Christ as the last Adam: Paul's use of the Creation narrative in 1 Corinthians 15

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In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul gives a sustained argument for the physical resurrection of the dead. Throughout this argument, he alludes back to the Creation and Fall accounts. While the reference to Christ as the "Last Adam" is the most obvious reference to Genesis, the rest of the chapter is also saturated with images and allusions to Genesis 1–3. Paul's use of the Creation and Fall narratives in this passage only works if they are interpreted as depicting historical events, as Paul undoubtedly understood them to do.

N.T. Wright argues that "The resurrection—that of Jesus, and that of Jesus' people—dominates the Corinthian correspondence."[1] In one of the most sustained arguments in any of Paul's letters, he takes on those in the Corinthian church who are claiming that there is no resurrection of the dead. Their denial does not stem from "scientifically"-minded skepticism that we might attribute to modern people, since most ancient people accepted some sort of disembodied spiritual existence after death. They probably regard resurrection from the dead as a perverse doctrine rather than an impossible one, since people with a Greek background would be more likely to regard a purely spiritual existence as superior to any existence involving a physical body.[2]

Paul vehemently argues against this position, saying that if there is no resurrection, Jesus cannot have been raised, and if Christ is not raised, the Christian has no hope of salvation. "Paul's point is a simple one: if their present position prevails, they have neither a past nor a future."[3] The logic of the argument in this passage forces the Christian to accept that indeed, there is resurrection of the dead, since Paul appeals to the Corinthians' own former acceptance of the fact of Christ's resurrection to prove his point.[4]

The explicit mention of Christ's resurrection stops at verse 20, but the rest of the chapter depends and builds on the point he has made up to that point. Having proved that there is resurrection from the dead by logical deduction from Christ's resurrection, and the disastrous results that come from denying this, Paul goes on to make his point that the resurrection of Jesus also guarantees the resurrection of the believing dead.[5] It is important to note that the resurrection of unbelievers is not in view in this argument; Paul's whole argument for the resurrection here, as will be seen, is based a comparison of Christ's relationship to those under Him to that of Adam's relationship to humanity which is descended from him. Unbelievers do not share this relationship to Christ, so they are not in view here.[6]

The comparison between the First and Last Adams in this argument "seems to break the flow of the argument begun in 15:35."[7] But this is not the case if one understands that Paul has the first chapters of Genesis in mind throughout the chapter. In this argument,

"Genesis 1–3 is thus not only a frequent point of allusion, but provides some of the key structural markers in the argument. … [T]here can be no doubt that Paul intends this entire chapter to be an exposition of the renewal of creation, and the renewal of humankind as its focal point."[8]

While Paul only explicitly quotes the Genesis creation narrative a few times in his argument, it is clearly in his mind during this whole passage.

The way that Paul uses the first chapters of Genesis in his argument shows that he regards the whole narrative, and specifically the story of Adam and the Fall, as historical in the sense that it refers to people which actually existed and events which actually happened. This forms the basis for his designation of Christ as "the Last Adam", the one who obeyed God perfectly in contrast to Adam's disobedience, and thus became a second head of humanity. Christians can have assurance of their own resurrection on the basis of his resurrection.

Christ as the firstfruits of the resurrection

Up to verse 20, Paul has been arguing for the resurrection of the dead, and in verses 20–28 he "sketches the framework within which this belief not only makes sense … but follows inescapably."[9] He does this using two images, the first of which is an agricultural image. In verse 23, Paul calls Christ "the firstfruits ($\dot{\alpha}\pi\alpha\rho\chi\dot{\eta}$, *aparchē*) of those who have fallen asleep." The firstfruits is the first part of a harvest, dedicated to God. There is both a temporal and a causal relationship between the firstfruits and the rest of the harvest; the firstfruits comes before the rest of the harvest, and it serves as a guarantee of the rest of the harvest.[10] "Firstfruits of any kind were holy to the divinity and were consecrated before the rest could be put to secular use," but Garland argues that by the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians, this force of the word had been weakened to the point where it was practically a synonym for "first".[11] The idea of firstfruits explains why one person would be resurrected ahead of everyone else, but Paul is mainly interested in the casual force of the firstfruits analogy.[12]
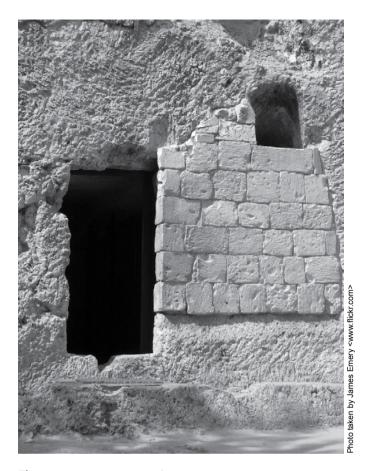
Paul is not simply stressing the chronological precedence of Christ, but that His resurrection was something completely different, the first event of its kind. "His resurrection was not simply God's miraculous intervention that rescued him from death, but was the beginning of God's renewal of all things." Christ's resurrection is the beginning of the harvest which characterizes the last days.[13] There were occurrences of resuscitations of dead people both in the Old and New Testament prior to Christ's resurrection, but they all died eventually (e.g. the widow's son revived by Elijah in 1 Kings 17, Jairus' daughter, Lazarus). But as Paul will clarify later in the passage, resurrection is much more than the soul being returned to the same body that was buried. There is a transformative aspect to the body as well, which was absolutely unique in Christ's resurrection which sets his resurrection apart from the resuscitations that preceded it.[14]

