

## The fruit of sin vs the fruit of sanctification: a Pauline allusion to Genesis 3 in Romans 6

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Paul's allusions to Genesis in the book of Romans have been widely acknowledged, especially in Romans 1:20ff;<sup>1</sup> 5:12–21;<sup>2</sup> and 8:19–23.<sup>3</sup> I propose there is an additional, commonly overlooked, allusion to Genesis 3 in Romans 6:20–23, which is clear when we look at the constellation of terms Paul uses:

“For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ.”

In Romans 5, Paul depicted Adam and Christ as two heads of humanity, whose respective rebellion and obedience resulted in death and life, respectively, for those under them. Here Paul depicts two modes of life, one unbelieving and one believing, which bear different fruits with different consequences. The first is slavery to sin and freedom from righteousness, which bears shameful fruit which leads to death. This was the life every one of the Roman believers in Paul's original audience lived before believing in Christ. The second is their current life, slavery to God and freedom from

bondage to sin, which bears the fruit of sanctification which leads to eternal life.

### Fruit leading to shame and death; fruit leading to eternal life

One can make a lexical argument that Paul is continuing to reference the Fall narrative (Genesis 3) in this passage. There are several words which occur both in the Fall narrative and in this passage. The word καρπός (*karpos*, fruit) occurs both in Genesis 3:2–3, 6 LXX and in Romans 6:21–22. The word translated ‘ashamed’ occurs in Genesis 2:25 LXX (αἰσχύνομαι, *aischunomai*) and Romans 6:21 (ἐπαισχύνομαι, *epaischunomai*). The verb translated ‘to die’ (ἀποθνήσκω, *apothnēskō*) occurs in Genesis 3:3–4 LXX, and the related noun translated ‘death’ (θάνατος, *thanatos*) occurs in Romans 6:21 and 23. The fact that in both Genesis 3 and Romans 6, fruit leads to shame and death is more significant than the mere presence of the same constellation of terms.

In both Genesis 2–3 and Romans 6, fruit also leads to eternal life. In Genesis 2–3, this is the fruit of the tree of life, from which Adam and Eve were free to eat prior to the Fall. However, after the Fall, they were removed from the Tree of Life to *prevent* their eating and living forever. But as Paul says: “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Romans 6:22). This is consistent with the image of believers having free access to the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:2).

### Interpretive and translational issues

Incidentally, recognizing this reference may help to resolve an interpretive debate about this passage.

ὄτε γὰρ δοῦλοι ἦτε τῆς ἀμαρτίας, ἐλεύθεροι ἦτε τῆ δικαιοσύνη. τίνα οὖν καρπὸν εἶχετε τότε; ἐφ' οἷς νῦν ἐπαισχύνεσθε, τό γὰρ τέλος ἐκείνων θάνατος. νυνὶ δὲ ἐλευθέντες ἀπὸ τῆς ἀμαρτίας δουλωθέντες δὲ τῷ θεῷ ἔχετε τὸν καρπὸν ὑμῶν εἰς ἀγιασμόν, τὸ δὲ τέλος ζωὴν αἰώνιον. τὰ γὰρ ὀψώνια τῆς ἀμαρτίας θάνατος, τὸ δὲ χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ ζωὴ αἰώνιος ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν.

Figure 1. The Greek text of Romans 6:20–23 as punctuated by UBS5

There are two ways to punctuate Romans 6:21. The first is that preferred by the ESV: “But what fruit were you getting from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.” In this punctuation, the assumed answer to the rhetorical question is ‘none’, because ‘fruit’ in this instance is assumed to mean ‘good results’. As Murray explains:

“In paraphrase the thought would be as follows: ‘Present your members servants to righteousness unto holiness (vs. 19). For consider that in your former state of service to sin you had no concern at all for righteousness and no good fruit whatsoever accrued from abandonment to the service of sin, nothing indeed but that of which you are now ashamed and the end of which is death. How urgent, therefore, is the claim of righteousness and the necessity of commitment to its bondservice.’”<sup>4</sup>

The second option is: “Therefore, what fruit did you have then? That of which you are now ashamed. For the end of these is death.”<sup>5</sup> Because *καρπός* normally has a positive connotation in Paul’s writing, most commentators prefer the first option. However, some disagree.

“‘Fruit’ is mostly used by Paul in a good sense and some argue for a good sense here, but F. Hauck is probably right when he comments, ‘The pre-Christian man is under the power of sin and brings forth the

corresponding fruits’ (TDNT, II, p. 615). Paul is inquiring what really significant result had followed from their living in those evil ways of which they are now ashamed. The end of those things, he emphasizes is death.”<sup>6</sup>

This interpretation also makes the most sense of the proposed Genesis 3 reference. In any case, a negative connotation to *καρπός* is not foreign to the usage of the rest of the New Testament, see for instance Matthew 7: 16–20.

Also, this passage highlights the consequences of taking a ‘dynamic equivalence’ translation too far, because it may obscure parallels the author intends to bring to mind. For instance, the NIV translates *karpos* as ‘benefit’, erasing the idea of ‘fruit’ from the passage and making it much harder to see any parallel to Genesis. As Morris points out: “Interestingly, NIV removes the agricultural metaphor by translating *benefit* where the noun means ‘fruit’ and then inserts it by rendering *reap* where the verb means ‘have’.”<sup>6</sup> Other dynamic equivalence translations similarly obscure the original terminology, making it harder to see that there are two interpretive options with the sentence in verse 21, as well as a parallel to Genesis 3. Only the strict translation of ‘fruit’ preserves the ambiguity inherent in the original Greek.

## What is ‘the sin’?

Paul concludes this passage: “For the wages of sin (τῆς ἀμαρτίας, *tēshamartias*) is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The singular noun is significant:

“Paul does not say ‘The wages of our sins is death’ but, ‘The wages of the sin is death’. Since 5:12 we have seen that this articulated term ‘the sin’ denotes, not sin and sinning in general (which is ἀμαρτία without the article), but ‘the power of sin’. It is a kind of personification. Like a master ‘the sin’ pay [sic] wages, namely this sin power that entered the world by the one act of Adam and by that one act enslaved us all. Nor should we forget that ‘the death’ came in with ‘the sin’ and by its very coming got hold of us all.”<sup>7</sup>

This reveals that Paul does not leave the comparison he was making beginning in Romans 5:12–21; rather, he is carrying it through to the end of chapter 6. This helps us to understand the flow of Paul’s thought, and reveals more about how he thinks of Adam’s *historical* sin as having actual consequences in the lives of the believers to whom he is writing.

## References

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