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## That All Shall Agree: On David Bentley Hart's Interpretation of Romans 5:18-19

Daniel O'Brien

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## That All Shall Agree: On David Bentley Hart's Interpretation of Romans 5:18-19

The famed American philosopher and Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart caused an outrage among Christian theologians of all denominations when he released his book, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, in 2019. Though the work is brief, in it Hart puts forth a concise, erudite, and scathingly polemical argument that belief in the eventual salvation of all, or universalism, is not only a legitimate Christian opinion but the only legitimate Christian opinion by appealing to philosophical theology, scripture, and moral logic. The work spawned countless counterarguments from other scholars with equal zeal, with both sides asserting confidently that they were correct and the other was sorely mistaken, or worse. Hart's universalist exegesis of many pieces of scripture caused a particular amount of consternation, despite the fact that he had first articulated these interpretations in his 2017 work *The New Testament: A Translation*. In both works, Hart posits that several verses of Christian scripture not only can be read in a universalist light, but are "apparently most explicit" in this manner<sup>1</sup>. One such text is Paul's contrast of Adam and Christ in Romans 5:18-19:

Ἄρα οὐν ὡς δι' ἑνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι' ἑνὸς δικαιώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς· ὥσπερ γὰρ διὰ τῆς παρακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἁμαρτωλοὶ κατεστάθησαν οἱ πολλοί, οὕτως καὶ διὰ τῆς ὑπακοῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται οἱ πολλοί. (So, then, just as through one transgression came condemnation for all human beings, so also through one act of righteousness came a rectification of life for all human beings;

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 95.

for, just as by the heedlessness of the one man the many were rendered sinners, so also by the obedience of the one the many will be rendered righteous.)<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I will argue that the most immediate interpretation of this passage does indeed support universal salvation. I will first analyze the Greek vocabulary and syntax of the text; I will then examine the validity of theological interpretations of the text; and I will conclude with a consideration of the text within the context of Romans and the broader Pauline corpus.

To consider whether a text teaches a doctrine of universal salvation, it is necessary to examine whether the constituent parts of such a doctrine are present, or whether the text is both soteriological in nature and universal in scope. In these verses in Romans, it is abundantly clear that Paul is discussing salvation, and doubly so in the context of his broader body of work: phrases like “condemnation” and “sinners” associated with humanity in Adam and “rectification of life” and “righteous” associated with humanity in Christ utilize language intimately associated with Paul’s idea of Christian salvation. There is little, if any, dissent on this point: All of the scholars I have engaged with take this soteriological reading for granted.<sup>3</sup> With this first criterion firmly established, the crux of the issue now lies in the scope of the salvation described.

The immediately obvious qualifier of soteriological scope in these passages, “πάντας ἀνθρώπους”, occurs twice in verse 18, once to describe the scope of condemnation and once to describe the scope of rectification. This phrase itself is unambiguous: it means all humans, or every person, and seems to be an explicit statement of universal salvation within the context of the verse. The intense parallelism

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hart takes for granted this reading in his note on the verse in his *New Testament*, reflecting the unanimous interpretation of this verse’s soteriological nature by both particularist (Thielman 290, Godet 225, Lacy 395) and universalist (Bell 432, Hart 298, Talbott 380) scholars.

of the verse, even to the extent that Paul omits using a verb—either in haste or to highlight the directness of the contrast with rhetorical vigor—frames the scope of condemnation as being the very same as the scope of salvation: “Just as ... condemnation for all human beings, so also ... rectification of life for human beings.” Hart notes this as well, writing in his translation of the New Testament that the “strict proportionality of the formation [...] is quite clear, here and in the surrounding verses: just as the first sin brought condemnation and death to *absolutely everyone*, so Christ’s act of righteousness brings righteousness and life to *absolutely everyone*.”<sup>4</sup> As Hart notes, there are no additional qualifiers provided in the second half of the verse to interrupt the direct parallelism; nothing in the text implies that the “πάντας ἀνθρώπους” in rectification is in any way more limited in scope than the “πάντας ἀνθρώπους” in condemnation. Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Willamette University and universalist scholar Dr. Thomas Talbott also concurs with this conclusion, writing in his article “The New Testament and Universal Reconciliation” that “the first all determines the scope of the second. [...] The grammatical evidence here seems utterly decisive; you can only reject it if you are prepared to reject what is right there before your eyes.”<sup>5</sup> Talbott, like Hart, considers the parallelism to be most clear and explicit in defining both “πάντας” within the same universal scope. According to these scholars, attempts to deny this conclusion rely on specious reasoning, and are often rooted in doctrinal presumptions rather than exegesis of the text itself.

