

Article

The Transformation of Hamartiology in Early Christianity: On Augustine's Interpretation of *Romans* 5:12

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Abstract: Starting with Augustine's controversial translation and interpretation of *Romans* 5:12, this paper compares Augustine's and the apostle Paul's different understandings of "sin": Paul understands "sin" from the apocalyptic eschatological perspective, and regards "sin" as a cosmic power; Augustine, on the contrary, gradually understood sin as an ontological sin in the discussion of the concept of "original sin". Through the development and transformation from Paul's theory of sin to Augustine's theory of sin, this paper further discusses the interactive relationship between the development of early Christian thought and its social and cultural contexts and tries to outline the path of interweaving biblical text and theological thought in history, particularly to teach how Chinese readers should interact with scriptures in the Chinese context.

Keywords: Paul; Augustine; *Romans*; hamartiology

1. Prelude

Augustine's understanding of sin is of great importance in the history of Christian theology. It not only became the very basis of the ethical, ecclesiological, and sacramental systems in the Catholic tradition but also provided an impetus to the Reformation¹. Thus, Augustine was usually called "der Paulus nach Paulus und der Luther vor Luther". (see [Bonaiuti 1917](#), p. 159). No matter how exact this genealogy may be, it shows the value of the Augustinian conception of sin in the development of Western Christianity. After centuries of unanimous scholarly approval, however, some challenges, and even adverse criticisms, against the doctrine of original sin have emerged since the early 20th century (see [Williams 1927](#)). This topic has aroused many heated debates. In particular, doubts regarding the biblical grounds of this theological doctrine have emerged from biblical studies². Scholars now argue that the idea of original sin belongs not to Paul himself but to the theological and doctrinal developments from the patristic church to the Council of Trent (see [Fitzmyer 1993](#)). Theologians, however, have shown almost no interest in responding to this biblical challenge. They focus either on the very meaning of original sin in Augustine's works or on its relevance to his contemporary church fathers.

The divergence between biblical study and theological research should not become a reason to relegate the classical doctrine into a corner. On the contrary, it should be seen as a great opportunity to open a dialogue between Paul and Augustine, for they could be the vantage points from which to gain new perspectives on each other. Thus, our inquiries herein are as such: What are the differences between the understandings of Paul and Augustine on sin? What might have caused these differences between these two great figures in the history of Christianity? More importantly, how should we, as contemporary Chinese readers, reflect on these differences? This article tries to provide an alternative answer to these questions by focusing on a key verse of *Romans* 5:12 as the revealed source of original sin.



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2. A Critical Text: Romans 5:12

The critical biblical text Augustine used for his doctrine of original sin was *Romans* 5:12³. Augustine cited this text more than 150 times overwhelmingly in his anti-Pelagian writings (see [Bonner 1968](#), p. 242). In his first work written against the Pelagians in the late fall of 411 or early in 412, *The Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones*, Augustine repeatedly cited this verse to argue his point of view, and confidently claimed that “in whom all sinned” in Rom. 5:12 means that in Adam, the sin was passed on to all human beings:

“Paul said, through one man sin entered the world, and through sin death (Rom 5:12). This means by propagation, not by imitation; otherwise, he would say, “Through the devil”. He is speaking of the first man, who was called Adam, a point which no one doubts. And thus, he said, it was passed on to all human beings (Rom. 5:12). Then, note, the carefulness, the propriety, the clarity with which the next clause is stated, In whom all have sinned (Rom. 5:12, *In quo omnes peccaverunt*). For if you have here understood the sin that entered the world through the one man in which sin all have sinned, it is certainly clear that personal sins of each person by which they alone sinned are distinct from this one in which all have sinned, when all were that one man. But if you have understood, not the sin, but the one man, in which one man all have sinned, what could be clearer than that clear statement?”. ([Augustine 1997](#), pp. 39–40)

The phrase interpreted by Augustine as “in whom” in *Romans* 5:12 is a contraction in Greek: “*eph’ hō*”. This contraction poses a complicated grammatical problem with theological significance ([Fitzmyer 1993](#), pp. 413–17). The problem is whether *eph’ hō* should be taken as a relative clause or as a conjunction. On the one hand, if it is taken as a relative clause, the phrase should be interpreted as “on which”. In this case, as a masculine or neuter pronoun, the reference of “*hō*” is controversial. Some insist that it refers to “the death”; some argue for “the world” (see [Jewett 2007](#), pp. 373–76). On the other hand, if “*eph’ hō*” is taken as a conjunctive phrase, the meaning of the conjunction could be either “because” or “for that”. There are an immense number of articles about this grammatical problem in *Romans* 5:12 among recent biblical research works. What is important for our purpose here is as follows: First, for biblical scholars, whether they decide on the relative clause translation or on the conjunctive phrase translation, all oppose Augustine’s translation of “in whom” for two reasons: (1) to translate “in whom”, the Greek word should be “*en*” (in) rather than “*eph*” (on, upon); (2) the referent “whom” (the one man) is so far removed. Thus, Augustine’s interpretation of “in whom” grammatically faces some great difficulties.

