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The Rise and Fall of Early Christian Physicalist Soteriology

1.1 EARLY CHRISTIAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE UNITY OF HUMANITY IN ADAM AND CHRIST

Eighteen years ago, as part of a Latin class, I began reading through Hilary of Poitiers' Psalm commentaries (at that time untranslated into any modern language). When I had worked my way through the 900 pages of Latin, I was left with the impression that has directed much of my work for the past eighteen years: Hilary had what seemed to me at the time a strange conception of humanity's corporate unity in the body of Christ. Hilary's language and images concerning the existence of all humanity in Christ's body went far beyond commonplace reflections on the Church as the body of Christ. Hilary presented a view of the unity of humanity that allowed not only Adam but also Christ to enact a change in the human condition that affects every human individual. The universality of the effects of the fall was, in Hilary's thought, mirrored by universal effects of the incarnation. Over the years I wondered: How unique is Hilary in having this strong sense of the unity of humanity such that, through Adam and Christ, there is a universal component to both fall and redemption?

As regards human unity in Adam, several recent studies have mirrored my own conclusion that there exists in early Christianity an extremely widespread commitment to human unity in Adam. The great question of how Adam's choice to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil can have disastrous and universal consequences on all humanity – when, for example, Cain's murder of his brother seems to have no effects that go beyond his individual person – was answered in the fifth century with the

conviction that all humanity is unified within Adam. Marta Przyszychowska, in her study of the early Christian conception of unity in Adam, makes the broad claim that "ALL or almost all Fathers believed in the unity of mankind in Adam because the belief of the unity of humankind was at that time self-evident."[1] Przyszychowska's claim for a widespread Christian conception of human unity in Adam is not surprising when viewed in light of the established scholarship on the conception of human unity that already existed in classical philosophy, including in both Platonism and Stoicism.[2] Human unity is a conception already in common currency at the time of early Christianity. The novelty in the Christian conception of human unity is not the conception of human unity itself but the Christian linkage of human unity to an individual historical figure, Adam. Przyszychowska argues that while classical philosophy created a climate that already fostered conceptions of human unity, the placement of this unity in Adam was self-evident to early Christians because of a shared conviction in a universal fall in which "Adam lost sanctity and justice not only for himself, but also for us; that he passed onto the entire human race not only mortality and suffering of the body, but also sin that is death of the soul."[3] In this way, the unity of all humans in Adam was the bedrock for early Christian thinking about

[1] Marta Przyszychowska, *We Were All in Adam: The Unity of Mankind in Adam in the Teaching of the Church Fathers* (Warsaw: De Gruyter, 2018), 1. Przyszychowska demonstrates convincingly that several key authors in the second through fourth centuries – including Origen, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine – articulate a unity of humanity, which gives persuasive weight to her wider claim that there is a nearly universal consensus in early Christianity through the fourth century that the universal effects of Adam's sin are dependent upon a unity of all humanity, and particularly a unity of humanity that centers in Adam.

[2] For scholarship on conceptions of human unity in classical philosophy, see H. C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Malcolm Schofield, *The Stoic Idea of the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For the Christian applications of these philosophical conceptions of human unity (which lend support to Przyszychowska's claim for a widespread Christian commitment to human unity), see, for example, Paul Burns' conclusion that Hilary's conception of human unity likely has Stoic roots, *The Christology in Hilary of Poitiers' Commentary on Matthew,* Studia Ephemerides Augustinianum 16 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1981), 103–108. Also illustrative of the wide currency of human unity in early Christianity is the scholarly debate on the source of Gregory of Nyssa's conception of human unity, in which Harnack proposes a Platonic source, Balthasar and Hubner propose a Stoic source, and Zachhuber proposes a Christian source (see Zachhuber's summary of the various positions in Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* [Brill: Leiden, 2000], 125–130).

[3] Przyszychowska, *We Were All in Adam*, 121.

the fall and provided the rationale for the universal fallenness of human body and soul.

