

THE DIFFUSION OF DEATH: ROMANS 5:12 AND ORIGINAL SIN

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Romans 5:12 has long held a privileged place in theological discussions of original sin. Other passages of the Old and New Testaments have played a part in the formulation of the doctrine as well, such as Psalm 51:5 and Ephesians 2:3, but none commands center stage like Romans 5:12. From earliest times theologians have turned to this passage to support the Christian belief that sin is a hereditary condition that affects the entire human family. Modern scholars, however, have often raised doubts about whether Paul's remarks in Romans 5:12 are capable of bearing the weight of this doctrine.

One reason for the skepticism is that theology and exegesis have generated no consensus about its interpretation, at least in matters of detail. This is true of Patristic and medieval scholarship no less than modern. Our aim in what follows is to propose a new reading of Romans 5:12 that is philologically grounded, exegetically compelling, and theologically continuous with the Church's doctrinal tradition. Our approach may be described as an effort at reassembly. It is an attempt to build a new interpretation of Romans 5:12 out of stones that have been hewn by others but are typically arranged in different ways.

This will require (1) a preliminary analysis of the context and structure of Romans 5:12, (2) a determination of what Paul means by "death" in the passage, (3) a considered decision on how the final two clauses of the passage relate to one another, (4) an examination of how the Council of Trent deals with the passage, and (5) a synthesis of our findings and its implications. We hope to demonstrate that, while Paul knows nothing of the later refinements that figures such as Augustine¹ would bring to the doctrine of original sin, what he asserts in Romans 5:12 constitutes a legitimate foundation in Scripture for the Church's teaching.

¹ It is frequently stated in modern studies that Augustine of Hippo invented the doctrine of original sin in the early fifth century AD. This is a misreading of the evidence. For a contemporary clarification, see Peter Sanlon, "Original Sin in Patristic Theology," in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 85–107.

Before unpacking this new reading, we begin by segmenting Romans 5:12 into its four constituent clauses (labeled a, b, c, and d). This will provide us with a series of reference points for the remainder of the study.

- 5:12a Διὰ τοῦτο ὥσπερ δι' ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς
τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν
5:12b καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος,
5:12c καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διῆλθεν,
5:12d ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον·
- 5:12a Therefore just as through one man sin entered the
world
5:12b and through sin death,
5:12c and so death spread to all men,
5:12d ἐφ' ᾧ [?] all have sinned.²

The Context and Structure of Romans 5:12

Romans 5:12 is part of a discrete unit in the letter, 5:12–21, in which Paul juxtaposes Adam and Christ as type and antitype, image and counterimage. Grammatically, this unit is expressed in the third person, marking it out as distinct from Romans 5:1–11, which is expressed in the first person, and likewise from 6:1 and following, which resumes the use of the first person. Rhetorically, the passage may be classified as an instance of *synkrisis*—a studied comparison of two persons, things, or situations that aims at drawing out the similarities and dissimilarities between them.³ Paul's effort to compare and contrast Adam and Christ is based on a common pattern: in both instances, the actions of "one" have ramifications for "all."

Scholars generally agree that Paul's purpose in Romans 5:12–21 is to magnify the redemptive work of Christ. His primary intention is not to brood over Adam's sin or to bemoan the train wreck of human sin that has been piling up ever since. Adam is drawn into the discussion more as a foil than as a subject of detailed study in his own right. Uppermost in Paul's mind is the superabundance of salvation and grace brought to the world by the Messiah (Rom 5:20). Adam and Christ have both performed deeds of universal consequence; nevertheless, there is nothing like a strict equivalence between them, since Paul insists that Christ has impacted the world to a degree far greater than Adam had. Thus, while the linkage between Adam and Christ depends upon essential commonalities, Paul is most concerned to accentuate the

² The phrase ἐφ' ᾧ (transliterated *eph' hō*) at the beginning of Rom 5:12d is deliberately left untranslated, since its meaning is one of the questions to be dealt with in this article.

³ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 589–90.

differences between the two men and especially the disproportion between the effects of their actions. He achieves this (1) by stressing that the free gift of grace in Christ is “not like” the effect of Adam’s transgression (Rom 5:15–16), (2) by reasoning in the rabbinical mode known as *qal wahōmer*,⁴ which is expressed in Greek as πολλῷ μᾶλλον (“much more”; 5:15, 17), and (3) by using the compound verb ὑπερπερισσεύω (“abound even more”; 5:20) to amplify the contrast. To paraphrase Paul’s logic with an analogy: If Adam’s transgression put the world in debt, Christ not only paid the debt in full but also made those who receive his gifts extraordinarily wealthy (see 2 Cor 8:9). This, it seems, is the main point that Paul labors to communicate in Romans 5:12–21 as a whole.

Turning to Romans 5:12 itself, we immediately face an interpretive difficulty. The question that confronts us is whether 5:12 is a complete sentence. Since at least the third century AD,⁵ it has been felt that Paul begins a new line of thought in this verse but abandons it before finishing.⁶ It has since become a majority position among scholars that 5:12 is an *anacoluthon*, a grammatically incomplete statement. The reason is that Paul introduces a comparison between Adam and Christ with the particle ὥσπερ (“just as”) but never follows up with a corresponding οὕτως καί (“so also”).⁷ It is a statement with a *protasis* but no *apodosis*. A few scholars contend that Paul does, in fact, complete the comparison, arguing that καὶ οὕτως (“and so”) in 5:12c is equivalent to οὕτως καί (“so also”),⁸ but this stretches the evidence too far, and the majority of commentators remain convinced that 5:12 is an unfinished sentence that breaks off abruptly.⁹ Evidently Paul felt that his

⁴ Literally “light and heavy.” It is a form of argument that reasons from a lesser fact to a greater one, comparable to the classical *a fortiori* argument.

⁵ See Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 5.1.3.

⁶ Hence, in several modern English translations, the verse ends not with a period but with an em dash (for example, RSV, NRSV, ESV, NABRE).

⁷ As Paul does several times in the near context (Rom 5:18, 19, 21; 6:4).

⁸ John T. Kirby, “The Syntax of Rom 5:12: A Rhetorical Approach,” *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 283–86; Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 224; Thomas R. Schreiner, “Original Sin and Original Death: Romans 5:12–19,” in Madueme and Reeves, *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin*, 272–73.

⁹ For example, C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Introduction and Commentary on Romans I–VIII*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 272; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38a (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 271; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Romans*, Anchor Yale Bible 33 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 411; Brendan Byrne, S.J., *Romans*, Sacra Pagina 6 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 183; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 318–19; N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, TN:

opening remarks needed immediate clarification, lest readers find his account of sin and death unpersuasive or at odds with the teaching of Scripture. At any rate, the balancing half of the comparison begun in 5:12a–b is postponed until 5:18–19.

Finally, it is often noted that Romans 5:12 follows a chiasmic structure: Sin–Death–Death–Sin. The mirrored pattern A–B–B'–A' clearly reveals the interests that occupy Paul's mind in this passage, but it does nothing in itself to define the relationship between them. The present study will attempt to do precisely this—to determine how sin is related to death in the case of Adam and how death is related to sin in the case of Adam's descendants.

The Meaning of “Death” in Romans 5:12

Romans 5:12 falls in the second major section of the letter, Romans 5–8, where the subject of “death” stands very much in the foreground. In the brief span of four chapters, the noun θάνατος (“death”) appears twenty-one times, the verb ἀποθνήσκω (“die”) seventeen times, the verb θανατόω (“put to death”) three times, and the adjective θνητός (“mortal”) two times. The statistical data is straightforward, but the reality of death indicated by this vocabulary is rather complex. Death as Paul describes it in Romans is a multidimensional concept with differentiated levels of meaning. It may be, as some suggest, that Paul understands death as a unified concept in which its different aspects are related at a theological level.¹⁰ But the fact remains that Paul employs the language of death to speak of several distinguishable realities.