Second, there is no certainty in the translation of “*eph’ hō*” in the New Testament. This phrase is found in several places. In Acts. 7:33, it carries its literal sense “upon which”, i.e., take off your sandals; the place where (upon which) you are standing is holy ground. In 2 Cor. 5:4, it means “because”: for while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. In Phil. 3:12, it means “for that”: I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Thus the translations of “on which”, “because”, and “for that” do make sense grammatically.

Third, the translation of “on which”, while grammatically possible, seems banal. If the pronoun refers to “death” it would provide the following sense: “Death spread to all so that all sinned in the sphere of death”. Otherwise, if we take the reference “the world”, it would mean: “Death spread to all so that all sinned in the sphere of the world”. However, it is hard to tell why it was necessary for Paul to add that all sinned in the sphere of death or in the sphere of the world.

Fourth, while the majority of scholars understand this phrase as a conjunction, there are disagreements among them. Some approve of the interpretation of “*eph’ hō*” as “for that”. For example, Fitzmyer argued for this meaning by pointing out that Plutarch (and other Greco-Roman writers) once used this phrase with the meaning of “for that” (Arat. 44.4.1, see [Fitzmyer 1993](#), p. 416). Furthermore, the translation “because” has the overwhelming

support of commentators who found many supportive texts from the Greek Church fathers' usage of this meaning (see [Toews 2013](#), pp. 103–26). Rather than repeating their arguments, we simply mention the different theological agendas behind these two translations.

The main reason for scholars supporting the meaning of “for that” is because this translation solves a “paradox” in Rom. 5:12. However, when we take the translation “because”, there is a “paradoxical” combination of fateful influence from Adam and individual responsibility for sins ([Jewett 2007](#), p. 376). In v. 12, “all die in Adam” means that the progeny of Adam must bear the punishment for Adam’s transgression. Furthermore, “because all have sinned” means that no one is innocent and everyone dies for their own sins. Can the mortality of human beings be due to Adam’s disobedience and also due to their own acts? This seems logically unacceptable for some scholars, so they would rather argue for the meaning of “for that”. The translation of “for that” resolves the paradoxical combination perfectly, and the sense of v. 12 would also be consecutive, though there would be no room for the free will of humans. Then, the verse, just as Fitzmyer argued, implies “the sequel to Adam’s baleful influence on humanity by the ratification of his sin in the sins of all individuals”. ([Fitzmyer 1993](#), p. 416). However, we argue in the second part below that the combination of death-ward determinism and individual responsibility in Paul not only makes sense but also has theological importance, for this combination proves exactly the characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology in Pauline thought.

Therefore, we took the position of scholars who agree with the translation of “because”; therefore, Rom. 5:12 should be translated as such:

“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”. (NRSV, throughout this article)

If so, the biblical verse that Augustine used to approve his theory of original sin is much likely mistranslated. Moreover, what Paul meant in Rom. 5:12 might be very different from what Augustine interpreted.

Remarkably, multiple pieces of evidence show that Augustine was not unaware of the problems of his translation and interpretation of Rom. 5:12, which he borrowed from Ambrosiaster. For example, Julian of Eclanum, Augustine’s chief opponent and who knew Greek, was severely critical of Ambrosiaster’s translation and Augustine’s use of it. Furthermore, Augustine defended his interpretation repeatedly⁴. Then, why did Augustine not rethink his position when confronted with those who read the Greek text? One of Augustine’s biographers, Gerald Bonner, assumed that “Augustine was so absorbed by his theory that he did not give it the critical examination which it required”. ([Bonner 1963](#), p. 372). However, this assumption may only be partially true.

If we look back to Augustine’s early work, *Exposition of Certain Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans*, which was written in 394–395 before his engagement with Pelagianism, we know that Augustine knew exactly the purpose behind Paul writing *Romans*. Augustine once argued that Paul wrote *Romans* to address the question of whether the gospel came to the Jews alone because of their works of law or to all the nations (gentiles) through their faith in Christ (see [Landes 1982](#), p. 53). However this insight, which brings Augustine closer to Paul’s meaning, was lost between the early Augustine and the Augustine of *To Simplician*. What had happened that made Augustine turn to the theory of original sin and believe that he must hold onto this theory tightly? Before discussing Augustine’s change in view, we need to understand Paul first.