Paul sees the resurrection of Christ as "an anticipatory promise of the general resurrection of the dead and as a consecrating reality that signaled the devotion of the remainder of those who were to be raised to God."[15] The relationship of Christ as the firstfruits of the resurrection guaranteeing the resurrection of believers depends upon the link between Christ and Adam in 20–22, and makes Jesus the founder of a "new humanity".[16]

The first and last Adams and the resurrection

Paul's argument about Christ as the firstfruits of the resurrection serves to build a foundation for understanding the relationship between the resurrection of Christ and that of believers. After this, he uses another image to argue for the appropriate relationship between Christ and believers such that he *can* act as the firstfruits. In order to build his case, in verses 21–22 Paul introduces the idea of Christ as a sort of antitype to Adam, whose relationship to humanity affects them positively in the same way that Adam's relationship to humanity affected them negatively.[17]

This is the first time that Paul uses the Adam/Christ typology, which is not used by any other biblical author, but which he will pick up again in Romans 5:12–21.[18] The two verses clarify each other: death came through Adam, resurrection from the dead came from Christ. In Paul's thinking, Adam represents "all that is fallen and destructive" while Christ represents the exact opposite.[19] So the typology works mainly in terms of contrasting these two heads of humanity; but as with all typologies, the contrast assumes an underlying similarity between the two figures. The fundamental characteristic Adam and Christ have in common is that they are individuals whose respective actions affect all people who are under them.[20] Christ stands at a head of a new humanity in a way that is like, but not identical to, Adam's headship.[21] Without this fundamental similarity, there is no ground for the contrast that Paul gives: the grammatical construction implies similar causality

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Figure 1. The resurrection of Christ undergirds the entire argument of 1 Corinthians 15.

between Adam's sin and the death of his descendents and between Christ's resurrection and that of believers.[22]

It is the *humanity* of Christ that is stressed in this argument rather than his deity: "it is in Adam *as man* that all die; it is in Christ *as man* that all are brought to life."[23] So Christ's resurrection in effect reversed the effects of Adam's sin, even though we do not yet see this reversal completely.

> "Whatever the Corinthians may have believed about Christ's resurrection, it cannot be argued to be of a different order because he was divine. Rather, just as death, so resurrection is *through a man*."[24]

This serves to refute the argument, whether real or hypothetical, that Christ was not the sort of human that death could really touch; *in his humanity*, he was as vulnerable to death as any human being. It also emphasizes that it was the same sort of resurrection that we will have; his divinity did not make his resurrection of a different order than the resurrection that the Christian will experience.[13] Christ's humanity is absolutely essential to Paul's argument; it is Christ's status as the "truly human one, the one who fully bears the divine image" which allows Christ to rescue humanity and become the head of a new humanity to whom resurrection is guaranteed.[25]

Paul's argument depends on a concept of a sort of corporate solidarity in the human race under Adam who brought death. That is, since he is the ancestor and head of all humanity, all who proceed from him are doomed to die under him.