Adding to the challenge of interpretation, Paul personifies “sin” and “death” as tyrannical powers that dominate the lives of men and women and exert a perverse influence over their actions.¹¹ Death is viewed as a totalitarian dictator who is said to “reign” or “exercise dominion” over sinful humanity (βασιλεύω; Rom 5:14, 17). Sin, who wreaks havoc in conjunction with death, is said to reign (5:21), enslave (6:6), pay out wages (6:23), seize opportunities (7:8), deceive (7:11), and kill (7:11). The two despots work in tandem, for Paul indicates that the realm ruled by death is also the realm where sin exercises its kingship (5:21).

Abingdon Press, 2002), 10:525; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 373.

¹⁰ See Thomas Barrosse, C.S.C., “Death and Sin in Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1953): 438–59. For a somewhat different view, see C. Clifton Black II, “Pauline Perspectives on Death in Romans 5–8,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 3 (1984): 413–33.

¹¹ See, for example, Stanislas Lyonnet and Léopold Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption, and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study*, *Analecta Biblica* 48 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998), 54–57, and more recently, Matthew Croasmun, *The Emergence of Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), esp. 102–39.

Death in Romans 5–8

The varied meanings of “death” in Romans 5–8 may be grouped into four categories. (1) *Physical death*. Paul has this form of death in mind when he speaks of the saving death of Christ (Rom 5:6, 8, 10; 6:3–5). The crucifixion is a singular and unrepeatable event of the past insofar as Jesus, in his resurrected state, is no longer subject to the laws of our mortal condition (6:9–10). Paul likewise has physical death in mind when he acknowledges that believers have mortal bodies (6:12; 8:11) that are to be doomed to perish, either naturally or by violent persecution (8:36, 38). Against this background believers look forward to the future resurrection of their bodies (8:11) as an event that will complete their adoption in Christ (8:23). (2) *Spiritual death*. Paul also speaks about a form of death that separates sinners, not from their bodies, but from the life and grace of God. One who transgresses the commandments of God experiences a death that does not result in the dissolution of the body. Paul describes this reality when he says: “I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me” (7:9–11). Although Paul’s main concern in this passage is to clarify the relationship between sin and the Mosaic law, his remarks cast a sidelight on the consequences of covenant violation: once the commandment is transgressed, the lawbreaker “dies” (7:10a) or incurs “death” (7:10b). Death is here a spiritual and relational concept in which the sinner’s “right relationship” with God perishes as a direct result of disobedience. The sinner, placing himself in a situation of “death,” is separating himself from the “life and peace” of the Spirit (8:6). (3) *Eschatological death*. Paul also speaks of death as the final outcome of sin, the destiny toward which evil-doing ultimately leads. This form of death, which consists of a definitive separation from God and a forfeiture of future glory, stands out in Paul’s warnings about the dangers that sin poses to the Christian moral life and the pursuit of sanctification (6:16, 21, 23). Avoidance of eschatological death not only demands the avoidance of sin but also calls for a proactive strategy of “putting to death” the deeds of the body that lead away from eternal life (8:13). (4) *Baptismal death*. Paul develops a unique understanding of death when he describes what believers undergo in the sacramental rite of baptism. The one who is baptized into Christ is crucified with him (6:6, 8) and experiences a death to sin (6:2, 7), as well as a death to an old way of observing the Mosaic law (7:6). In this context death is a saving event, a result of accessing the redeeming power of Christ’s death. It is a death that frees us from the slavery of sin and gives rise to the moral obligation of leaving behind the delinquent ways of our past.¹²

¹² For this form of death, see Sorin Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope: Paul’s Metaphorical*

The question, in view of this variety, is what Paul means by “death” in Romans 5:12. What reality is indicated by the twofold use of the term *θάνατος* in 5:12b and 5:12c?¹³ There are no scholars to our knowledge who argue for a baptismal meaning of death in this passage, and for obvious reasons. It is fairly common, however, for scholars to claim that Paul’s intention in 5:12 is to identify the causes of physical death for Adam and his progeny.¹⁴ Others contend that Paul is referring to “total death,” by which is meant the full spectrum of physical, spiritual, and eschatological death that Adam’s trespass released into the world.¹⁵

In our judgment, these options shoot wide of the bullseye. Various contextual indicators suggest instead that Paul is singularly focused on *spiritual death* as the personified tyrant that reigns as a king over the family of Adam.¹⁶ There can be no doubt that Paul sees a close relationship between spiritual death and bodily decease, on the one hand, and spiritual death and eschatological demise, on the other. But neither of these related forms of death presses into his field of vision in Romans 5:12–21. The death that “entered” the world through Adam’s disobedience (*εἰσῆλθεν*; 5:12b) and “spread” to all humanity (*διῆλθεν*; 5:12c) is spiritual death. It is the deprivation of spiritual life, union, and peace with God that attends our birth into the world and threatens to have the final say at life’s end.

Observations supporting this understanding of death in Romans 5:12 include the following. (1) In the preceding context, Paul insists that Christ rescues believers, not from bodily decease and decay, but from being God’s “enemies” (*ἐχθροί*; 5:10). This suggests that the death unleashed by Adam’s sin is a spiritual and relational death that is undone only by a reconciliation with God effected through Christ (5:11). (2) In the immediate context, Paul

Language of ‘Death’ in Romans 6:1–11, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005).

¹³ A handful of uncials (D, F, G) and minuscules (1505, 2495) omit the second reference to ὁ θάνατος in Rom 5:12c, but the manuscript support for its inclusion is considerable. Interestingly, Augustine worked at times with an Old Latin text that lacked the word *mors* (“death”) in Rom 5:12c. Unaware of this defect, he took the implied subject of the verb *pertransiit* (“spread”) to be *peccatum* (“sin”), rather than death; see Henri Rondet, S.J., *Original Sin: The Patristic and Theological Background*, trans. Cajetan Finegan, O.P. (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1972).

¹⁴ For example: W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903), 132–33; Byrne, *Romans*, 176; John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 181–82. Fitzmyer is willing to grant that, in Rom 5:12, death “includes spiritual death,” but he maintains that bodily death remains Paul’s primary focus (*Romans*, 412).

¹⁵ This is essentially the position of Barrosse in “Death and Sin.” See also Moo, *Romans*, 320.