3. What Paul Possibly Said in *Romans* 5:12

Most of us understand the story of sin from *Genesis* 3, which tells of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. However, we should realize that neither the word “sin” nor the words “original sin” are used in *Genesis* 3. The form of *Genesis* 3 is simply a transgression and punishment narrative. Actually, during the Second Temple Judaism, the diversity of the Adam/sin story is stunning (see [Toews 2013](#), pp. 15–37). In the wisdom literature, Adam is a heroic figure, the first patriarch of the Jewish people⁵. In

historical writings, the story of sin begins either with Cain⁶ or with the “marriage” of “the sons of God” and “the daughter of men” in *Genesis* 6⁷. Additionally, some scriptures of the Dead Sea Scroll believe that God is responsible for the creation of the evil spirit in *Genesis* 1, and the evil spirit is responsible for sin⁸. Most importantly, the apocalyptic writers of the biblical Apocrypha, trying to invoke the story of Adam and Eve to help explain the diaspora and then the tragedy of 70 CE, attribute death and the physical pain and chaos of the present evil age to Adam’s transgression in the garden; but they also strongly argue for free will, and that each person born from him is accountable for his or her own judgment⁹.

Furthermore, during the Jesus movement, there was also a lack of concentrated interest in the Adam and Eve narrative from *Genesis* 3. Only three out of the twenty-seven writings in the New Testament canon make reference to the Adam and Eve story (*1 Corinthians*, *Romans*, and *1 Timothy*). These references, surprisingly, have become profoundly influential in the development of Christian thought. Among the three references, *1 Corinthians* and *Romans* are the “undisputed letters” of Paul¹⁰. In *1 Corinthians*, written in 53–54 CE, Paul asserted: “For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ”. (15:22). Several years later, Paul wrote another letter, *Romans*, in which he states:

“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. . . . But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many... Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous”. (5:12–19)

This shows that Paul’s understanding of Adam, death, and sin came from a very different background than that of his later readers, including Augustine, who may have held on to a non-Jewish or non-apocalyptic Christian understanding. Therefore, we should treat Paul’s wording carefully without taking its Christian meaning for granted.

3.1. Paul’s Understanding of Adam

As discussed above, until Paul’s time, there was no fixed tradition about how to understand Adam. Though Paul was not the only one reflecting on Adam’s transgression and its effects on his descendants among Jewish writers, he was the one who presented a new understanding of Adam to contrast the baleful effects of Adam’s transgression with the salvific benefits of Christ’s obedience. Thus, the uniqueness of Paul’s understanding of Adam is his “Adam–Christ” typology. By arguing that Adam introduced sin as well as death into the world, Paul made Adam the antitype of Christ, the one whose transgression inaugurated a sinful predicament that only Christ could reverse. Just as he said in Rom. 5:14, “Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come”.

Paul’s “Adam–Christ” typology is fundamentally oriented by the Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. For Paul, Adam’s transgression was an apocalyptic event through which the apocalyptic power of sin came into the world. Jesus’s death and his resurrection were also seen as apocalyptic events. Paul asserted that the cross is not simply an expression of the love of God but a unique and determinative apocalyptic event in the struggle between God and the anti-God powers of the cosmos (cf. Rom. 8:23; 3:21–26). Moreover, the resurrection of Jesus, as an apocalyptic event, signals the beginning of the general resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15), the beginning of the age to come. Thus, Jesus’s death and resurrection were God’s apocalyptic answer to the apocalyptic event of Adam’s transgression, which brought an apocalyptic power of sin into the world. In this sense, all history could be summarized with these two apocalyptic paradigmatic figures (see [VanMaaren 2013](#), pp. 275–97)¹¹: the disobedient one who is the progenitor of the old humanity, bringing the power of sin to all; and the obedient one, who is the progenitor of a new humanity, bringing the power of salvation to all.

3.2. Paul's Understanding of Death

It is noteworthy that Paul's main interest in both *1 Corinthians* and *Romans* was not the origin of sin but the origin of death. He never meant to ask where sin comes from, or whether sin is a cosmic power threatening the oneness of God. Paul treated sin as a real power that presents the plight/threat of human existence. He tried to concentrate on how to deal with it. On the contrary, the origin of death and its power are quite obvious. Paul linked death with sin. Death is the result and the accompaniment of sin in the world, even in the period before the giving of the law (Rom. 5:14). This means:

(1) As the consequence of sin, death was not a part of the creator's design. The image of death as stemming from human disobedience to God's order shows that Paul tended to understand death as an "ethical rupture", which could be found in Jewish tradition, but not as the Hellenistic "ontic flaw". (Black 1984, p. 421).

(2) Death enters the world with sin, but death for Paul was not only an intrusion but also an intruder, a personal and cosmic power who demonically reigns in this age (cf. Rom. 5:14,17; 1 Cor. 15:25–26). In this sense, death is much like sin; actually, death is the manifestation of sin's reign: "Sin exercised dominion in death" (Rom. 5:21). Thus, we see the mythological language of apocalyptic thought in Paul to characterize death as a cosmological tyrant.