> "Paul assumes that the representative determines the fate of the group. All those bound to Adam share his banishment from Eden, his alienation, and his fate of death so that death becomes the common lot of his posterity. All those bound to Christ receive reconciliation and will share his resurrection and heavenly blessings."[26]

Paul will clarify in Romans 5:12–21 that Adam passed on sin as well as death to his descendants, and the former forms the basis for the latter. Paul is not primarily interested in the way Adam functioned to bring sin to humanity, but that Christ functioned in the same way to bring resurrection to all who are under him. Adam simply gives the necessary typological background for Paul's argument.[13] Paul argues that Jesus because of the resurrection became the basis of a "new humanity", and those who are in him share in His resurrection, just as those in Adam die.[22]

Death "the last enemy"

Paul is proclaiming that Jesus' resurrection constitutes a victory over death that also applies to his new humanity, but the fact remains that believers were still dying in his day, and have continued to do so for nearly 2,000 years after he wrote this passage. Beker notes that there is a disjunction between the defeat of sin, which has no power in the Christian life according to Paul, and that of death, which still maintains its hold on humanity. "Death still reigns, at least in some important sense."[27]

As long as those who belong to Christ die, death is not fully defeated. Since θάνατος (thanatos, death) is accompanied by the article in this clause, it should be treated as the subject, making ἔσχατος ἐχθρὸς (eschatos echthros, last enemy) the predicate nominative, placed at the front of the clause for emphasis. I.e. it's saying, "[The] death is last enemy"; the latter phrase describes the characteristics of the former.[28]

"By separating it [death] and drawing special attention to it, emphasis is placed on the fact that the reign of Christ is not complete until death is conquered."[29] Paul's argument is that the resurrection of Christ and eventually of believers, and nothing less than that, constitutes the defeat of death.[30] So the resurrection of believers will serve to complete Christ's defeat of death; the logical result of which is "the end will come" with Christ's complete victory over every enemy of God's rule, and that Christ will transfer dominion to God the Father (v. 24).[31]

ἐπειδὴ γὰρ δι᾽ ἀνθρώπου θάνατος, καὶ δι᾽ ἀνθρώπου ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν: ὥσπερ γὰρ ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ πάντες ἀποθνῄσκουσιν, οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ πάντες ζῳοποιηθήσονται.

Figure 2. The Greek text from 15:21–22. 1 Corinthians 15 contains one of the clearest examples of a New Testament author's historical interpretation of Creation and the Fall.

To call death an "enemy" implies that it is not natural, and that it is not the original state for which God created humanity. Jewish and Christian attitudes towards death were notably different from those of the surrounding pagan culture. While Greeks thought of death as "a welcome liberation; the physical was left behind as the self became pure spirit", in the Bible "death is viewed as a disruption of life that, apart from resurrection, reduces the totality of the self as a psychosomatic unity. In this sense it is understood as an enemy associated with fallenness, sin, and judgment."[32] This was highlighted when Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus, despite being about to resuscitate him (John 11:35).

This view of death requires an explanation of the origin of death, and Paul looks back to Adam as the one who introduced sin and death into the created order.[33] While some commentators prefer to take the immortality of Adam and Eve in a non-literal way and argue that their lifespan was merely reduced from what it would have been otherwise, Paul clearly takes it straightforwardly: Adam had to be immortal before he disobeyed, or else death would not have been a punishment or an intrusion on the created order.[34] The resurrection of the dead must happen because "death is an intruder, a violator of the creator's good world. The creator's answer to death cannot be to reach some kind of agreement or compromise. Death must be, and in the Messiah has been and will be, defeated."[35]

Different kinds of bodies

Up until now, Paul's argument has been that the resurrection is an indispensible doctrine; without it there is no Christianity.[36] But those who are denying the resurrection are also likely operating under a mistaken assumption which must be corrected; namely, that the resurrection of the dead is inherently a foul doctrine. This probably stemmed from the assumption that resurrection simply means the resuscitation of the same dead bodies that were buried. "Because the Corinthians could not fathom how [the resurrection of the dead] was possible, they had abandoned any trust that it was possible."[37] Paul does not directly attribute these questions and misunderstanding to the Corinthian believers. Instead, he puts them in the mouth of a hypothetical questioner, allowing him to more forcefully refute the errors without directly insulting the Corinthian believers. Paul goes on to discuss the nature of the resurrection body, and to answer misunderstandings about the resurrection body by pointing out that though there is a true continuity between bodies in this life and the resurrection body. He explains that the resurrection body is a different sort of body appropriate to resurrection existence, just as there are different sorts of bodies in this age.