¹⁶ See, for example, Gerald Bray, “Adam and Christ (Romans 5:12–21),” *Evangel* 18 (2000): 4–8. Wright appears to follow this line of interpretation as well (“Romans,” 526).

virtually equates death with the “condemnation” that falls upon all humanity in the wake of Adam’s sin (κατάκριμα; 5:16, 18). Incorporation into Christ frees the believer from this condemnation, as Paul indicates in Romans 8:1, but this does not spare the believer the tragedy of bodily death. (3) In the proximate context, Paul claims that the counterpoint of death in Adam is not physical or natural life, but the gift of “eternal life” in Christ (ζωὴ αἰώνιος; 5:21; 6:23). There can be no question that Paul’s understanding of eternal life includes the new life that God will impart to our mortal bodies at the final resurrection (8:11); however, eternal life is not merely a future gift for the body, since Paul contends that even now the spirits of embodied believers are made alive by the indwelling of Christ (8:10). (4) In a later passage, Paul is adamant that physical death is *not* an obstacle to union with God through Christ (8:38). By contrast, the death that Paul speaks of in 5:12 does exactly this: it spreads to all and separates all from God. (5) Death as a lifeless state of enmity with God is attested outside the book of Romans in other Pauline writings, for example, in Ephesians 2:1–7. (6) Several ancient Christian writers understand Paul to speak of spiritual death in Romans 5:12, noting that bodily death is merely an aftereffect of this prior and more dreadful reality. To cite one example, Origen of Alexandria contends: “Without a doubt this is the death concerning which the prophet says, ‘The soul which sins will die.’ Of this death one could rightly say that bodily death is a shadow. For wherever the one goes, the other necessarily follows, just as the shadow follows the body.”¹⁷

These considerations suggest that Paul’s “short history of death” in Romans 5:12 penetrates deeper than the problem of human mortality. Likewise, the legacy of death is not—at least at this point in Paul’s letter—extended into a future eternity. Romans 5:12–21 is focused entirely on the predicament of spiritual death that entered human history through Adam’s disobedience and spread to all generations after him.

Death in Genesis 2–3

As we read the evidence, this interpretation of death in Romans 5:12 is confirmed by Paul’s intertextual allusions to the Old Testament. The first of these is Genesis 2–3, which all agree is the background for Paul’s abbreviation of the Adam story in 5:12a–b. Many suppose that Paul’s thinking on “death” is based directly on Genesis 3:19, where the Lord God pronounces on Adam a sentence of bodily corruption: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This is unlikely, however. One can agree that, in

¹⁷ Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 5.1.19, cited from *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Books 1–5*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, *The Fathers of the Church* 103 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 313. See William of St. Thierry, *Exposition on the Epistle to the Romans* 5.12, who follows Origen’s interpretation exactly.

the etioloical account of Genesis, physical death is portrayed as a negative consequence of the first human sin. But dissolution of the body is only one of several penalties imposed on the disgraced couple. It is the culmination of a lifetime of added burdens that include painful childbirth, spousal domination in marriage, toilsome labor for food, and an earth that sprouts inedible thorns and thistles (Gen 3:16–18).

Paul's understanding of death more likely arises from the creation-and-fall narrative as a whole, and especially from Genesis 2:17, where the Lord God warns the first man of the consequences of eating from the forbidden tree: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."¹⁸ The warning of death that attaches to the commandment is the key to making sense of what follows. The expression in Hebrew, *mot tamut*, is an emphatic construction that stresses the certainty of the outcome (nicely captured by the English Standard Version's "you shall surely die"). Many connect this divine warning with the sentence of bodily corruption in Genesis 3:19, but a direct link between these verses is doubtful. In addition to the certainty of death, Genesis 2:17 also says something about its timing. Adam is assured that death will come "in the day" that he eats from the tree, and yet Genesis tells us that he lived to be "nine hundred and thirty years" old (Gen 5:5). Even granting that the Hebrew phrase *beyom* can be a general indicator of time ("when") and not always a specific one ("in the very day"), the elapse of more than nine centuries between Adam's transgression (Gen 3:6) and the termination of his life in the body (Gen 5:5) can hardly be squeezed into the timeframe envisioned by the expression.

The death threatened by God in Genesis 2:17 thus requires a more proximate referent, and this is supplied by the context. The transgression of Adam and Eve immediately brings forth negative consequences that give shape and substance to this prospect of "death" without offering a dictionary definition of the word. There is an instantaneous disruption in the couple's relationship with God that is marked by fear and shame (Gen 3:8–11); there is a sudden alienation between husband and wife and an unwillingness to accept the responsibility for sin (Gen 3:12); there is an immediate sentencing of the couple with the imposition of penalties, including a limitation placed on their lifespan (Gen 3:16–19); and there is an abrupt expulsion of the couple from the Lord's presence, with precautionary measures put in place so that their reentry into the garden is prevented (Gen 3:22–24). These consequences, which come quickly "in the day" that Adam sinned, make the threat of death in Genesis 2:17 intelligible to readers of Genesis.¹⁹ And they are essentially

¹⁸ Schreiner says about Rom 5:12: "Paul is likely reflecting on the threat of Gen 2:17" ("Original Sin and Original Death," 272).

¹⁹ For an insightful reading of Gen 2–3 along these lines, see R. W. L. Moberly, "Did the

spiritual consequences that injure relationships, most notably the human relationship of covenant communion with God.²⁰

Beyond this, the broader context of Genesis may have suggested to Paul that the conditions of human existence following the couple's disobedience is a prolongation of this primordial death. All men and women who stem from Adam and Eve are born "outside the garden" into a world that is rife with opposition to God, hostility between individuals and nations, physical and emotional suffering, and the frustrations that hound all human efforts at survival. Perhaps we cannot say from Genesis alone that our fallen human condition is a congenital disorder that passes to successive generations by reproduction and birth, but a rabbi such as Paul, who had none of our modern hang-ups regarding the historicity of the Genesis narratives, could well have deduced such a thing. Indeed, it should not pass unnoticed that Jewish and Christian notions of the unity of the human race are more indebted to Genesis than to any other book of Scripture. Its macronarrative, encompassing the primeval and patriarchal stories, stretches over a frame of genealogies that trace the generations of human descent (however elliptically) from the first human couple to the family of Israel. If there was anywhere an ancient reader of Scripture could turn to track intergenerational phenomena for theological purposes, it is the book of Genesis.

Finally, while Adam receives limited attention in the Hebrew Bible outside the early chapters of Genesis, interest in Adam and Eve and the effects of their actions on human history rises sharply in Second Temple and rabbinic sources.²¹ In several ancient texts, blame for the universal experience of physical death and other woes is pinned directly on Adam and Eve.²² There is little reason to doubt that Paul was aware of these traditions and that he internalized them to some extent. But the prevalence of these ideas in early Judaism need not mean that Paul is repeating them in Romans 5:12. One also finds Jewish discussion of *spiritual death* in relation to Adam. In a remarkable passage, Philo of Alexandria has this to say about Genesis 2:17: "After they [Adam and Eve] have eaten, not merely do they not die, but they beget children and become authors of life to others. What, then, is to be said of this?

Serpent Get It Right?" in *From Eden to Golgotha: Essays in Biblical Theology*, Studies in the History of Judaism (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 1–27.

²⁰ Note that the "spiritual death" resulting from Adam's sin includes mortality (a new state of imperiled existence) but not physical death as such (the event of bodily decease and corruption).

²¹ See, for example, Robin Scroggs, *The Last Adam: A Study in Pauline Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 16–58, and especially John R. Levison, *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1988).

²² See Sir 25:24; 4 Ezra 3:7; 7:118; 2 Baruch 23:4; 54:15; 2 Enoch 30:17; Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 13.8; Genesis Rabbah 16:6.

That death is of two kinds. . . . The death of the man is the separation of the soul from the body, but the death of the soul is the decay of virtue and the bringing in of wickedness. . . . And this death is practically the antithesis of the death which awaits us all.”²³ Paul, then, is not the only ancient reader of Genesis to hold that Adam incurred spiritual death by an act of disobedience in the garden of Eden. At the same time, there is reason to think that Paul’s assertion in 5:12 goes beyond the theological horizons of Judaism, at least with respect to death’s diffusion. So far as the extant sources indicate, Jewish scholars did not explicitly develop the notion that men and women enter the world estranged from God, living in a state of spiritual death from the outset, owing to the primordial sin of the first couple.²⁴

Death in Wisdom 2:24

If Romans 5:12a–b draws primarily from the Adam story in Genesis 2–3, it draws secondarily from the theological interpretation of Adam’s fall in Wisdom 2:24. The passage reads: “Through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it.” Neither Adam nor his transgression is explicitly mentioned in this verse, yet commentators agree that an allusion to both is implicit. Nor is overt mention made of the serpent who instigated the first sin, yet commentators agree that Wisdom pries behind the mask of the serpent to identify the tempter as the devil—the evil one who brought death into the world by drawing the original couple into disobedience.