(3) More importantly, by claiming death as the manifestation of sin's reign, Paul showed a kind of sin-oriented or death-ward determinism. This is what we see in Rom. 5:12a, b. However, he moved quickly to counterbalance this determinism with a reference to individual responsibility in 5:12c. This is the reason we agree with the translation "because". By pointing out that "death spread to all because all have sinned", Paul confirmed two different kinds of death here: one is the death of human beings as a whole, which is the consequence of Adam's transgression; the other is the death of individuals, which is the punishment for their own sins. Juxtaposing human mortality and responsibility seems to be a characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic writings. Käsemann found a similar, though later, statement in *2 Baruch* (see Käsemann 1980, p. 148): "For although Adam sinned first and has brought death upon all who were not in his own time, yet each of them who descended from him has prepared for himself the coming torment.... Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become our own Adam". (54. 15, 19). In the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, this kind of juxtaposition is not illogical. One of the reasons is that they ascribe to Adam hereditary death but not hereditary sin.

3.3. Paul's Understanding of Sin

For Paul, sin was not something hereditary from generation to generation, because sin is taken as an apocalyptic power, sometimes even personified (see Cranfield 1975, p. 191), rather than an intrinsic nature. Thus, the Greek word *hamartia* (sin) was used in the singular: it enters the world (Rom. 5:12); it rules (5:21; 6:12, 13, 14); it enslaves (6:6, 16, 17, 20; 7:14; 8:2); it deceives (7:11); it works (7:17, 20); it dwells within (7:17, 20, 23); it has its own law (7:12–8:2); and we are all "under sin" (3:9). Sin pulls all human beings, except Jesus, and all creation into its magnetic force field of downward spin. Nothing is capable of binding its power or freeing people or creation from its pull, not even the gift of God's revealed law.

This understanding of sin is closely related to Paul's anthropology. As to his understanding of how sin affects humanity, two anthropological terms by Paul, "body" (*sōma*) and "flesh" (*sarx*), are crucial (see Dunn 1998, p. 50). Though writing in Greek, Paul was thinking of the Hebraic anthropological meaning. On the one hand, *sōma* expressed, for Paul, the character of created humankind, that is, embodied existence. *Sōma* could be used to refer to "I", which is more than a physical body, but an embodied "me" by which "I" and the world can act upon each other (cf. Rom. 12:1, 1 Cor. 12:17, 15:35–44, etc.). It is precisely embodied that the person participates in society, in creation, and in salvation. On the other hand, *sarx* contains the weak or even the dark side of humanity, not because of intrinsic human nature but because of the powers of death and sin. Paul's usage of *sarx* was on a spectrum, denoting: (1) the physical body (Rom. 11:14; 1 Cor. 6:16; 15:39); (2) its

weakness (Rom. 6:19), flesh is perishable and mortal (1 Cor. 15:50); (3) thus, the negative moral connotation, as flesh no one can boast before God (1 Cor. 1:29, also cf. Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16); (4) the sphere of sin's operations, "no good thing dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18); and (5) a source of corruption and hostility to God (Rom. 8:7; Gal. 5:24, 6:8). *Sarx* refers not to the sinful nature of the body but to the tendency of humanity to submit to the power of sin. In other words, *sōma* denotes a being in the world, whereas *sarx* denotes a belonging to the world (see Dunn 1998, p. 72).

From this anthropology, sin is considered a relational problem, or quite literally a socio-political problem, the rulership of sin (thus sometimes written in English as sin to denote its power rather than the sinful act), from which human beings and creation need liberation.

3.4. Conclusions

Rom. 5:12 serves a bigger picture (see Matera 2010, p. 130). Paul's real agenda was Messiah Jesus' triumph over the apocalyptic power of sin and the gift of righteousness and life for all people. Thus, he needed to explain the possibility of transferring from the realm of sin to the realm of grace (5:1–21). With this aim, he first described humanity's new relationship to God as its ground for hope in verses 1–11. Then he moved onto the reason for this new relationship and hope in verses 12–21. Therefore, as part of this argument, v. 12 was designed to show why humankind needs God's grace. In this sense, some points in Rom. 5:12 deserve to be noted:

- (1) Paul understood sin as an apocalyptic power, enslaving all humans and all creations. It is a universal cosmic sinfulness. Thus, sin is a relational problem, rather than an ontological issue.
- (2) Paul was not concerned with the transmission of sin. For him, the history itself, after Adam's transgression, is under the cosmic power of the rulership of sin; hence, there is no need for the biological transmission of sin from one generation to the next.
- (3) The painful effects of sin on humankind were expressed by Paul with his unique anthropological languages of *sōma* and *sarx*. The mortality of human beings indicates itself in *sarx*.
- (4) In a given social structure, the consequence of sin is mortality, which is inevitable and universal. Furthermore, Paul taught that all humans are responsible for their own sinful behaviors/acts.

To sum up, Paul's intention here in Rom. 5:12 was not to explore the origin of sin, but to explain how sin comes into the world and reigns over humankind, to compare Adam's disobedience and Christ's obedience (5:18–19), and finally to show the necessity of God's grace (5:20–21). His perspective was not looking for theodicy to explain the human condition but to confront the plight of humankind with eschatological hope. Additionally, all that is special in Paul can be traced back to his cultural context of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.