One such attempt to maintain a particularist interpretation relies on limiting the second “πάντας ἀνθρώπους” to be a more narrowly defined category than its literal

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<sup>4</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 298.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Talbott, “The New Testament and Universal Reconciliation” *Christian Scholars Review* 21, no. 4 (1991-1992): 380.

meaning of “all human beings.” Dr. Frank Thielman, professor of Greek Exegesis at Beeson Divinity School and author of Zondervan’s Exegetical Commentary on Romans, makes this argument, writing in his commentary on this passage that “Paul’s use of ‘all’ in both sides of the comparison does not mean that every human being will experience the life that comes from justification just as every human being is subject to sin and death. This is clear from the role that human faith plays in Paul’s description of the gospel throughout”.<sup>6</sup> Thielman correctly notes that Paul uses the same language in both halves of the verse and even paraphrases the “just as” clause, linking universal condemnation to universal salvation, as well. Without the “not,” Thielman’s statement seems to be the obvious reading of the text. Hart considers this objection to be rooted in previous doctrinal frameworks instead of the text: “it has been obligatory for devout infernalists to insist that in the space of a single verse (Romans 5:18)—of a single sentence, in fact—the word ‘all’ changes from a reference to every human being throughout the whole of time into a reference solely to the limited number of those elected for salvation, and does so without the least notice being given. One should simply know that that is what Paul meant to say. This is preposterous, obviously.”<sup>7</sup> Thielman, perhaps due to the traditional Protestant framework he is operating within (only those who have faith are saved; not all have faith; ergo not all are saved), inexplicably interpolates a “does not mean” to say essentially that Paul means the opposite of what he said. Thielman attempts to weld together the scope of salvation with the manner through which it is received, conflating the “who” and the “how.” Although this marriage may seem obvious to one with a mainline particularist perspective like

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Thielman, “Romans 5:12-21,” in *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 291.

<sup>7</sup>D. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 163.

Thielman, it is foreign to the traditional form of purgatorial universalism which scholars like Hart advocate. Purgatorial universalism holds that all will be saved not despite their lack of faith in Christ, but precisely because of their faith: “every tongue will gladly confess that Jesus the Anointed is Lord.”<sup>8</sup> Justification through faith is not exclusive to particularism, and there is no contradiction in saying that all people are saved and that people receive justification through faith. Thielman’s objection is rooted in a category error extrapolated from his prior doctrinal position, not in the text itself, and thus is irrelevant and does not challenge the universalist reading of the text.

A similar, yet distinct, objection is raised by the famed Swiss theologian and exegete Frederic L. Godet in his *Commentary on Romans*. In this work, Godet notes that the parallelism dictates that “the result on the side of righteousness is at least equal to that which history attests on the side of condemnation,” rejecting the idea that the “all” does not truly mean all on both sides of the verse.<sup>9</sup> However, Godet does not see this as support of universalism. Carefully noting the absence of a verb in verse 18, Godet frames the “ἐνὸς (one)” as one act, rather than one person. As such the “δι’ ἐνὸς (through one)” is through one past act, leading him to conclude that the missing verb is in the past tense. From this hypothesis, he concludes that Paul “does not say that all *shall* be individually justified; but he declares that, in virtue of the one grand sentence that has been passed, all *may* be so, on condition of faith.”<sup>10</sup> As such, Godet’s translation and interpretation seem to open the door for his position that while God has offered rectification to all human beings, not all human beings will receive it. Unlike Thielman’s

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<sup>8</sup> Phil. 2:11 (David Bentley Hart’s *The New Testament*).

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), 224.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 225.

position, Godet's relies on the text itself. Yet however valiant Godet's attempt may be, his argument is still revealed to be flawed upon examination.