Paul’s reliance on this passage is subtle but unmistakable. His claim in Romans 5:12a–b that “sin entered the world and through sin death [ἡ ἀμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἀμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος]” closely approximates Wisdom’s affirmation that “death entered the world [θάνατος εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον].” The agreement in wording strongly suggests that these texts are related at a literary level, even though their focuses are different: Paul discourses about Adam’s role in introducing death into the world, whereas Wisdom highlights the devil’s role in bringing this about. The point of common interest for these two passages is the origin of death in human history. The significance of this for interpreting Romans 5:12 lies in the type of death that Wisdom describes.

Analysis reveals that Wisdom 1:1–6:21 is a unified subsection of the book that is presented as a trial scene. The author uses this metaphor to engage the wicked and the powerful on the true nature of death, among other

²³ Philo of Alexandria, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis* 1.105–6; in *Philo I*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 217.

²⁴ Andre-Marie Dubarle, O.P., *The Biblical Doctrine of Original Sin*, trans. E. M. Stewart (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 143–44.

things.²⁵ The wicked, who act on appearances and remain blind to life's deeper realities, suppose that physical death is the ultimate tragedy that terminates human existence. Even worse, they wield the power of physical death as a weapon against the just. What they fail to understand, according to Wisdom, is that wickedness brings a more dreadful kind of death that separates sinners from God and leads to condemnation on the day of judgment. One implication of this position is that bodily death is only a relative evil. In fact, the author claims that physical suffering and death can be a means of purification for the just (Wis 3:5–6), even a sign of divine favor (Wis 4:10–14). It actually conveys the souls of the just into the hand of God (Wis 3:1). By contrast, life's ultimate tragedy is spiritual death, which is incurred through doing evil and results in the loss of a blessed immortality. Spiritual death is the real enemy of human fulfillment. And this is the kind of death that the devil's envy released into the world according to Wisdom 2:24.

To summarize our analysis of death, several indicators suggest that Paul in Romans 5:12 recounts the origin and spread of spiritual death, rather than physical or eschatological death. It is a condition of separation from God and a privation of divine life that reaches all human beings through Adam, the progenitor of the human race. These indicators are contextual, drawn from Romans 5–8, as well as intertextual, based on a close reading of Genesis 2–3 and Wisdom 2:24.

The Relationship between Romans 5:12c and Romans 5:12d

Having argued that Paul understands death in Romans 5:12 as spiritual death and that his thinking on this subject likely derives from select Old Testament passages, it remains to determine how the diffusion of death to all humanity in 5:12c is related to the sins attributed to humanity in 5:12d. The question boils down to the meaning of ἐφ' ᾧ, the all-important phrase that links the final clauses of the verse together: "and so death spread to all men, ἐφ' ᾧ all have sinned." Formally, the expression is a prepositional phrase; functionally, however, it could be (1) given its full value as a *prepositional phrase* that introduces a relative clause, or (2) read as the equivalent of a *conjunction* introducing a causal, provisional, or consecutive clause. Nowhere more than here has the history of interpretation witnessed a greater divergence of opinion among theologians and exegetes.

²⁵ The interpretation in this section relies heavily on Michael Kolarcik, *The Ambiguity of Death in the Book of Wisdom 1–6: A Study of the Literary Structure and Interpretation*, *Analecta Biblica* 127 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991), esp. 76–79 and 133–58.

Proposed Meanings of ΕΦ' ΩΙ in Romans 5:12d

The most helpful survey of the options is provided by Joseph Fitzmyer, who enumerates eleven proposed meanings of the phrase by ancient and modern scholars, to which he adds a twelfth.²⁶ Several of the proposals he lists have invited heavy criticism or have otherwise garnered minimal support, and these will not be reviewed here. Instead, we confine our examination to eight of the most significant and/or influential views of the meaning of the phrase ἐφ' ᾧ, separating them into prepositional and conjunctive readings.²⁷ The chart below abbreviates Fitzmyer's survey, updates it with references to major commentaries published after his 1993 article, and is followed by brief explanations of each position.

Function of ἐφ' ᾧ	Antecedent of ᾧ	Translation of 5:12d
1. Prepositional Phrase	one man (εἷς ἄνθρωπος, 5:12a)	"in whom all have sinned"
2. Prepositional Phrase	one man (εἷς ἄνθρωπος, 5:12a)	"because of whom all have sinned"
3. Prepositional Phrase	world (κόσμος, 5:12a)	"in which realm all have sinned"
4. Prepositional Phrase	death (θάνατος, 5:12b–c)	"in the direction of which all have sinned"
5. Prepositional Phrase	preceding clauses (5:12a–c)	"on the basis of which all have sinned"
Function of ἐφ' ᾧ	Equivalent in Greek	Translation of 5:12d
1. Causal Conjunction	διότι / ἐπὶ τούτῳ ὅτι	"because/for this reason that all have sinned"
2. Provisional Conjunction	-----	"on the condition that all have sinned"
3. Consecutive Conjunction	ὥστε	"with the result that all have sinned"

²⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., "The Consecutive Meaning of ΕΦ' Ω in Romans 5.12," *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 321–39; reprinted in *To Advance the Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 349–68.

²⁷ It should be noted that Fitzmyer's survey does not cover occurrences of ἐφ' ᾧ in the LXX, although it appears eight times (Gen 38:30; Josh 5:15; 2 Kgs 19:10; Prov 21:22; Isa 25:9; 37:10; 62:8; Jer 7:14). In most cases, it renders the Hebrew relative pronoun *'ăšer*, often in combination with a resumptive pronoun, which appears later in the relative clause as the object of a preposition (or as a pronominal suffix attached to the object of a preposition). Translations include "upon which," "upon whom," and "for which," depending on the gender of the antecedent. The LXX examples of ἐφ' ᾧ thus have a prepositional function, introducing a relative clause.

PREPOSITIONAL FUNCTION #1. The majority of the Latin Fathers and medieval writers understands the preposition ἐπί as equivalent to the preposition ἐν (“in”), and the relative pronoun ὃ as a reference to Adam, the first man “in whom” all sinned in the beginning. No doubt this reflects the widespread influence of the *Vetus Latina* and the Latin Vulgate, both of which render Romans 5:12d the same: *in quo omnes peccaverunt*. It appears this was the understanding of Origen of Alexandria, at least at one point in his career.²⁸ Later this reading was advocated by the anonymous fourth-century Roman exegete called Ambrosiaster.²⁹ It was launched into the Middle Ages when its theological potential was mined by Augustine³⁰ and further refined by his successors.³¹

PREPOSITIONAL FUNCTION #2. Several of the Greek Fathers prefer to understand the relative pronoun ὃ as a reference back to Adam, but they ascribe a causal or instrumental meaning to the preposition ἐπί. On this reading, Adam is the one “because of whom” or “through whom” all have sinned.³²

PREPOSITIONAL FUNCTION #3. A more recent proposal argues that the preposition ἐπί bears a local meaning and that the antecedent of the relative pronoun ὃ is the masculine noun κόσμος (“world”) in Romans 5:12a. This yields the sense: “in which [realm]” all have sinned.³³

PREPOSITIONAL FUNCTION #4. According to another proposal, the preposition ἐπί has a directional nuance, and the antecedent of the relative pronoun ὃ is identified as the masculine noun θάνατος (“death”) in Romans 5:12b–c. Paul, who stated in Romans 5:12a that Adam’s sin led to his death, is thus

²⁸ Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 5.1.3, although he gives a causal meaning to the phrase in *Commentary on John* 20.39.