However, while human unity in Adam is a conviction ubiquitous in early Christian reflection, human unity in Christ is an idea that is more limited in early Christianity. There are different ways to conceptualize the unity of all humanity in Adam, and some of these ways have a logic that extends more naturally to a human unity in Christ than others. For example, the articulation of human unity through the language and conceptualization of "universals," as found in Marius Victorinus and Gregory of Nyssa, is an idea of unity that works equally well for human unity in Christ as it does for human unity in Adam. However, the belief that humans are unified in Adam by being seminally present "in his loins," as found, for example, in Origen, is a conceptualization of human unity that does not so easily transfer to Christ because Christ, unlike Adam, is not the physical progenitor of the race.[4]

Therefore, while nearly all early Christians teach that humanity is unified in Adam, which explains the universal effects of Adam's actions, not all early Christians teach that all humanity is similarly unified in Christ. Only a subset of early Christian writers attribute the same universality to the effects of Christ's incarnate life, passion, and death as they do to Adam's choice to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good of evil.

The first thing to note about this subset of early Christian writers is that they manifest no awareness that their extension of human unity in Adam to human unity of Christ – with their parallel willingness to accept that the incarnation has universal effects in the same way as did the fall – is unique or in need of either philosophical explanation or polemical defense. Przyszychowska notes that the majority of early Christians made little to no effort to explain how humanity is united in Adam because the existence of that unity seemed self-evident.

[4] For Origen's belief that humanity exists in the loins of Adam, see Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 5:1: "If then Levi, who is born in the fourth generation after Abraham, is declared as having been in the loins of Abraham, how much more were all humans, those who are born and have been born in this world, in Adam's loins when he was still in paradise. And all humans who were with him, or rather in him, were expelled from paradise when he was himself driven out from there; and through him the death which had come to him from the transgression consequently passed through to them as well, who were dwelling in his loins; and therefore the Apostle rightly says, 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.' So then it is neither from the serpent who had sinned before the woman, nor from the woman who had become a transgressor before the man, but through Adam, from whom all mortals derive their origin, that sin is said to have entered, and through sin, death."

> It is the general climate of those times, the universal convictions so deeply instilled in the way of thinking of the people who lived then that frequently nobody even explained them. I am deeply convinced that ALL or almost all Fathers believed in the unity of mankind in Adam because the belief of the unity of humankind was at that time self-evident.[5]

Nevertheless, several early Christians did make attempts to explain *how* humanity is united in Adam, and there is a wide variety of these explanations, variety that was never the source of polemical debate – from the argument that all human nature is united as a singular universal; to the Stoic-influenced conviction that there is a "natural, literally physical unity of the entire humankind"[6]; to the view that all humanity is in Adam because he is the progenitor of all; to a weaker sense in which Adam functions as a representative of humanity. The lack of any direct, much less heated, engagement among early Christian authors until the fifth century on this question of *how* humanity is united in Adam manifests that none of these authors felt that any one of the variety of positions entered into the realm of possible heresy. Expanding on Przyszychowska's conclusions, I believe that there is a similar lack of theological worry concerning the articulations *that* and *how* all humanity is united in Christ, even though these arguments are less ubiquitous than the arguments concerning unity in Adam.

The second thing to note about this group of Christian authors who posit a unity of humanity in Christ, such that the incarnation has universal effects on humanity, is that this conviction is in nearly every case developed individually and not inherited. While Cyril likely did have knowledge of the presence of this idea in Athanasius' thought, and Maximus in the thought of Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril of Alexandria, there is no indication that Marius Victorinus, Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, or Gregory of Nyssa were familiar with the writings of each other; rather, in at least these four cases, we must admit that their conviction of the universal effects of the incarnation resulting from the unity of humanity in Christ was individually developed. However, we must return to the first point: None of these authors manifest an awareness that they were developing a position that was novel or minority.

Although the articulation that there is a unity in Christ, such that the incarnation has universal effects, is not widespread in early Christianity, the lack of any outcry or polemical engagement with this position by

[5] Przyszychowska, *We Were All in Adam*, 1.
[6] Przyszychowska, *We Were All in Adam*, 8.

those who did not hold it seems to support its proponents' belief that this position was not a novelty but was at that time universally accepted as a legitimate application of the general conviction of human unity in Adam.