Fundamentally, Godet's argument relies on several layers of uncertain translational foundation. While there is a history of translating or interpreting "ένος" as "one act," it is by no means the predominant position. Thielman notes that major translations are roughly split on the issue, yet he adds that because "the contrasting word 'all' in each clause refers to people, however, it is likely that Paul has 'one person' in mind in each clause also."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the word "ένος" is repeated once again in verse 19, which mirrors 18, where it is attached to "άνθρώπου," clearly denoting "one person." The term also directly refers to Jesus Christ, a person, in the immediately proceeding verse 17. Verse 19's equivalent statement contains verbs where verse 18 does not, which could provide clues as to the nature of the verbs implicit in verse 18. With this in mind, it is notable that the verb for the apodosis of verse 19 is future tense, rather than the past tense one might expect if Godet's conjecture were correct: Paul shifts from the aorist passive "κατεστάθησαν (they were rendered)" to the future passive "κατασταθήσονται (they will be established)". Many translations have deemed it fit to use this sense of switched tense in their interpolated verbs for verse 18 as well, including the well-established English Standard Version's rendition: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men."<sup>12</sup> This, however, is merely an educated assumption, and while it provides evidence against Godet's view, it is not necessary to accept this view instead in order to recognize the guesswork involved. The uncertain nature inherent to assumptions like this makes them a weak foundation for an argument, especially for one

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<sup>11</sup> Thielman, "Romans 5:12-21," 290.

<sup>12</sup> Rom. 5:18 (English Standard Version).

aimed at reversing the obvious reading of the text. It is impossible to know for certain the tenses of the missing verbs simply because they do not exist. Even if the verb were past tense, Godet's implicit premise that the clause is therefore a conditional, denoted by his use of "may", is even more of an interpretive leap. Essentially, several stretches and assumptions about the language of the text are required for Godet's interpretation to be valid. In light of this, other scholars have looked to the language and theology in the surrounding verses to support a particularist interpretation of verses 18 and 19.

In his response to Thomas Talbott's article "The New Testament and Universal Reconciliation", Rhodes College professor of philosophy Larry Lacy<sup>13</sup> delineates an argument against an inclusive "all" in Romans 5:18 based on the phrasing of the preceding verse, verse 17, which reads: "For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive (οἱ [...] λαμβάνοντες) the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ."<sup>14</sup> Lacy contends that "those who receive" is a qualifier which limits not only verse 17 but also verses 18 and 19 as well. He refrains from explicating the exact nature of this group but hints that it is believers in Christ, an interpretation which naturally follows from Paul's emphasis on salvation through faith.<sup>15</sup> Swedish theologian Sven Hillert, in his doctoral dissertation on universal salvation in Paul at the historic Uppsala University, notes without hesitation that "the λαμβάνοντες are undoubtedly believers," adding that the phrase "those who receive" replaces "believers" here because of Paul's shift from the language "faith" earlier in the epistle to that of "grace" and

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<sup>13</sup> Lacy is not what Hart would deem an "infnalst," believing in eternal torment, but is an "annihilationist," believing that all sinners will be destroyed (Lacy 405). Nevertheless, his arguments against universalism could be used to support either position.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 5:17 (ESV).

<sup>15</sup> Larry Lacy, "Talbott on Paul as a Universalist," in *Christian Scholar's Review* 21, no. 4. (1991-1992), 402; Cf. Romans 5:2.



“gift.”<sup>16</sup> In Lacy’s view, regardless of who “οἱ [...] λαμβάνοντες” are, “the point here is that Romans 5:18 is ambiguous [...] Romans 5:17 strongly suggests that it is not all without qualification but all who are in Christ who will be led to acquittal and life.”<sup>17</sup> For Lacy, “οἱ [...] λαμβάνοντες” is the precise metric of scope which clarifies “πάντας ἄνθρώπους”, the more ambiguous metric. Yet it is the latter of these two phrases which contains any explicit denotation of scope, and a fairly explicit one at that: a quantitative adjective describing those who are saved (“all”). The former describes merely a quality of the saved, or perhaps the manner through which they are saved. It is the same error as Thielman’s: equating Paul’s emphasis on salvation through faith with particularism. Lacy is absolutely right in saying that it is not “all without qualification” that are saved, but rather “all who are in Christ.” Yet this is no more indicative of particularism as it would be of universalism. Salvation through faith in Christ is a fundamental tenet of what Dr. Trevor Hart, former Professor of Divinity at the University of St Andrews, considers to be Christian Universalism (as opposed to Pluralistic Universalism<sup>18</sup>) in his essay “Universalism: Two Distinct Types,” writing that the “contention is not simply that in spite of their sin all will be saved; but rather that because of Christ’s dealing with sin and because of their response to this atoning reality in faith, all will be saved. [...] It is universalist because [universalist theologian J.A.T. Robinson] expects faith itself to be a universal phenomenon.”<sup>19</sup> There is no incongruence in saying that “those who receive”