²⁹ Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans* 5.12 (PL 17:92).

³⁰ Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 4.4.7 (PL 44:614).

³¹ See, for example: Anselm of Canterbury, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*; Thomas Aquinas, *De malo* q. 4. No other view is even considered in the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Rom 5:12.

³² Theodoret of Cyrus, *Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans* 5.12 (PG 82:100); John of Damascus, *On the Letter to the Romans* 5.12 (PG 95:477). John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Romans* 10.1 (PG 60:473), may belong in this category as well, when he says: Τί δέ ἐστιν, ἐφ’ ὃ πάντες ἡμαρτον; Ἐκείνου πέσοντος, καὶ οἱ μὴ φάγοντες ἀπὸ τοῦ ξύλου γεγόνασιν ἐξ ἐκείνου πάντες θνητοί (“And what is the meaning of ἐφ’ ὃ πάντες ἡμαρτον? After/because that man fell, even those who did not eat from the tree have all become mortal through him”; our translation). This view was adopted in modern times by J. Cambier, “Péchés des hommes et péché d’Adam en Rom V.12,” *New Testament Studies* 11 (1964–1965): 264–65.

³³ Jewett, *Romans*, 376.

understood to say “in the direction of which” all have sinned, death being the end toward which all sinful actions lead.³⁴

PREPOSITIONAL FUNCTION #5. A final proposal in this category holds that the preposition ἐπὶ signals the basis upon which an action takes place, and that the antecedent of the relative pronoun ὃ, taken as neuter rather than masculine, is the preceding cluster of three clauses in Romans 5:12a–c. This yields a translation such as “on the basis of which” all have sinned.³⁵

CONJUNCTIVE FUNCTION #1. By far the most popular view in modern times understands the phrase ἐφ’ ὃ as equivalent to the causal conjunction διότι (“because”), or as representing ἐπὶ τούτῳ ὅτι (“for this reason that”). This proposal had some currency in earlier times³⁶ and has since become the regnant view among modern grammarians,³⁷ commentators,³⁸ and English Bible translations.³⁹

CONJUNCTIVE FUNCTION #2. Another view is that ἐφ’ ὃ attaches a proviso or condition to the spread of death in 5:12c that Paul asserts has been fulfilled in

³⁴ Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 270n176.

³⁵ Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 6 (Leipzig: Deichert, 1910), 261–68, and recently, Longenecker, *Romans*, 589–90. Fitzmyer also places in this category Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Letter to the Romans* 5.12: Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ τῆς ἐν Ἀδὰμ παραβάσεως γεγόναμεν μιμηταὶ καθ’ ὃ πάντες ἡμαρτον, ταῖς ἴσαις ἐκεῖνον δίκαις ὑπενενήγγεθα (“For since we have become imitators of Adam’s transgression to the extent that all have sinned, we have come under penalties equal to his”; PG 74:784; our translation).

³⁶ Photius of Constantinople, *Question 84 to Amphilochius* (PG 101:553).

³⁷ For example: A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 963.; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 50, 132; Maximilian Zerwick, S.J., *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples*, adapted from the 4th Latin edition by Joseph Smith, S.J. (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2011), no. 127; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 342–43; “ἐπὶ” in Walter Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 365 (6c); Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 139–40.

³⁸ For example: Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 133; Cranfield, *Romans*, 277–78; Moo, *Romans*, 321; Byrne, *Romans*, 183; Wright, “Romans,” 526–27; Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter*, 222; Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 241.

³⁹ In the RSV, NRSV, ESV, NABRE, JB, NJB, NIV, NAS, and NKJV translations.

Romans 5:12d. A modern advocate of this position proposes translating “on the condition that” all have sinned.⁴⁰

CONJUNCTIVE FUNCTION #3. Finally, Fitzmyer has pioneered a new solution to the problem of ἐφ’ ᾧ by showing that Hellenistic writers sometimes use the phrase to indicate the consequence or result of an action or circumstance. In these instances, the prepositional phrase functions as the equivalent of the consecutive conjunction ὥστε. Romans 5:12d could thus be translated “so that” or “with the result that” all have sinned.⁴¹ This reading has been adopted in a few commentaries⁴² and other studies.⁴³

A Consecutive Reading of ΕΦ’ ΩΙ in Romans 5:12d

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a detailed critique of these proposals one by one. Much of this has already been done by others.⁴⁴ Instead we confine our attention to two interpretations that have been the most widely accepted and influential in the history of interpretation, namely, what we have listed above as Prepositional function #1 (“in whom”) and Conjunctive function #1 (“because”). After doing so, we advocate for Conjunctive function #3 (“with the result that”) as the option that yields the most coherent sense of Romans 5:12d in its context.

(1) Despite its considerable influence in the Latin theological tradition, the rendering of Paul’s ἐφ’ ᾧ with the prepositional phrase *in quo* (“in whom,” referring to the one man, Adam) is problematic. It is not strictly impossible from a grammatical point of view, but neither is it satisfactory, and this for several reasons. (a) The masculine εἰς ἄνθρωπος (“one man”) in Romans 5:12a is too remote to function as the natural antecedent of the pronoun in Romans 5:12d. Two intervening clauses (Rom 5:12b–c), plus two intervening masculine nouns that could also serve as antecedents (κόσμος, Rom 5:12a; θάνατος, Rom 5:12b–c), combine to make this reading unlikely. (b) Paul is capable of speaking about the incorporation of all human beings “in Adam,” as he does in 1 Corinthians 15:22, where he states: ἐν τῷ Ἀδὰμ πάντες ἀποθνήσκουσιν

⁴⁰ Stanislaus Lyonnet, S.J., “Le Sens de *eph’ hō* en Rom 5, 12 et l’exégèse des Pères grecs,” *Biblica* 36 (1955): 436–56.

⁴¹ Fitzmyer, “Consecutive Meaning,” 332–38.

⁴² Frank J. Matera, *Romans*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 126–27; Scott W. Hahn, *Romans*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 83.

⁴³ Thomas H. Tobin, S.J., *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 177–78; Sabou, *Between Horror and Hope*, 130; Brian Vickers, “Grammar and Theology in the Interpretation of Rom 5:12,” *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 272.

⁴⁴ Most notably by Fitzmyer, “Consecutive Meaning,” 322–32; see also Cranfield, *Romans*, 274–79.

("in Adam all die"). But in that passage, he uses the preposition ἐν, rather than ἐπί, as found in Romans 5:12d, and there is little semantic overlap between these two words, even in postclassical Greek, where several prepositions tended to become more elastic in meaning.⁴⁵ (c) This interpretation leads to a reading of πάντες ἥμαρτον ("all sinned") that is itself improbable. In the Augustinian interpretation, this refers to the whole human race sinning in Adam in a collective and participatory way. As Augustine himself puts it, "all have broken God's covenant in that one man in whom all sinned."⁴⁶ The idea is that Paul speaks of an involuntary participation in Adam's sin by an actual participation in Adam's nature. Adam is not simply an individual, but the primal instantiation of human nature, and so the consequences of his fall not only affect him personally but also affect all his descendants subsequently and distributively.⁴⁷ In our estimation, the theological underpinnings of this view are not in themselves objectionable; indeed, one can find precedent in Scripture for such a manner of thinking (see Heb 7:6–10). Nevertheless, the fact remains that, in his letters, Paul consistently uses the verb ἁμαρτάνω ("to sin") for actual sins committed by morally responsible persons in the course of their individual lives. That he has this default meaning in mind in Romans 5:12d is nearly certain: earlier in the letter he uses the identical Greek expression to insist that "all have sinned [πάντες ἥμαρτον] and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23)—an unmistakable reference to the universal occurrence of actual sins—and two verses later, in a passage intended to preempt objections to 5:12, Paul speaks of multiple generations of "those whose sins [τοὺς . . . ἁμαρτήσαντας] were not like the transgression of Adam" (5:14). For these reasons, the translation "in whom" falters on linguistic grounds.