Wright argues that "the key to understanding [verses 35–49] is to realize that they, like verses 20–28, are built on the foundation of Genesis 1 and 2."[38] Paul draws his themes for the arguments in this section directly from the creation narrative, using images that his audience would be familiar with from everyday life. Paul builds up his argument gradually, forcing his audience to agree with one point at a time, until it is impossible to reject his conclusion.[39]

Paul begins by answering the question "how are the dead raised?" using an agricultural metaphor: just as the seed has to die in order to produce the full-grown plant, and just as there is continuity and transformation in the growth of the plant from the seed, the resurrection body has transformed continuity with the body of this age. That the seed does not actually die in the modern sense of the word is not important, the argument and the analogy still hold. What is raised comes from what is buried in an important sense, but is fundamentally transformed so that it is different from what was buried.[40] God gives the appropriate body to each organism. Fitzmyer sees in this argument an allusion to plants bearing fruit according to their own kinds in Gen. 1:11–12.[41]

After proving that there is continuity with transformation in this age with the example of the seed and the plant, he goes on to show that there also various sorts of bodies in this age. In verse 39, he alludes in reverse order to the creation of various animals in Genesis 1:20–27, and in verse 40 he also brings in heavenly bodies as well.[41] "Paul's point is that God, who created bodies of such known and diverse splendor, has also made human bodies of present and future existence, which may be quite diverse and beyond our present comprehension."[42] Having shown that there are many kinds of bodies in the present existence, he argues that there is yet another type of body suitable for resurrection existence.[39]

The first and last Adams, and the resurrection body

Paul brings back the Adam/Christ typology, which he introduced in 21–22 in verses 45–49. Before, Paul was emphasizing their common humanity, but this time Paul is emphasizing the qualitative difference between the two heads of humanity to explain how there can be a resurrection body.[43]

Just as there is a temporal sequence between the firstfruits and the rest of the harvest, there is also a temporal relationship between the "natural" body (ψυχικός , *psychikos*) and the "spiritual" body (πνευματικός , *pneumatikos*). Paul argues that all people inherit one kind of body and mode of life from Adam, but believers will inherit another kind of body and an accompanying mode of life from Christ.

Just as the seed is sown in order to be transformed into a greater body, so regarding human death and resurrection,

"what is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable." There is some debate about what exactly is sown; a common interpretation is that it is the body which is sown, and the resurrection body is raised imperishable. Some others argue that it is the entirety of life that is meant.[44] Garland suggests that since a dead body is without a soul, it is improbable that Paul meant sowing to refer to burial; rather, he argues that Paul meant the procreative act which produces the ψυχικός *body*. This view finds support in that procreation is sometimes referred to as "sowing" while burial is never described in this language.[45] Whichever interpretation one adopts, the meaning is essentially the same; what is raised is transformed into an imperishable state, although it retains continuity with what is sown.

While the last section focused on the common humanity of the First and Last Adams, this passage shows the qualitative difference between the two. "The first Adam was merely a living human being … . By emphatic contrast, the last Adam is not merely living but life-giving."[46] So not only is Christ the firstfruits of the resurrection who guarantees the resurrection and determines the kind of body and what kind of existence resurrected believers have, but He is Himself the source of this transformation.

There is some debate about whether Paul is using the Philo's categories of "earthly" and "heavenly" man. Although some see Philo's influence, the connection is tenuous, especially with no proof that Paul uses Philo's categories anywhere else. Most of Paul's other terminology differs sufficiently from Philo that there is no reason to conclude that he is being influenced by him in this passage. This is all the more true when one considers that evidence for the influence of Genesis on this passage is much stronger. There is no reason to posit another major background influence since the Genesis influence sufficiently explains the passage.

Possible Rabbinic influences face the same problem; a superficial reading seems to support the conclusion that Paul was influenced by them, but analysis invariably exposes such links as forced.[47] Collins sees the most likely source for Paul's thought here in the Genesis creation narrative; "dust" in verse 48 hearkens back to Genesis 2:7, and "image" in verse 49 to Genesis 1:26.[48] It is also common for commentators to see a reference to a "primal man" mythology in Paul's choice of language in v. 21, but as Fitzmyer notes, it is much more natural to see a straightforward allusion to the Genesis Creation/Fall narratives, as there is no reason to think that Paul ever thought in terms of the "primal man" mythology.[22]

ψυχικός **versus** πνευματικός

The interpretation of the words ψυχικός and πνευματικὸς in verse 44 is worth further discussion. ψυχικός is used to describe the earthly body, while the heavenly body is πνευματικός . The former was used in