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<sup>16</sup>Sven Hillert, *Limited and Universal Salvation: A Text Oriented and Hermeneutical Study of Two Perspectives in Paul*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1999), 105.

<sup>17</sup> Larry Lacy, “Talbot on Paul as a Universalist,” 402.

<sup>18</sup> Namely, that all will be saved regardless of their faith or lack of faith in Christ. See Trevor Hart, “Universalism: Two Distinct Types” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. De S. Cameron, Nigel M. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books House, 1992), 3-15

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 22-23.

of verse 17 are the same people as the “all men” of verse 18, and there is therefore no cause for limiting the latter for the sake of the former.

Lacy himself acknowledges this: “[Romans 5:17] alone does not tell us whether or not there are any who fail to receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness. Nor on the other hand does it tell us that all will. That has to be determined from other texts.”<sup>20</sup> Lacy inadvertently shows why verse 17 is significantly more ambiguous than verse 18 in terms of salvific scope: the former simply does not concern scope, while the latter explicitly uses its language. Lacy inexplicably goes on to argue the exact opposite, that the language of scope in verses 18-19 (“other texts”) ought to be read in light of verse 17, but his point remains. Hillert concurs that verse 17 in no way limits the scope of verse 18, as the use of λαμβάνοντες “implies no restriction, however, since *all* are mentioned in verse 18”<sup>21</sup> (Hillert 105). Hillert rightly notes that verse 17 describes a quality of those saved, without delineating the scope of those saved, which is the prerogative of verses 18-19. In his paper “Rom 5.18-19 and Universal Salvation,” Anglican theologian and scholar of Paul at Nottingham University Richard Bell notes that, in light of verses 18-19, it ultimately does not matter whether or not “οἱ [...] λαμβάνοντες” means Christians or all people as in the end the two groups will be indistinguishable— “on the last day all will in fact have come to faith and be in receipt of the gift of righteousness.”<sup>22</sup> The distinction introduced by “οἱ [...] λαμβάνοντες” must be recognized in the context of the verse: Paul is comparing the reign of death, which is imposed, with the reign of life, which is received—emphasizing his doctrine of salvation through faith. The comparison is not between two simultaneously existing

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<sup>20</sup> Lacy, “Talbot on Paul as a Universalist,” 402.

<sup>21</sup> Hillert, *Limited and Universal Salvation*, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Bell, “Romans 5.18-19 and Universal Salvation,” *New Testament Studies* 48, no. 3 (2002): 429.

groups—those who receive and those who do not—but rather between two distinct ages—the reign of death in Adam and the reign of life in Christ.

When Romans 5:18-19 is considered in this image of two separate ages, the reign of death and reign of life, the universalist reading becomes more apparent. Within Romans 5:12-21, the basic structural unit in which the verses in question are found, Paul does indeed consider there to a difference between the scope of condemnation and the scope of salvation in a sense—yet this difference is in the opposite direction than what a particularist might suppose: “But the free gift is not like (οὐχ ὡς) the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more (πολλῷ μᾶλλον) have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. [...] For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more (πολλῷ μᾶλλον) will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup> If there is any disproportionality in verses 18-19 implied by the surrounding context, it is that salvation is disproportionately greater than condemnation, instead of vice versa as particularism might suggest. In his work “The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul,” Professor of New Testament at Texas Christian University’s Brite Divinity School Eugene M. Boring opines that Paul’s emphasis on Christ’s redeeming work being “*much more* significant than Adam’s” suggests Romans 5:12-21 “as a whole points to universal salvation.”<sup>24</sup> Boring argues that “Paul’s main point would be wiped out if, in fact, the ‘real’ meaning of the passage as a whole is that sin and death ultimately prevail over most of humanity.”<sup>25</sup> As in verses 18 and 19 themselves, the surrounding verses in Romans 5 can

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<sup>23</sup> Romans 5:15,17 (ESV).