(2) Despite its dominance in modern times, the rendering of Paul's ἐφ' ᾧ as a causal conjunction meaning "because" is open to question. It is an attested meaning of the phrase in ancient Greek, and it may be used this way by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:4 and Philippians 3:12, but the case is not so clear for Romans 5:12, as scholars have noted. (a) Fitzmyer insists that "[t]he trouble with this interpretation is that there are almost no certain instances in Greek literature where ἐφ' ᾧ is used as the equivalent of causal διότι" and then adds that "alleged examples in the Pauline corpus apart from Romans 5.12 are

⁴⁵ Stanley E. Porter adds: "This interpretation fails because . . . ἐν ('in') would be the more likely preposition, especially since locative ἐπί tends to refer to physical location" ("The Pauline Concept of Original Sin, in Light of Rabbinic Background," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 1 [1990]: 3–30, at 23).

⁴⁶ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.27, cited from Saint Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 688.

⁴⁷ With the exception of Adam's personal guilt, which he alone bears (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §405).

far from certain.”⁴⁸ Others have expressed similar doubts,⁴⁹ including those scholars who have opted for different positions in the chart above. For our purposes, it is sufficient to recognize that a causal meaning of the phrase in 5:12 is not an open-and-shut case, but one that calls for greater scrutiny and reevaluation. (b) The real difficulty with a causal reading of ἐφ’ ᾧ in Romans 5:12 is the tension it creates with the context. If Paul is saying in 5:12c–d that “death spread to all men, *because* all have sinned,” then Adam and his offspring simply mirror one another. Paul would be advocating a “dual causality” in which both Adam brought death upon himself by his personal sin and his descendants bring death upon themselves by their own personal sins.⁵⁰ As one scholar concludes from this interpretation of 5:12: “Death is universal for the precise reason that sin is universal.”⁵¹ The problem with this reading is that the following verses say just the opposite.⁵² In 5:15–21, Paul is concerned exclusively with Adam’s responsibility for universal death; the first man’s action—and his alone—is the singular cause of a universal effect that brings death to everyone. Notice how he speaks without qualification in 5:15: “many died through one man’s trespass.” In Romans 5:17 he again asserts: “because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man.” As Paul views the matter, Adam’s primal transgression is both the means (5:15) and the reason (5:17) that death has gained mastery over the human family. No other causes of death, subordinate or otherwise, are mentioned. For this reason, the translation “because” fails to convince on logical grounds.

(3) This leads us in search of a new solution to the problem of ἐφ’ ᾧ in Romans 5:12, and Fitzmyer has already brought it to light. If the translation

⁴⁸ Fitzmyer, “Consecutive Meaning,” 326.

⁴⁹ Moo admits that the case for a causal meaning of ἐφ’ ᾧ in Rom 5:12 is “not nearly as strong as some suggest” (*Romans*, 322). It is likewise considered unproven by Lyonnet (“Le Sens de *eph’ hō*,” 455). Even Blass and Debrunner, who assign a causal meaning to the phrase in 2 Cor 5:4 and Phil 3:12, place a question mark (?) beside Rom 5:12 (F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. Robert W. Funk [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], no. 235[1]).

⁵⁰ Kruse notes how common this interpretation has become: “There is now a tendency among a number of scholars, no matter how precisely they construe *eph’ hō*, to identify a primary and secondary cause for human beings becoming subject to death. The primary cause is Adam’s disobedience, through which death first entered the world, and the secondary cause is the sin of disobedience of all human beings, who likewise bring death upon themselves” (*Paul’s Letter*, 242).

⁵¹ S. Lewis Johnson Jr., “Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 298–316, at 305.

⁵² Moo perceives this tension when he says: “Paul in v.12 asserts that all people die because they sin on their own account; and in vv.18–19 he claims that they die because of Adam’s sin. Paul does not resolve these two perspectives” (*Romans*, 324). See also A. J. M. Wedderburn, “The Theological Structure of Rom V.12,” *New Testament Studies* 19, no. 3 (1973): 339–54, esp. 353–54.

“in whom” (prepositional meaning #1) falters on linguistic grounds and the translation “because” (conjunctive function #1) fails to convince on logical grounds, we believe the translation “with the result that” (conjunctive function #3) succeeds on both counts. Even scholars who have opted for different positions acknowledge that Fitzmyer has researched and argued his position well⁵³ and that he has made real progress in a debate that is centuries old.⁵⁴ His case appears solid that several postclassical authors use the phrase ἐφ’ ᾧ to introduce a consecutive clause indicating the result or consequence of a given action, occurrence, or circumstance.

For the sake brevity, we cite four examples selected by Fitzmyer, leaving readers to consult his article for additional examples and a discussion of details.⁵⁵ The first comes from Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, written in the early second century AD. Speaking of Cimon’s quest to recover the remains of the legendary Theseus and to return them to the city of Athens, he says:

Τότε δὴ πολλῇ φιλοτιμίᾳ τοῦ σηκοῦ μόγις ἐξευρηθέντος,
ἐνεθέμενος ὁ Κίμων εἰς τὴν αὐτοῦ τριήρη τὰ ὅσῃ καὶ
τᾶλλα κοσμήσας μεγαλοπρεπῶς κατήγαγεν εἰς τὸ ἄστυ
[Loeb reads: τὴν αὐτοῦ] δι’ ἐτῶν σχεδὸν τετρακοσίων. ἐφ’
ᾧ καὶ μάλιστα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡδέως ὁ δῆμος ἔσχεν.⁵⁶

Then with great enthusiasm, Cimon, after finally discovering the burial site, placed the bones and other items in his own trireme and brought them back in grand fashion to his hometown after nearly four hundred years; *as a result*, the citizens were very kindly disposed toward him.

A second example can be seen in Plutarch’s work *On Curiosity*. The author narrates how a man of repute named Rusticus attended one of his lectures and stirred the admiration of the audience when a letter arrived from the emperor:

Γενομένης δὲ σιωπῆς, κάμοῦ διαλιπόντος ὅπως ἀναγνῆ
τὴν ἐπιστολήν, οὐκ ἠθέλησεν οὐδ’ ἔλυσεν πρότερον ἢ

⁵³ Longenecker, *Romans*, 589.

⁵⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 375. Not all agree, of course. Wright considers Fitzmyer’s case “at best not proven,” but he supports this judgment by saying that a consecutive translation asserts “the opposite of what he [Paul] states throughout, which is that sin causes death” (“Romans,” 527). Surely this is begging the question. The only thing that Paul states unambiguously is that *Adam’s sin* was a cause of death.

⁵⁵ The Greek texts are those cited by Fitzmyer as they appear in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* database. Occasionally, these texts differ in minor ways from what is printed in the Loeb Classical Library editions. The translations that follow each excerpt have been slightly adapted from Fitzmyer’s.

⁵⁶ Plutarch, *Cimon* 8.6.