4. How Augustine Developed the Doctrine of Original Sin

4.1. Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin

In the book *To Simplician*, written in 397, Augustine used the epoch-making phrase "original sin" (*originale peccatum*, see Augustine 1953, "First Question: Romans 7:7–25, 4") for the first time in the history of Christian thought. This phrase defines a sinful quality, which is inherent in human nature, albeit involuntarily acquired. In the same book, he asserted that humans constitute a single "lump of sin" (*massa peccati*): "As the apostle says, 'in Adam all die' (1 Cor. 15:22), and to Adam the entire human race traces the origin of its sin against God". (see Augustine 1953, "Second Question: Romans 9:10–29, 16"). Almost at the same time, the theology of original sin that Augustine articulated in *To Simplician* is reflected clearly and repeatedly in Augustine's most famous writing, *Confessions*, where he confessed that all humankind were sons of Adam (I, ix) and inherited sin already as an embryo (I, vii).

This early formulation became fixed and dogmatic in Augustine's reaction to the teachings of Pelagius and his followers. This controversy began in 411 and lasted for twenty years. Pelagius in Rome encountered Ambrosiaster's *Commentary on Romans*, and he unequivocally rejected Ambrosiaster's interpretation of Rom. 5:12, claiming that Paul did not imply any hereditary transmission of sin. He tended to interpret Paul to be speaking of social inheritance, that is, humans sin by voluntary imitation of Adam's, never through a fault inherent in human nature (see Pelagius 1993). After this, his two followers, Celestius and Julian of Eclanum, came and stayed in North Africa, becoming the most formidable of all the antagonists with whom Augustine crossed swords. In a lifetime of polemical writing (Bonner 1963, p. 344).

Augustine's argument for "original sin" began with a portrayal of the "unfallen" Adam as a righteous and perfect man¹². Adam's sin, or "the Fall", was a sin of will. The perfect unfallen Adam made a choice, and he sinned; he fell. Adam's sin was due to a direct and willful transgression of the command of God. Following Ambrose, Augustine believed that Adam sinned due to pride (see Ambrose 2003, "Death as a Good") because he wanted to be like God¹³. Adam's choice fundamentally changed human nature, for his sin passed unto all human beings. That is, original sin. Just as Augustine asserted:

"For the first man, his human nature was so corrupted and changed within himself... For we were all in that one man, since we all were that one man who fell into sin through the woman who was made from him before they sinned. The particular form in which we were to live as individuals had not yet been created and distributed to us; but the seminal nature from which we were to be propagated already existed. And, when this was vitiated by sin and bound by the chain of death and justly condemned, man could not be born of man in any other condition." (Augustine 2013, Book XIII. 3, 14, p. 569, 579)

Today, we can see that Augustine's insistence that "eph' ho" in *Romans* 5:12 should be translated as "in whom" is, to a large extent, due to his understanding of sin as an inherent human nature. Humankind inherits this sinful nature "in" Adam. The differences between Paul and Augustine are rather clear: For Paul, sin was an apocalyptic power, a relational and political problem. For Augustine, sin was of internal human nature passed down hereditarily from generation to generation, which is an ontological problem. Then, what caused the different understanding of Augustine and why did he find inherent sin so important that he would rather accept a problematic translation of Rom. 5:12 from Ambrosiaster? The alternative answer is his re-oriented anthropology.

4.2. A Change in Augustine's Thought

As mentioned earlier, Augustine changed his early understanding of *Romans* and turned to Ambrosiaster's translation and interpretation to construct the theory of original sin. What was happening? Bonaiuti astutely noted that this great change happened between the years 396 and 397. He pointed out that, in the book *On the Free Choice of the Will* (394–395), Augustine thought of the organisms of Adam and Eve in Eden as ethereal substances that were transformed into bodies of flesh because of their disobedience (Bonaiuti 1917, pp. 161–62). Thus, for Augustine then, the consequences of Adam's transgression were death, ignorance, and the body itself (III. 54). This idea was apparently under a strong influence of Neoplatonic philosophy and of Ambrose's thought¹⁴. At this time, Augustine thought that sin brought an organic modification in human beings, but not a helpless perversion of a fleshly organism already in existence.

However, a couple of years later, when he wrote *To Simplician*, Augustine began to identify humankind with Adam and in his sin. He turned his understanding of "subject to the flesh" (*carne subditi*) into "subject to the cravings" (*concupiscentiae subditi*). In this sense, Augustine overcame the rejection of body in Neoplatonism and admitted the value of creation. However, at the same time, he also impressed the stigma of original sin on both the body and soul. This change made Augustine's theory more pessimistic. His point of view in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, that Adam's action in Eden brought the

radical transformation of human nature from an ethereal to a bodily substance, might have left a possibility of the intactness of human existence. However, in the new posture of Augustinian thought, the incessant trouble of corrupted sensuality, the sin, effaces the very possibility of free will¹⁵. Humankind is thus a “lump” of condemned creatures, which cannot acquire any merit before God, and whose hopes for forgiveness and atonement rest solely on the benevolent grace of the Father.