<sup>24</sup> Eugene M. Boring, “The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 2 (1988): 285.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

only be interpreted as being particularist if they are taken to mean the opposite of their plain meaning. While Romans 5:18-19 are arguably the most rhetorically obvious universalist verses in the chapter, the image Paul develops in the chapter as a whole utterly excludes particularism in a theologically potent manner.

This paper is not meant to comprehensively analyze universalism throughout the entire Pauline corpus, but it would be remiss not to consider some of the verses mentioned by particularists who charge that a universalist interpretation of Romans 5:18-19 is incongruous with the rest of Paul's work. Evangelical theologian and founding faculty member of Fuller Theological Seminary Dr. Everett F. Harrison makes one such charge, arguing that "if the doctrine of universalism were being taught [in Romans 5:19], Paul would be contradicting himself, for he already pictured men as perishing because of sin (2:12 ch 1 Corinthians 1:18)"<sup>26</sup> The verses read, respectively, as follows: "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law," and "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."<sup>27</sup> The first verse is a statement about the universal conditions of sinfulness for both Gentiles (all who have sinned without the law) and Jews (all who have sinned under the law), not, as Harrison seems to suggest, a statement about eternal damnation for some but not others. As Hillert notes, "not only a statement about salvation for all but also a statement about salvation for some would contradict the statement in 2:12 interpreted in the way proposed by Harrison."<sup>28</sup> The verses present the same idea of universal condemnation before Christ found in the protasis of verses 18 and 19. The second verse

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<sup>26</sup> Everett F. Harrison, *Romans (The Expositor's Bible Commentary)*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1976), 65.

<sup>27</sup> Romans 2:12; 1 Corinthians 1:18 (ESV).

<sup>28</sup> Hillert, *Limited and Universal Salvation*, 34.

does indeed specify two simultaneous groups: “those who are perishing” and “us who are being saved.” Yet this is congruent with universalism: there is no suggestion of a final, eternal separation into these groups, only a recognition that not all are currently in the process of being saved. This idea is also presented with a clear universalist flavor in Romans 11, where Paul, seeking to explain the rejection of Christ by the majority of Jews in his time, writes that “a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved.”<sup>29</sup> For Paul, the current status of the unsaved Israelites’ being “hardened” is not discordant with his proclamation that “all Israel will be saved.” In both verses Harrison cites, he makes an error of equating current divisions with eternal ones, of conflating the idea of “perishing” due to sin with particularism in a similar way to how Thielman and Lacy conflate salvation through faith with particularism. Hart notes that Paul does hold a distinction between “the salvation of those who already belong to Christ at the time of his *parousia* (‘presence,’ second coming)” and “the full completion of this universal renewal (perhaps on the far side of that purging fire of judgment described at [1 Corinthians 3:10-15]).”<sup>30</sup> Universalists of Hart’s persuasion may unabashedly believe in the capacity for sin to bring death while simultaneously emphasizing that “the last enemy to be destroyed is death.”<sup>31</sup> Both death and hell are present in Christian universalism but are never permanent states because of Christ’s victory over them. One passage, however, is held by Lacy to imply that such destruction is, in fact, final.

Lacy points towards 2 Thessalonians 1:9 as a text where particularism is explicitly presented in a Pauline letter<sup>32</sup>, claiming the verse warns of “the danger that some might

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<sup>29</sup> Romans 11:25-26 (ESV).

<sup>30</sup> D. Hart, *The New Testament*, 348.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:26 (ESV); cf. T. Hart, “Universalism,” 22-27.