1 Corinthians 2:14 to describe someone "not particularly attuned to the work of the Holy Spirit," while the latter is one "who is open to the Spirit's influence".[49] In 3:1, πνευματικός is contrasted with σαρκινός (*sarkinos*, fleshly or carnal), which seems to be a ψυχικός person controlled by the desires of the σάρξ (*sarx*, flesh).[49] Once one grants the existence of and distinction between the two, that there are two kinds of bodies suited to the two types is a foregone conclusion for Paul. The πνευματικός body is not spiritual in the sense that it is composed of spirit; it is a physical body *controlled* by the Spirit. Just as all humans inherit a ψυχικός body from Adam (the first one to have such a body), believers will also inherit a πνευματικός body in the resurrection as a result of their relationship with Christ (who was the first one to have that sort of body).[50]

Earthly vs heavenly

The first man is described as "earthly" while the second man is "heavenly". In the history of interpretation of these two words, there has been a tendency to read origin into these words; that is, that the first man comes *from* the earth and the second man comes *from* Heaven. However, it is much more likely that Paul is drawing from the Genesis account about Adam being made from earth, and uses "heavenly" as an appropriate antonym to apply to Christ. Fee argues that they are basically synonyms of ψυχικός and πνευματικός in this passage.[51]

Is Adam necessarily historical?

The argument of this paper has been that Paul's argument requires Adam to be a historical figure; however, there are many commentators who have the view that Paul's argument still works if Adam is seen to be mythological. C. K. Barrett is typical of this view:

> "Sin and death, traced back by Paul to Adam, are a description of humanity as it empirically is. For this reason the historicity of Adam is unimportant. It is impossible to draw the parallel conclusion that the historicity of Christ is equally unimportant. The significance of Christ is that of impingement upon a historical sequence of sin and death. Sin and death (to change the metaphor) are in possession of the field, and if they are to be driven from it this must be by the arrival of new forces which turn the scale of the battle, that is, by a new event … . But so far as the 'Second Adam' or 'Heavenly man' figure is mythological, the myth has been historicized by Paul, and that not only because he was aware of Jesus as a historical person, but because a historical person was needed by the theological argument."[52]

But this argument fails on its own terms because it does not recognize that the view throughout the Bible is that sin and death were themselves intrusions on human history caused by Adam's sin, and this is the basis for the contrast with Christ's actions which affected human history for good.[53]

Purely mythological figures obviously cannot affect history for good or evil. Furthermore, even Barrett has to concede that *Paul himself saw* Adam as a historical figure, as do most commentators, whether or not they think that Paul was wrong to do so.[23] Collins is unusually honest about his opinion of Paul's exegesis, saying that it results from a naïve reading of the Genesis creation narrative, which springs from a lack of enlightenment provided by modern source criticism. Implications for divine inspiration aside, at least Collins admits that Paul does in fact see Adam as a historical character, and that this perception forms the whole basis for his argument about the resurrection of the Christian.[54]

The conclusion that Paul is using the Genesis narratives, not just as proof-texts, but within an entire theology of creation, to argue for the existence of resurrection bodies, is inescapable. "This is not a mere 'appeal to Scripture', as though Paul were mounting an argument about something else and needed to drag in a few proof-texts."[25] The Genesis accounts of the Creation and Fall as historical narratives were foremost in Paul's mind throughout the whole passage.

Conclusion

Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15 only comes together as a coherent whole when one realizes that the imagery and *history* of the Creation and Fall narratives are constantly in Paul's mind. Paul uses creation imagery along with the contrast between Adam and Christ to argue first for the fact of the resurrection, then for the sequence of resurrection and the existence of the resurrection body. This argument, though it has Jewish background in its repudiation of the notion that matter is inherently bad, differs enough from any existing Jewish tradition that we must conclude that this is an original argument from Paul, based on his careful working through a theology of creation. "Paul clearly believes that something has happened because of which new construals of well-known texts are now appropriate."[55]

If one accepts that Paul saw the Genesis Creation and Fall narratives as historical, as most commentators argue, then this raises serious questions for the interpretation of this passage, not to mention the wider issues of inspiration and infallibility, for those who want to take the Genesis narratives in a non-historical fashion while accepting this argument from Paul for the resurrection. As in Romans 5:12–21, Paul's point is inescapably that Christ is the head of a new humanity whose actions constituted a breaking into history which affects all under him, just as Adam's action affected all under him based on his unique relationship with those who came after him. If the creation narratives fall apart under modern scrutiny, then so must an argument so dependent on their being historical.

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