It is interesting to note that before his *To Simplician*, Augustine happened to read a Pauline comment by Ambrosiaster (Toews 2013, p. 86). In his commentary on 5:12d, Ambrosiaster said:

“In whom—that is, in Adam—all sinned. Although he is speaking of the woman, he said in whom because he was referring to the race, not to a specific type. It is clear, consequently, that all sinned in Adam as in a lump (*quasi in massa*). Once he was corrupted by sin, those he begat were all born under sin. All sinners, therefore, derive from him, because we are all from him”. (Ambrosiaster 2017, pp. 96–97)

Augustine adopted this interpretation. More importantly, he took the phrase of “a lump of sin” (*massa peccati*) as a peculiar idiom to express the solidarity of all human beings in the sin of Adam. “*Massa*” (lump) originally only meant an indistinct amalgam of inorganic elements. In the Vulgate, this word appears in the New Testament only four times (Rom. 9:21; 11:16; 1 Cor. 5:6; and Gal. 5:9), meaning either a “paste” or an amorphous compound of inorganic or vegetable substances. Obviously, however, Augustine’s usage of the word “*massa*” is figurative, with which he developed a new anthropology:

(1) The fall is not a bodily sin, but a sin of the will. In this sense, Augustine objected to the idea of getting away from the body to achieve happiness, and claimed that we do not have to be saved from God’s gifts for the first man, but to be saved from the punishment of sin (Augustine 2013, Book XIII.17, pp. 583–85).

(2) The sin of will, exerting its effects on both the body and soul of humankind, is manifested by tension neither between the soul and body, as the neoplatonists believed, nor between the body (*sōma*) and flesh (*sarx*), as Paul suggested, but between souls and spirits in humanity. Primarily, for Augustine, sin has its roots in the turning of soul to body, but not the body itself.

Here is an interesting example: In the passage of *The Retractationes* (I. 23–25), Augustine mentioned that when he wrote comments on *Romans* (*Exposition of Certain Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, 394–395*), he was unable to grasp the true meaning of the passage 7:14, “For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh (*sarkinos*), sold into slavery under sin”, because he did not dare to apply to Paul the qualification of “to be carnal”. In other words, Augustine found it hard to remain consistent with his conception of the spiritual life and of the sinful body. However, two years later, in *To Simplician* (after he changed his anthropology), Augustine provided a longer and more developed exegesis of Rom. 7:7–25. He recalled this experience in *Against Julian* (VI, 23, 70) and said that after a long hesitation, he was convinced that the word “*carnalis*” (note the Greek form of this word is *sarkinos* from *sarx* in Pauline epistles) could be applied to the apostle as well, who wanted to express the cries of the spirit fighting against carnal desires (Bonaiuti 1917, p. 166).

(3) For Augustine, there were also two different types of death (Augustine 2013, Book XIII. 15, pp. 580–81). When Adam sinned, his soul was abandoned by God, which was humanity’s first death. Augustine cited *Genesis* 3:9 to prove this point, where God called to Adam and said to him “Where are you?”. Augustine pointed out that this was God’s warning to Adam, claiming that he was not in the presence of God any longer. The second death, that is, physical death, is consequent on the first death. The mortality of humankind is the result of sin.

(4) The anthropology of “lump of sin” also sheds light on Augustine’s understanding of God’s grace. By interpreting “in whom all sinned” through the figure of “*massa*”, Augustine was able to associate Rom. 5:12 with another passage, Rom. 9:21, where there

is the comparison of the potter, who “has right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use”. Henceforth, notions of the absolute and inscrutable freedom of God in electing his own people and of humankind’s incapability of accomplishing anything but wrong and sin alone were brought together by Augustine.

In short, the definition of humankind as “a lump of sin” (or “*massa luti, maasa damnationis, mass damnata*”), which Augustine borrowed from Ambrosiaster, caused him to modify his point of view. This re-oriented anthropology of “lump of sin” became the fundamental idea of his theory of original sin, where he described the nature of sin as the separation between soul and spirit, manifesting itself in the mortality of humankind. Furthermore, this anthropology also constituted the starting point of the two fundamental ideas in his anti-Pelagian struggle about grace and predestination.

4.3. Further Consequences

Starting from the anthropology of “lump of sin”, Augustine’s attention shifted from a sin of body to a sin of will, which affected his understanding of history by all means, and eventually affected his eschatology.

Along with his exegesis of Rom. 7:7–25 in *To Simplician*, Augustine developed a four age model of the periodization of history. In the first six sections of the first question of *To Simplician*, he began by explaining the relationship between the law and sin in terms of the historical situation of humankind. According to him, there are four distinct conditions of the human being in history: first, the condition of human beings before the law in which the law is simply not known; second, the condition of human beings under the law and before grace in which the law is known yet they find it difficult, if not impossible, to obey it; third, the condition of human beings under grace in which they not only recognize and choose the good but are also able to perform it; and fourth, the condition of human beings after death in which the tension between good and evil is resolved and they find peace (Stark 1989, pp. 346–47).

