

Sin and Death in Genesis and Romans

The account of creation presented in the first three chapters of Genesis explains God creating man in his image, giving a command not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and the first people eating from the tree anyway. According to this account, eating from the tree gave them knowledge of good and evil. Moreover, due to this knowledge God prevented them from eating from the tree of life as that would give them too much power. However, in his letter to the Romans, Paul says knowledge of the law is inscribed in the heart of every person by God and furthermore God has given us the gift of life. Herein I will first establish the Genesis account of knowing good and evil and then the death of humanity. Then I will cross-examine it with passages from Romans that challenge this account. In doing so I will show the two accounts together demand that sin is from God and God uses death as a tool for his ends with humanity.

In Genesis 1 after creating the rest of the world, God creates man in his image: “Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26). What he means by image and likeness and how it applies to knowing the law or good and evil is unclear from the context. Presumably humans have some significant god-like attributes. However, the attribute may just be free will, for example, so it need not have a bearing here. In the second account of creation, God tells Adam to till the Garden of Eden “And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 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” (Gen 2:16-17). Presumably Adam did not know he was not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil until God told him not to. While the verbal command may have been a writing device to convey

the rule to the reader, other parts such as a man leaving his father and mother to cling to his wife (Gen 2:24) are left outside of direct quotations.

Prior to eating the apple Adam and Eve are naked and unashamed (Gen 2:25). As God had considered his creation good and not condemned them for their nakedness, this nakedness must not be evil or sinful. Furthermore their lack of shame must also not be evil or sinful. However, when the serpent convinces them to eat from the tree, “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Gen 3:7). In learning about what good and evil are they determined their nakedness is evil. Alternatively, to know good and evil could mean to become familiar with both rather than have a cognitive awareness of what they are. If this is the case then their shame could be a product of that.

Finally God sees the two have eaten from the tree and sentences them to death: Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (Gen 3:22-24)

God objects to man having eternal life as man is like god in knowing good and evil. Thus God prevents man from having eternal life. This fulfills the prophecy from the command before, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). Ergo God has prophesized the death of humanity and fulfilled it by ensuring man not obtain life after eating the fruit.

Paul addresses Adam’s sin directly in Romans: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law” (Romans 5:12-13). Note sin preceded the law and sin entered through Adam. This confirms

there was no sin prior to the fall—Adam and Eve’s nakedness and unashamedness were not sins. However, if sin is not reckoned when there is no law, Adam could not have reckoned his first sin, eating the fruit. If God’s command to not eat the fruit qualifies as law then law did come prior to sin and Paul is mistaken. As we’re assuming Paul is not wrong, God’s command to eat the fruit is not a law, confirming Adam could not have reckoned his sin. He must have been unaware on some significant level of the significance of his disobedience.

Paul also suggests the law, which may be attached to the knowledge of good and evil, allows one to know sin: “What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead” (Romans 7:7-8). If one does not have the law one not only lacks cognition of what is good as opposed to evil but one is unable to comprehend the idea of evil at all. Moreover with the knowledge of sin delivered by the law sin is able to create evil desires within a person. This passage seems to conflict with Paul’s previous statement “All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” (Romans 2:12) as his previous statement requires some people to be able to sin apart from the law. He resolves the matter when he says “When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness” (Romans 2:14-15) as he indicated the law is given in two ways: via him telling the Jews and via innate inscription in each person’s heart. This distinction resolves the contradiction if “the law” people are sinning apart from refers only to the law given to the Jews

and not the law inscribed in each person's heart. Thus everyone has the law and can thereby sin and be judged for it, but Paul has clarified Jew and Gentile alike will be judged.

Tying back to Adam, in order to sin he had to have the law, but at the same time sin preceded the law. Considering two meanings for "law" doesn't escape the issue as a heart-inscribed law would reckon sin and clearly a directly stated law would lead one to reckon sin. So if the command not to eat the fruit was not law and Adam did not have any law in his heart already then the only remaining option is sin entered Adam from elsewhere, and Paul's statement applies to people in general, but not Adam as he is a special case. The scripture does support this in its use of the word "through," i.e. "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin" (Romans 5:12). Adam did not create sin but rather he was a vessel for sin, an extant entity, to enter the world, and sin itself was being used as a vessel for death. Thus in Adam's special case sin entered Adam directly rather than by the law. Furthermore if the knowledge of good and evil is itself the inscribed law in the heart of humankind then the narrative flows consistently within itself and with Romans.

If sin came from outside of Adam (and Eve) as the synthesis of Genesis and Romans suggests then it had to come from outside of humanity. As sin entered the world through Adam, it also could not already have been part of the world. Thus sin entered from outside the world. Unless something besides God and the world exists and is merely unmentioned by scripture, this leaves only God to have put sin into Adam to enter the world. Thus sin and thus all it entails is part of God's acts. As the law is a consequence of sin, the telos of sin may merely be to allow the law and eventually grace to enter the world as without sin neither can play a role with humanity.

With sin established as part of the plan, Romans's (and the New Testament's in general) promise of life can be better integrated into Genesis's account of death. As noted by Genesis and Romans, death entered the world through Adam's sin. Death then had dominion over the world (Romans 5:14). If humans were to eat from the tree of life, we would have eternal life which God objected to strongly enough to place cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the tree. However, with the life of Jesus Christ God turns around and gives the gift of eternal life to humans: "But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:8-11). This seeming conflict of God prohibiting life but then giving life fits with the narrative of God letting sin enter the world through Adam so that God could provide his grace to humanity. If God had merely let people eat from the tree of life and live forever, possibly on Earth, then we would have no need for a connection. However, if death is allowed dominion over the world then God has to defeat it and allow humans to cling to him in life rather than ourselves.

This idea of God explicitly allowing sin and death to fulfill his ultimate purposes with humanity does initially sound odd. Paul says, "Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure" (Romans 7:13). The first part does suggest nothing good brought death to him, however, it was indeed sin that brought death to him. This is not contested: God let sin enter the world through Adam and *death through sin*. Sin is ultimately the vessel of death regardless of how sin is being used. As Paul says in the latter portion, the sin is used to demonstrate the sinfulness, as is the commandment,

that is, law. This too fits into the narrative that God uses human sinfulness as a tool to draw humans closer as we are forced to seek God's grace to escape death that accompanies sin.

In conclusion, the accounts of sin and death in Genesis and Romans on the surface appear to clash, but in their apparent clash their synthesis reveals deeper revelations about the telos of sin and death. Rather than being entities created by humans that escaped God's grasp they are instead tools of God that serve to draw humans closer through our flaws.

Works Cited

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