<sup>32</sup> The authorship of this text is disputed, as Talbott notes. Talbott, “New Testament,” 381.

be destroyed forever rather than attaining salvation forever.”<sup>33</sup> The verse describes how unbelievers “will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”<sup>34</sup> In the English presented in the ESV the verse seems clearly particularist, but the Greek is not so decisive and Hart’s rendering seeks to reflect that: “οἵτινες δίκην τίσουσιν ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ κυρίου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς δόξης τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ”; “Who will pay the just reparation of ruin in the Age, coming from the face of the Lord and the glory of his might.”<sup>35</sup> (2 Thessalonians 1:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:9 Hart’s Translation). Hart, in his translation choices, implicitly notes three distinctions, two of which Talbott also notes in his article “The New Testament and Universal Reconciliation.” Firstly, ὄλεθρον is elsewhere used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:5 (undoubtedly a letter written by Paul, a distinction not shared by 2 Thessalonians, which Talbott considers) specifically in the context of redemptive punishment. Talbott cites 1 Corinthians 5:5 where “*destruction* [ὄλεθρον] is explicitly a redemptive concept, and not only that: [...] ‘you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.’”<sup>36</sup> The destruction of the flesh is not permanent—1 Corinthians concludes in chapter 15 with Paul’s account of the resurrection of the body—but is a punishment ultimately oriented toward salvation. A second distinction, made by Hart in his postscript to his translation of the New Testament, is that αἰώνιος is not equivalent to the English term “eternal”:

The adjective αἰώνιος [αἰώνιος], unlike the adjective αἰδιος (aïdios) or adverb αἰεῖ (aei), never clearly means “eternal” or “everlasting” in any incontrovertible sense, nor does the noun αἰὼν simply mean “eternity” in the way that the noun αἰδιότης

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<sup>33</sup> Lacy, “Talbott,” 396.

<sup>34</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (ESV).

<sup>35</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (D. Hart’s *New Testament*).

<sup>36</sup> Talbott, “New Testament,” 389-391, quoting 1 Corinthians 5:5.

(aïdiotēs) does; neither does aiōnios mean “endless,” as ἀτέλευτος (atelevtos) or ἀτελεύτητος (atelevtētos) does; and, in fact, there are enough instances in the New Testament where the adjective or the noun obviously does not mean “eternal” or “eternity” that it seems to me unwise simply to presume such meanings in any instances at all.<sup>37</sup>

The third distinction is that ἀπὸ does not always mean “away from,” but can mean “from” more generally. Talbott, noting that the term takes the second meaning a few verses earlier in 2 Thessalonians 1:2 (“Grace to you and peace from [ἀπὸ] God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”) and that Jesus himself is described “in flaming fire” in verse 8, claims that “the presence of the Lord in flaming fire, the glory of his power, is the source of, or that which brings about, the destruction of the wicked.”<sup>38</sup> Instead of describing eternal destruction separated from God, the verse can just as easily be describing a cleansing fire from God in the age to come—the latter reading being much more congruent of 1 Corinthians 3, the only other mention of a fiery punishment in the afterlife by Paul, where the fire is very clearly purgative and temporary: “If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”<sup>39</sup> If the two texts are to be harmonized,<sup>40</sup> it must be considered that this universalist interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is significantly more plausible than particularist interpretations of Romans 5:18-19, which I have shown to be dubious. As 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is wholly in line with universalist ideas within the grander vision of

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<sup>37</sup> D. Hart, *The New Testament*, 538.

<sup>38</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:2,8 (ESV); Talbott, “New Testament,” 390.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:15 (ESV).

<sup>40</sup> Which is not strictly necessary to maintain Pauline consistency, considering the disputed authorship of 2 Thessalonians.

Paul's eschatology, it does not affect the validity of a universalist reading of Romans 5:18-19.

Other scholars have claimed that while Romans 5:18-19 reads clearly as a universalist statement, it is not intended as such, claiming that Paul followed the Adam/Christ motif too far and presented an idea discordant with the rest of his theology. Such a view is held by German theologian and professor of the New Testament at the University of Marburg Rudolf Bultmann, who advocates that Paul's adoption of the Adam/Christ parallel—an idea belonging to an external “gnostic” theology—has led him inadvertently to a conclusion contrary to his real view.<sup>41</sup> E. P. Sanders, New Testament scholar and leading proponent of the “New Perspective” on Paul, argues similarly, writing that Paul “seems rather to have been carried away by the force of his analogy and argued more than he intended.”<sup>42</sup> Boring considers both of these scholar's objections and finds them wanting on the basis that the entire chapter contains universalist ideas, and not just the conclusion in verse 18-19: “*Each* verse affirms that whatever humanity lost in Adam *humanity* (more than) gained back in Christ.”<sup>43</sup> Bell, citing and agreeing with Boring, adds that Bultmann's charge that the Adam/Christ parallel belongs to an external theology alien to Paul's thought is unfounded, as “the mythical background to Paul's thought is not to be found in Gnosticism, but rather in his understanding of participation in Adam and in Christ.”<sup>44</sup> Romans 5:18-19 is no aberration nor is it isolated from Paul's consistent theological thought; rather, as Bell

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<sup>41</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “Adam and Christ according to Romans 5,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 154.