διεξεληθεῖν ἐμὲ τὸν λόγον καὶ διαλυθῆναι τὸ ἀκροατήριον·
ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἐθαύμασαν τὸ βάρος τοῦ ἀνδρός.⁵⁷

When it became silent, and I stopped [speaking] so that he could read the letter aloud, he was unwilling and did not unbind it before I finished the discourse and the audience was dispersed; *as a result*, all were amazed at the importance of the man.

A third example is provided by Cassius Dio from the early third century AD. The historian relates how Gaius Caligula, intent upon making a new appointment, ousted certain consuls from office. The result was a tragic act of suicide:

Ἐκείνους μὲν δὴ διὰ ταῦτα αὐθημερὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς ἔπαυσε,
τὰς ῥάβδους σφῶν προσυντρίψας, ἐφ' ᾧ δὴ ὁ ἕτερος αὐτῶν
ἀδημονήσας ἐαυτὸν ἔσφαξε.⁵⁸

So for these reasons he summarily stripped these of their rule, having first broken apart their fasces, *with the result that* one of them killed himself in anguish.

A fourth example comes from the *Orations* of Libanius of Antioch, dated ca. AD 363. Speaking laudably of the emperor Julian he states:

Ἦ γὰρ οὐχ οὗτος ἐκεῖνος ὁ τοὺς θήξαντας ἐπ' αὐτὸν τὰ ξίφη
καὶ βεβουλευμένους ποῦ καὶ πότε δεῖ τὴν κοινὴν εὐτυχίαν
ἐκτεμεῖν, ἐλέγχας μὲν καὶ μεμψάμενος, τῶν ψυχῶν δὲ οὐκ
ἀποστερήσας, ἐφ' ᾧ καὶ μᾶλλον τὴν οἰκουμένην ἢ τοῖς
τροπαίοις ἐξέπληξε;⁵⁹

For was not this man the one who, having convicted and blamed those who had sharpened their swords against him, and who had conspired about where and when it was necessary to cut off the good fortune common to all, did not take their lives, *with the result that* he astounded the world even more [by his clemency] than by his triumphs?

As these and other examples illustrate, Hellenistic authors do in fact use the phrase ἐφ' ᾧ as the equivalent of a conjunction introducing a consecutive

⁵⁷ Plutarch, *De curiositate* 522e.

⁵⁸ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 59.20.3.

⁵⁹ Libanius, *Orations* 15.43.

clause. What is more, the main verb in these clauses is normally a past indicative, either imperfect or aorist, just as we find in Romans 5:12.

But is a consecutive meaning likely in Romans 5:12? Does Paul's discourse in Romans 5:12–21 become more coherent if we adopt a translation of 5:12d that reads “with the result that all have sinned”? We believe so. The question is important because, as one commentator notes, “Fitzmyer . . . does not take advantage of his own linguistic suggestion because he cannot see how sin can be the result of death.”⁶⁰ This is said in reference to Fitzmyer's exegetical conclusion that “Paul in v.12 would be ascribing death and human sinfulness to two causes, not unrelated: to Adam and to the conduct of all human beings.”⁶¹ Indeed, how Fitzmyer's conclusion follows from a consecutive reading of ἐφ' ᾧ is unclear. It appears, rather, that Paul views universal sinfulness (“all have sinned”) as a result of Adam's sin—a result that follows in the wake of death invading the world and spreading to all (5:12b–c). Put differently, the death that reaches all is the spiritual death that Adam's sin introduced into human history and the result of its diffusion to all is the sinfulness exhibited by all. This understanding of the passage seems to leave no room for a cause of death that is *not* Adamic. But, in that case, it fits seamlessly with the verses that follow, where Paul blames Adam alone for the death (5:15) and condemnation of all (5:18). We submit, then, that Paul is not concerned with identifying the *twofold* cause of death (Adam's sin, plus the sins of Adam's descendants) in 5:12. Instead, his interest lies in the *threefold consequence* of Adam's sin (death entered human history, then death spread to all human beings, and consequently all human beings became sinners).⁶²

The Council of Trent: Romans 5:12 and Original Sin

A final consideration, before tying the strands together, is the Council of Trent. Biblical exegesis and theology in a Catholic context require a careful look at the Church's recourse to Romans 5:12 in defining the dogma of original sin. The purpose for doing so is not to fall back on an “argument from authority” that overrides or makes unnecessary the laborious work of exegesis. It is rather to welcome the guidance of the Magisterium as a help, rather than a hindrance, to discovering the theological meaning of Paul's words in this passage.

The Council of Trent issued its *Decree on Original Sin* on June 17, 1546. It was promulgated partly to counter misconceptions of the doctrine that

⁶⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 276.

⁶¹ Fitzmyer, “Consecutive Meaning,” 339.

⁶² Dubarle suggests something similar when he considers that “all have sinned” in Rom 5:12d may be a reference to “evil deeds, actually committed by all men as an inevitable consequence and manifestation of original sin” (*Original Sin*, 154; emphasis added).

were cropping up in the sixteenth century⁶³ and partly to lay the groundwork for the council's comprehensive *Decree on Justification* issued on January 13, 1547. Regarding matters of content, the decree is not innovative to any significant degree: it is essentially a restatement of the Church's traditional understanding of original sin. Indeed, careful examination of the Latin text⁶⁴ shows that key expressions of the decree have been lifted directly from the Synod of Carthage in 418 and the Second Synod of Orange in 529.⁶⁵

For our purposes, it is noteworthy that the decree twice invokes the authority of Romans 5:12. In canon 2, this verse is cited to support the claim that the first man Adam transmitted to his descendants not only mortality and pain in the body but also "the sin which is the death of the soul" (*peccatum quod mors est animae*).⁶⁶ In canon 4, the passage is cited to validate the Catholic Church's practice of baptizing infants and small children who are incapable of committing actual sins, since even these must be cleansed of "what they contracted through generation" (*quod generatione contraxerunt*).⁶⁷ Thus, in formulating the dogma, Trent finds in Romans 5:12 vital information about the nature of original sin (the death of the soul in addition to mortality) and its transmission (passed on to all through natural generation).

Besides noting these principle affirmations, we should also recognize the limits of the decree in relation to Romans 5:12. For instance, the Council fathers offer no authoritative interpretation of particular clauses or expressions in the passage. Nor do they tie the dogma of original sin to the traditional Latin translation, as if the doctrinal import of Romans 5:12 depends on the wording of the text as rendered in the Vulgate.⁶⁸ Presumably it is the overall thrust of Paul's teaching in this verse that supports the dogma being defined. This impression is reinforced in the decree when it reproduces a line of the Synod of Carthage that says that the apostle's words in Romans 5:12 "should only be understood in the sense in which the Catholic Church spread everywhere has always understood it."⁶⁹ And what is this universal un-

⁶³ For example, Martin Luther had recently denied that original sin was the privation of original justice, claiming that it refers to man's total corruption by which the powers of body and soul are completely incapacitated (see his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 5.12). The Tridentine decree likewise addresses the neo-Pelagianism of Albert Pighius and Erasmus of Rotterdam; see Rondet, *Original Sin*, 170–171.

⁶⁴ Printed with English translation in parallel columns in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionem et Declarationem de Rebus Fidei et Morum* (hereafter, DH), ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed., English eds. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), nos. 1510–1516.

⁶⁵ For the synodal canons, see DH, nos. 222–24 (Carthage) and 371–72 (Orange).

⁶⁶ DH, no. 1512.

⁶⁷ DH, no. 1514.

⁶⁸ *In quo omnes peccaverunt* ("in whom all have sinned").