1.2 THE NATURAL DEVELOPMENT OF PHYSICALIST SOTERIOLOGY IN FOURTH-CENTURY THEOLOGY

As Christians thought about the narrative of fall and redemption, the correspondence of Adam and Christ (first articulated by Paul) as having roles that were similar in scope but reversed in effect became commonplace. Adam's role in the fall was mirrored by Christ's role in redemption. This ubiquitous Adam–Christ comparison was taken one step further by several theologians in the fourth century. For these authors, the universality of the effect of Adam's actions demanded a universality in the effect of Christ's actions. If Adam, a mere man, could initiate a fall of the human condition that affects all humans, so Christ, who is God and more powerful than Adam, initiates an improvement of the human condition that affects all humans.

This idea that there is a unity of humanity in Christ, such that the incarnation enacts a universal change of the human condition, has been recognized as the "physical" or "mystical" theory of redemption since the nineteenth century. J. N. D. Kelly explains the fundamental rationale of the "physical" theory as a reflection on the nature of the parallel between the works of Adam and Christ – as an incorporation of all humanity in both the actions of Adam and Christ and the consequences of those actions – that we have just gone through.

> Just as all men were somehow present in Adam, so they are, or can be present in the second Adam, the man from heaven. Just as they were involved in the former's sin, with all its appalling consequences, so they can participate in the latter's death and ultimate triumph over sin, the forces of evil and death itself.[7]

I will discuss the historiography and reception history related to the nineteenth-century recognition and labeling of this theory in Chapter 2. Here I note that throughout the rest of this book I name as "physicalism" or "physicalist soteriology" this belief in a unity of humanity in Christ, which enables the incarnation to enact a universal change in the human condition, and I call the proponents of this belief "physicalists."

[7] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978), 377.

Physicalist soteriology is a phenomenon centered in the second half of the fourth century. The following chapters in this book will explain the details that flesh out this physicalist belief that a unity of humanity in Christ gives the incarnation the ability to universally affect the human condition. However, even apart from those details, it is obvious that physicalist soteriology is not a "trajectory" in the sense that we might speak of the trajectory of "pro-Nicene trinitarian theology" or "mia-physis Christology." In both these examples, there is a trajectory of development where shared technical terminology and scriptural constellations manifest an interaction both between generations (individual authors are intentionally developing the previous generations' theology) and within a generation (individual authors are responding to the polemical critiques their contemporaries offer of the previous generations' theology). If a "trajectory" requires interaction between its proponents and opponents, which would result in shared terminology and scriptural foci, then it is clear that there is no such thing as a trajectory of physicalist soteriology. Each physicalist in this book – Marius Victorinus (290–364), Athanasius (296–373), Hilary of Poitiers (315–368), Gregory of Nyssa (335–394), Cyril of Alexandria (378–444), and Maximus the Confessor (580–662) – creates his own brand of physicalism. Each of these authors presents a physicalism that is unique in terms of provenance and that is also unique conceptually, including terminology, scriptural support, and even broad differences in the conceptualization of both how Christ effects a transformation of all humanity and of what that transformation consists. Furthermore, none of the physicalists in this book were engaged in any intentional theological dialogue either promoting or defending this idea.

The rise of several independent proponents of physicalism in the second half of the fourth century and then the dearth of followers in this line of thought in succeeding centuries manifest that physicalism is a natural outgrowth of fourth-century theology that is swiftly curtailed by substantial theological changes in the early fifth century. There is no "father of physicalism." Rather, the independent and spontaneous appearance of physicalism in several authors (both Latin and Greek) in the second half of the fourth century implies that the physicalist conviction of a unity of humanity in Christ that enables the incarnation to have a universal effect on the human condition is a fairly natural outgrowth of late fourth-century theological positions. Additionally, there was never, in the fourth or succeeding centuries, any direct attention on this conviction: There is no hint of either a polemical condemnation or a defense of physicalism anywhere by anyone in this time period. It is worth noting

at this juncture that physicalism, in arguing that the unity of humanity in Christ allows the incarnation to have universal effects, can be a building block in a theology of universal salvation: such is the case with Gregory of Nyssa, and possibly Marius Victorinus and Maximus the Confessor. However, there are several physicalists who explicitly argue that the universal effects of the incarnation are not in and of themselves salvific. Athanasius, Hilary of Poitier, and Cyril of Alexandria are clear that while the incarnation does affect all, it does not save all. Therefore, there is no necessary correlation between physicalism and universalism.

