he might create [*ktizo*] in himself one new man), 4:24 (a new man having been created [*ktizo*] in

righteousness), and Col 3:10 (the new man, the one renewed [*anakainou'menon*] in accordance with the one having created [*kti'santos*] him).

Paul's most expressive image of this renewal is found in Rom 6:3-4 and in Rom 8:29-30. One must also remember that this is the very imagery used by Jesus in his conversation with the rabbi Nicodemus in John 3:3-5 - in order for one to enter into the reign of God (a realm wherein grace reigns - Rom 5:21), he must be born anew (*gennethe' a'nothen*).

Conclusion

The reason that the death of Jesus had the power to reverse this curse was not the fact that he was a man who was sinless, but that he was sent into the world as the second Adam to reverse the effects of the curse brought on by the disbelief and disobedience of the first Adam, and to accomplish this he must have been without sin, in contrast to the first Adam.

This is Paul's line of thought in 1 Cor 15:21-22, " For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." So also in Romans 5:12 he says, ". . . sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned."

In Romans 5:17-19, he continues this line of reasoning,

If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. 18: Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. 19: For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

In 1 Cor 15:45-49, Paul reflects this same line of argumentation,

Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46: But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. 47: The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. 48: As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. 49: Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven."

In verses 53-57, he concludes,

For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable and this mortal nature must put on immortality. 54: When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55: "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" 56: The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57: But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Let me sum up this discussion with the following: Paul thinks that all of this is a part of God's doing in his desire to save the human race, but is all possible because of who Jesus was. He was not just a man who was sinless, he the very Son of God, who was God in the flesh.

I think that the incarnation of Christ is something beyond our ability to grasp let along to fully appreciate. The **first Adam** was a human being who was made in the image of God; the **second Adam** was a human being who was the one in whose image man was made, who had become "one of us" in order to recreate us anew, again in his image as revealed the second Adam.

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