⁶⁹ Compare Trent in DH, no. 1514, with Carthage in DH, no. 223.

derstanding to which appeal is made? It is the theological meaning of Romans 5:12 whereby original sin is essentially “the death of the soul” that spreads to all members of the human race “by generation.” The decree can scarcely be understood otherwise, since, as we have seen in our examination of the phrase ἐφ’ ᾧ, the interpretive tradition antecedent to Trent arrived at no consensus on the meaning of 5:12d.

Now, we make no claim that the exegesis of Romans 5:12 proposed in this article is precisely what the Council of Trent envisioned in the sixteenth century. It could not have been so, given the ubiquitous use and authoritative standing of the Vulgate in the Christian West at this time. However, our reading of Romans 5:12 aligns with the Council’s reading in two important respects: (1) there is agreement on the meaning of “death” in the passage, and (2) there is agreement that the “cause” of this spiritual condition is not the sins of Adam’s descendants, but the primordial sin of Adam himself.

Putting the Pieces Together: Romans 5:12 and Original Sin

It remains to summarize our reading of Romans 5:12 and to draw out some of its implications. We begin with a translation of the verse as we understand it, adding italics where it differs from most English translations in use today: “Therefore just as through one man sin entered the world and through sin death, and so death spread to all men, *with the result that* all have sinned—”

(1) Central to Paul’s short history of sin in Romans 5:12 is the entrance and diffusion of death in human history. Some find a reference to the origin of human mortality and physical death in this passage. Others detect a reference to the manifold consequences of the first sin, which include physical, spiritual, and eternal death. We have argued that Paul’s focus is the origin and diffusion of *spiritual death*. Adam’s fall brought about a death of the life of grace in all members of the human family, a separation from God that finds its solution in Jesus Christ, who reconciles sinners to God through a restoration of divine life to all who believe. Evidence for this reading was found in Paul’s death discourse in Romans 5–8 and in his intertextual reliance on Genesis 2–3 and Wisdom 2:24.

(2) We noted earlier that Romans 5:12 is stamped with a chiasmic structure: Sin–Death–Death–Sin. The relationship among these four components is often construed as follows: sin is the cause of death for Adam, and sin is likewise the cause of death for his descendants. Paul is thus thought to identify the twin causes of death, however one defines death. On the Augustinian reading, Adam sinned in the beginning and drew death upon himself, and Adam’s descendants, who were “in Adam” by virtue of a shared human nature, sinned along with him, thus drawing death upon themselves. Alternatively, a majority of modern scholars understand Paul to mean that Adam sinned

in the beginning and brought death upon himself, and Adam's descendants thereafter sinned in their own personal history and brought death upon themselves.⁷⁰ Our proposal is rather different. It suggests that the chiastic structure of Romans 5:12 is wired to communicate a chiastic logic: *sin* is the cause of *death* for Adam, and *death* is the cause of *sin* in Adam's descendants. The polarity of sin and death in 5:12a–b is thus reversed in 5:12c–d. Adam died because he sinned, and we sin because we inherited death from Adam (i.e., his disgraced condition). The latter half of this statement, being a paraphrase of 5:12c–d, is precisely what Paul says in the immediate context: “many died through one man’s trespass” (5:15), and “by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners” (5:19).

(3) One strength of this reading is its simplicity. Gratuitous presuppositions and implied premises need not be supplied to make sense of what Paul says in Romans 5:12.⁷¹ There is no need to force his words into a theological mold of thinking that is never clearly revealed elsewhere in his letters. It is perfectly within the province of later theologians to develop models for explaining the mystery of original sin and its transmission through history, but we must be careful not to read these back into Romans 5:12. Instead, the interpretation proposed in this article is harmonious with the way in which Paul develops the antithesis between Adam and Christ in 5:12–21 as a whole. There is no perceivable tension between his assertions in 5:12 and what he says subsequently. Responsibility for the sin and death that pervades our world is laid squarely on the shoulders of Adam. Of course, Paul believes and teaches elsewhere that our own sinful actions have consequences that increase the scale of the disaster. But these are not at issue in Romans 5:12–21. His focus here is more restricted: everything Adam had done to wreck our relationship with God is undone by Christ.

(4) Can we say, then, that Romans 5:12 teaches the doctrine of original sin as the Church understands it? Yes and no. Scholars are correct to point out that Paul never describes Adam’s “sin” (ἡ ἁμαρτία; 5:12a) as something that passes to his descendants in a hereditary way. In fact, this is not a text that speaks about the transmission of sin to anyone beyond Adam, much less “to all men” (εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους; 5:12c). This much we readily admit. But we

⁷⁰ For the sake of brevity, we omit reference to those who combine the Augustinian theology of a corporate sin in Adam with the modern translation “because” in Rom 5:12d, since they too contend that Paul speaks of a double causality of death in this passage.

⁷¹ One exception concerns the transmission of death. Paul never states explicitly that natural generation is the means of death’s diffusion to all. Nevertheless, given that his reflections in Rom 5:12–14 arise out of the narratives of Genesis, a book that locates the origin of the human race in Adam, it scarcely seems credible that he imagined it in any other way. The burden of proof lies with one who would deny that the spread of Adamic death reaches his descendants other than by genealogy. In all likelihood, Paul views the fact that “all have sinned” as a historical manifestation of a hereditary condition.

need to recall a distinction made by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its 1984 document *Scripture and Christology*. The Commission distinguishes the “auxiliary language” of Catholic tradition from the “referential language” of Sacred Scripture (§1.2.2.1).⁷² Over the centuries, the Church has developed its own theological vocabulary to communicate the truths of revelation efficiently and intelligibly, but we should not always expect to find this terminology in the biblical writings. The expression *peccatum originale* (“original sin”) is a case in point. No such language appears in the Bible, and yet the Church insists at the Council of Trent that the doctrine conveyed by the expression *is* rooted in the inspired texts of Scripture, most directly in Romans 5:12.

It is our view that Paul asserts the doctrine of original sin in Romans 5:12, and yet he does so without using the auxiliary language of theology and catechesis. What would later become known as original sin is here described as an original “death” (ὁ θάνατος; 5:12b–c).⁷³ It is the power of spiritual death that invaded human history through Adam and spread to all men who stem from Adam. And what is the result of this? An explosion of sin on a universal scale (ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον; 5:12d). The referential language of Paul is not the same as the auxiliary language of the Church, but there is a coincidence of essential meaning.

(5) Finally, some have suggested that the doctrine of original sin may be legitimately found in Romans 5:12, but only as the *sensus plenior* (“fuller sense”) of the passage when read in the light of Christian doctrinal development.⁷⁴ We are proposing something different. If we have understood Romans 5:12 aright, then Paul himself affirms the diffusion of spiritual death from Adam to all who come after him as genealogical descendants. This would mean that the doctrine of original sin, at least its basic substance, is more precisely located in the *sensus literalis* (“the literal sense”) of the text. It is not a deeper meaning of Romans 5:12 discovered in retrospect by later readers of Paul; it is the very thing that Paul was trying to communicate to his readers in first-century Rome.

⁷² See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Scripture and Christology: A Statement of the Biblical Commission with a Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 20.

⁷³ Dunn perceptively states that Paul’s concern in this verse is with “original death more than original sin” (*Romans*, 273). We think it more accurate to say that “original death” is the way that Paul speaks about “original sin.” Byrne is likewise alert to Paul’s principal concern in Rom 5:12, which he says “is not with the onset of sin but with what comes in sin’s train, namely, death” (*Romans*, 176).

⁷⁴ For example, Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 409; Matera, *Romans*, 144.