Morality, Not Mortality: The Inception of Death in the Book of Romans

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In the book of Romans, Paul has often been understood to describe the inception of human mortality and the corruption of creation through the “original sin” of Adam and Eve, but this is difficult to square with the scientific insight that death is intrinsic to the evolutionary process. Certain works on theology and evolution posit that the inception of “death” in Romans refers to some construal of “spiritual death” rather than mortality or “physical death,” but this has normally been stated briefly, with little exegetical analysis. This article outlines an exegetical case for a reading of “death” in Romans as a matter of moral corruption rather than mortal corruption, based on parallels between Paul’s words and Hellenistic Jewish texts roughly contemporary with Paul, particularly the writings of Philo and Josephus. Ultimately, my analysis suggests that Christians can find coherence, rather than conflict, between Romans and evolutionary science.

In discussions at the intersection of evolutionary science and theology, one key topic has been the extent to which scripture can be squared with the current scientific consensus about evolution. Arguably, the biblical text that is most problematic to fit with evolution is the book of Romans, where Paul has often been understood to describe the inception of human mortality, the corruption of creation, and the infection of humanity with sinfulness and guilt through the “original sin” of Adam. If humans came to exist on Earth through an evolutionary process in which innumerable generations of organisms lived and died, and to which death is, in fact, intrinsic, then in what meaningful way can mortal corruption have its inception with Adam?

To cite a key verse of interest, Romans 5:12 says, “Just as sin came into the world through one person, and death through sin, so death spread to all people.” The context clearly indicates that the “one person” is Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12–14). This and other pertinent elements of Romans not only articulate the “plight” that concerns Paul throughout much of the text, but are also integral to Paul’s framing of Christ as the “solution” to this plight. Thus, the significance of “death” is not a peripheral interpretative issue, but rather a key consideration in any effort to understand Paul’s articulation of the gospel of Jesus in this letter.

Some have addressed the apparent theme of the inception of death in Romans by reasoning that since Paul spoke as a first-century Jew, in a context in which evolutionary science could not begin to be understood, and in which it would have been normal to think that Adam and Eve caused human mortality, he can be forgiven for failing to provide an accurate picture of human origins. Others have suggested that “death” in certain passages of Romans should be understood as “spiritual death” rather than “physical death”—separation from God, or some other form of relational or moral
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