<sup>42</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism : 40th Anniversary Edition*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 473.

<sup>43</sup> Boring, “Language,” 285.

<sup>44</sup> Bell, “Rom 5.18-19,” 431



notes, it is deeply rooted in Paul's conception of the reign of Christ superseding the reign of Adam.

The image of Christ as the conquering King, clearly present in Romans 5, appears consistently in Paul's eschatological vision. In accordance with this idea, there is no hint within these verses that some will remain in death while others receive life. For Paul, the reign of sin and death, where all stood condemned, is conquered, destroyed, and superseded by the reign of grace brought by Christ, where righteousness abounds to an even greater degree than condemnation ever did: "where sin was abundant, grace was superabundant, In order that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign by righteousness for life in the Age through Jesus the Anointed, the Lord."<sup>45</sup> Boring argues that this framework leaves no room for particularism: "The 'change of lordships' is the unilateral act of God, who conquers the realm of sin and death, destroying their lordship by establishing his own. The picture of royal conquest does not allow for two competing parallel lordships [...] there are no remaining pockets of resistance [...] All welcome the conqueror as a liberator from an alien tyrant."<sup>46</sup> . This is also the framework central to 1 Corinthians 15, "the fullest depiction of Paul's eschatological vision anywhere in his writings" according to Hart, which features a grand image of Christ conquering all of his enemies—including death—and handing over his Kingdom to the Father "so that God may be all in all."<sup>47</sup> Notably, this is where Paul first makes the parallel between Adam and Christ later seen in Romans 5: "For just as in Adam all die, so also in the Anointed all will be given life."<sup>48</sup> (1 Corinthians 15:22 Hart's Translation). The association with the universalistic Adam/Christ typography with the image of Christ as the conquering King

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<sup>45</sup> Romans 5:21 (D. Hart's *The New Testament*).

<sup>46</sup> Boring, "Language," 284.

<sup>47</sup> D. Hart, *The New Testament*, 348; 1 Corinthians 15:28 (D. Hart's *The New Testament*).

<sup>48</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:22 (D. Hart's *The New Testament*).

is no accident. They together reflect a revolution by invasion, where humanity is freed from its bondage to death it entered through Adam by the Son of God who entered into the bonds of death, broke them, and established his universal Lordship of life in its stead. The two distinct reigns are both universal in scope but one far greater in power—whose King will “reign till he puts all enemies under his feet” when “every tongue gladly confess that Jesus the Anointed is Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:25; Philippians 2:11, Hart’s Translation). The universalist interpretation of Romans 5:18-19 fits naturally within these broader themes present in Paul’s theology: though all were brought to death by Adam, Christ has destroyed death, and by doing so he will bring life to all in the end.

When faced with criticisms on every level, from textual nitpicks to challenges of context to questions of broader theological congruence, the universalist interpretation of Romans 5:18-19 advanced by Hart remains unshaken. The Greek text itself is clear, both in its vocabulary and structure; The surrounding verses support a universalist reading; And, within the context of Paul’s theology, Romans 5:18-19 fits completely with the universalist eschatological and salvific image of Christ the conquering King. Hart’s exegesis remains the clearest and most readily apparent reading of the text and—despite how many protests and even charges of heresy<sup>49</sup> it may spawn—is one that certainly holds up to scrutiny, both textually and theologically, and his universalism should be taken with utmost seriousness as a legitimate Christian doctrine.

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<sup>49</sup> Edward Feser, “David Bentley Hart’s attack on Christian tradition fails to convince,” review of *That All Shall Be Saved*, by David Bentley Hart, *Catholic Herald*, July 10, 2020.

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