It is notable, however, that the four age model, *ante legem, sub lege, sub gratia*, and *in pace*, implied in Pauline letters as a history of salvation, was, for Augustine, deeply related to the development of the individual believer, who sins freely before knowing the law, struggles not to sin once it is known, and succeeds in this struggle with the reception of grace. In Augustine’s thought, the strict opposition between the spiritual and the carnal not only is replaced by a process of transformation but also becomes an internal transformation, through which those who are carnal can become spiritual through grace. As a result, human beings cease needing to struggle against sin only with the transformation during the fourth stage, when he will have perfect peace (Fredriksen 1991a, p. 164).

Thus, Augustine argued that salvation history is both linear and interior. Scriptural history and the individual’s experience coincide at their shared extremes: birth in Adam; eschatological resurrection in Christ. In his correspondence with Hesychius, Augustine demonstrated the distinction between the first and second resurrections. The second resurrection, he asserted, is the resurrection of the body and can only occur at the end of the world (6, 1). However, the first resurrection occurs now: it is of the soul, through which its reception of baptism and life in the church is raised from the death of being anti-God.

More importantly, public history for Augustine is more opaque than personal history. Christians know how the story will end (Augustine 2013, Book XX.30, pp. 1049–54), but history’s timeframe is only known to God. If the hour of the end is unknowable in principle, it cannot serve to impose a plot on time, none that those living in time can discern (see Markus 1970, pp. 154–86). Given this radical agnosticism, history cannot serve as the prime medium of salvation, while the individual as the locus and focus of God’s saving grace¹⁶ plays a more important role (see Fredriksen 1991b, pp. 75–87).

This argument is emphasized in *The City of God*, especially when Augustine had to face materialist and millenarian misconceptions¹⁷. He kept up with Paul, insisting that the fleshly body be raised spiritual (1 Cor. 15:44–54), but he did not understand “spiritual”

as the body's substance, as it means in *1 Corinthians*. Augustine referred to "spiritual" as being the body's moral orientation. He insisted that the risen body will be of a corporeal substance (such as genders), not coming on a transformed Earth, but instead dwelling in the heavens (Augustine 2013, Book XXII. 21, p. 1165). The Kingdom of God will not come on Earth. From this point, the vision of social prosperity and harmony in Jewish apocalyptic tradition fully dropped out of Augustine's picture (Fredriksen 1991a, p. 166). No food, sex, or social relations in the Kingdom. These saved individuals, in their perfected bodies, will contemplate God in the beatific vision. Thus, Augustine affirmed the Great Sabbath, the eschatological seventh day, as the saints themselves: "After this present age God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day; and he will cause us, who are the seventh day, to find our rest in him" (Augustine 2013, Book XXII. 30, pp. 1188–92).

5. Reflections: Paul, Augustine, and Us

Thus far, we have seen that the different understandings of Paul and Augustine on sin are not just an exegetical problem of Rom. 5:12, but rather due to their different anthropologies, which are deeply related to their different contexts and languages.

For Paul, his understanding of sin came from a Jewish apocalyptic eschatology. Sin as the apocalyptic power reigns, and humankind is *sarkinos*, being easily subjected to the power of sin. Thus, the end of time would be the final victory of God over the anti-God apocalyptic power in the history of salvation. For Augustine, with his fierce and pessimistic features of African Christianity, the Greek understanding of humankind as made up of distinct parts (different from Hebrew tradition, which saw human beings more as whole persons existing in different dimensions), and also with the specific situation of Pelagianism, he understood sin as the inherent, rather ontological, sin of the will. Therefore, his concern was to draw from the eschaton at the end of history to an internal spiritual condition of humankind. From Paul's apocalyptic narrative to Augustine's ontological and theological construction, we can trace a distinctive movement in the wake of which Christian biblical and theological interpretations traveled from the ancient world, represented by Paul, to the late antique world, represented by Augustine.

A common question raised by contemporary biblical scholars is whether, in order to accomplish the development we discern from Augustine, he remained faithful to Paul or betrayed him. On this question, we can say that Augustine deviated from Paul in the translation of Romans 5:12, for he did misinterpret the scripture, but he also followed Paul's steps and even went further on the issue of sin. Paul described the relationship between man and God in a sinful historical situation from the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology; Augustine then further explained the source of sin under the basic biblical narrative framework of "by one man sin entered into the world" and discussed the relationship between man and God at the ontological level of human beings' sinful nature. On the one hand, both Paul and Augustine's understandings of sin follow the same biblical narrative: sin enters the world by one person and brings death to all people, from which human beings are enslaved by sin and death until Christ brings salvation. On the other hand, they both responded to the core issues concerned in their respective situations with different interpretations of sin. More importantly, Augustine's mistranslation and reinterpretation of Paul shows the dynamic relationship between biblical text and theological construction: when people need to develop a theology to respond to specific social and cultural situations, they need to develop it under the basic biblical narrative framework while simultaneously expanding and extending the connotation of biblical text. This is of special enlightening significance to Chinese readers. When Christianity was introduced into China, the concept of original sin was one of the reasons why Chinese people found Christianity unacceptable. In Chinese traditional culture, the idea of ethical life and moral cultivation is the growth and perfection of human nature, emphasizing the process from man to gentleman. However, the description of the human condition of the fall and sinful nature in the Christian doctrine of original sin emphasizes becoming human from sinning, and these two different understandings of human beings are often tit for tat on some

specific occasions. Recognizing the relationship between biblical texts and theological traditions enables Chinese readers to not only understand Paul's emphasis on humans' position in the history of salvation but also to further explain the sin in the Bible from the characteristic situation of Chinese readers, so that the gospel message can also have significance in the Chinese cultural context. Furthermore, they can understand the concrete context of Augustine's theological tradition, reflect and respond to this tradition, and then understand the relationship between different theological traditions, so as to gain a holistic view of the world of Christianity.

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Notes

- ¹ Augustine's theology of sin became official orthodox church dogma in the Council of Orange in 529, and is repeated in many Christian creeds and confessions of faith, e.g., Lutheran: Augsburg, 1530; Roman Catholic: Council of Trent, 1563–1564; Reformed: Second Helvetic Confession, 1566; Westminster Confession, 1646; Anglican: Thirty-Nine Articles, 1563; Methodism: Articles of Religion, 1784.
- ² Some biblical scholars, who are mainly considered the school of "New Perspective on Paul" or even "Radical New Perspective on Paul", such as James D. C. Dunn, Robert Jewett, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, J. Christian Beker, etc., through the historical–critical reading of certain texts of Paul, have pointed out that Paul's understanding of sin is quite different from Augustine's interpretation. Based on these biblical research works, some scholars have tried to describe a history of the idea of sin, to show how the conception of original sin developed in ancient times.
- ³ The other texts Augustine cited to support his doctrine of original sin were *Job* 24:4, 5 (from a faulty Latin translation of the LXX, 25:4–5 in NRSV), *Psalms* 51:5, *John* 3:5, and *Ephesians* 2:3. Some scholars believe that the biblical basis for Augustine's theology of original sin is without foundation, as two of the proof texts are based on mistranslations (*Job* and *Romans*), the use of the *Ephesians* texts is "specious", and neither the *Psalms* nor the *John* texts support his idea of original sin.
- ⁴ See, for example, *Answer to Julian*, 6.75; *Unfinished Work Against Julian*, 2.48–55; *Faith, Hope and Love*, 45, 47; *On Nature and Grace*, 48; *Letters*, Vol. 3, 157, Vol. 4, 176. Cf. Steow, *The Story of Original Sin*, pp. 174–77.
- ⁵ e.g., *Sirach* [198–175 BCE in Hebrew, 132BCE in Greek], *Jubilees* [ca. 175–100 BCE].
- ⁶ e.g., *Sirach*, *Wisdom of Solomon* [composed in Egypt during the reign of the Roman Emperor Caligula, 37–41 CE].
- ⁷ e.g., *1 Enoch*, *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* [ca. 200 CE].
- ⁸ e.g., *The Community Rule*.
- ⁹ *4 Ezra* 7:19–24, 116–126; 8:56–62; 14:34; *2 Baruch* 15:6; 54:21; 84; 85:7.
- ¹⁰ The undisputed letters, meaning that biblical scholars feel little need to have arguments about their authenticity, include *Romans*, *1 Corinthians*, *2 Corinthians*, *Galatians*, *Philippians*, *1 Thessalonians*, and *Philemon*. Additionally, the great majority of critical scholars believe that three of the remaining letters—*1 Timothy*, *2 Timothy* and *Titus*—are pseudepigrapha.
- ¹¹ Thus, unlike later Church fathers' interpretations, the "Adam–Christ" typology in Paul focuses more on the influences of their action, rather than on their origins.
- ¹² See, Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 18, 32; *City of God*, xii, xxii, xiii, xxii, xiv; *Marriage and Desire*, i, vi, viii.
- ¹³ The sentence "he wanted to be like God" was added by Ambrosiaster and taken by Augustine; see Ambrosiaster, *Commentaries*, 5:14, 42.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Ambrose, *Expositio Psalmum*, cxviii, Serm. xv. 36, where he presents Adam in the Garden as "a heavenly being, exempt from the cares and struggles of this life, endowed from the moment of his creation with the perfect balance of reason, will and appetite which fallen man lost."
- ¹⁵ For Augustine, it is God's grace that restores the free will of humans. This opens a whole new discussion of the relationship between sin and freedom in Augustine.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Augustine's comment on Rom. 8:8–24: the 'creatura' who groaned for redemption was man himself (53, 54).
- ¹⁷ Paula Fredriksen had pointed that Augustine was influenced by Tyconius on his eschatology. See her "Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity", cited above.

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