After the fourth century, there are only two further physicalists: Cyril of Alexandria in the first half of the fifth century, and then Maximus the Confessor, in the seventh century, is the last physicalist. After Maximus, this conviction that the incarnation enacts a universal change in the human condition as a result of the human unity in Christ simply disappears from the Christian tradition. If physicalism was indeed a natural outgrowth of fourth-century theology, then its abrupt diminishment in the fifth century manifests that whatever supported the natural outgrowth of physicalism in the late fourth century – and made it a teaching inoffensive even to its nonproponents – disappears by the second half of the fifth century.

1.3 The Rise of the Creationist Ensoulment Model and Its Detrimental Effect on Corporate Conceptions of Humanity, Original Sin, and Physicalist Soteriology

Drawing from the discussion so far, we see that the conviction that there is a unity of humanity in Christ that results in some manner of universal human transformation is a theological extension of the belief that the fall has a universal effect on humanity enabled by the unity of humanity in Adam. Just as Adam, through the unity of humanity in him, changed all humanity for the worse, Christ, through the unity of humanity in him, changes all humanity for the better. Interestingly, while the conviction of a unity in Christ leading to universal human transformation received no polemical attention at any period in early Christianity, the unity of humanity in Adam – including the effects of this unity on all humanity, and the manner in which these effects were transmitted from Adam to all other humans – was a topic of theological conflict from very early on and came to be a central interest in the polemics revolving around several different controversies in the fourth and especially fifth centuries.

Amid the theological developments and debates of the late fourth and early fifth centuries – from the post-Nicene trinitarian debates to the christological controversies – one development that has been consistently underrecognized and undervalued is the shift in the Christian conception of ensoulment. The late fourth and early fifth centuries see a shift away from the two ensoulment models that had coexisted up to the fourth century – pre-existence and traducianism – toward a new model, creationism. The transition from traducianism and pre-existence to the creationist ensoulment model does not happen all at once, and I find it helpful to think of four stages within this process, even though some of these stages chronologically overlap. In Stage 1, which lasted until the late fourth century, there exist two ensoulment models in Christianity: pre-existence and traducianism, both of which intentionally function as the mechanism to explain how and why the fall has universal consequences and coexist with the idea that there is a unity of humanity in Adam. In Stage 2, these two ensoulment models devised to explain the universality of the fall, namely pre-existence and traducianism, get rejected as part of antiascetical polemics, for reasons that have nothing to do with the universality of the fall. In Stage 3, around the turn of the fifth century, a new ensoulment model, creationism, is created and rises to prominence. This ensoulment model, unlike the earlier ones, was not designed to be an explanatory mechanism for the universal consequences of the fall and explicitly limits the unity of humanity in Adam to a physical/bodily unity (that excludes a unity of soul). In Stage 4, creationism completely ousts the former ensoulment models. Despite the Pelagian use of creationism to deny any universal effects of the fall by denying a unity of humanity, on the level of the soul, in Adam, Augustine seems to be the only one to recognize that – now that ensoulment has ceased to provide the rationale for how and why the fall can have universal effects – Christianity is left without anything else to fill in this necessary logic.

In Stage 1, which lasts until the late fourth century, two different ensoulment models coexisted in Christianity, and both were intentional answers to the question: How can the fall affect all humans universally? Both Origen and Tertullian – as the fathers, respectively, of the pre-existence and traducian models of ensoulment – thought of ensoulment in light of what was to them the real and manifest conditions of universal human fallenness. Ensoulment was the way each of them explained how individual humans participate in a universal human condition of fallenness that is a result of sins committed in a distant past. Origen attests that "Christian brethren often ask a question … Little children are baptized

'for the remission of sins.' Whose sins are they? When did they sin?"[8] For Origen, in the beginning, all created beings were rational (nonmaterial) beings, but these rational beings turned away from God and fell. There are myriad gradations of fallenness, each directly corresponding to the level of individual fault.

> God made one a daemon, one a soul and one an angel as a means of punishing each in proportion to its sin. For if this were not so, and souls had no pre-existence, why do we find some new-born babes to be blind, when they have committed no sin, while others are born with no defect at all? But it is clear that certain sins existed before the souls, and as a result of these sins each soul receives a recompense in proportion to its deserts.[9]

Here we see that Origen argues that the blindness of a newborn manifests a greater level of fallenness and individual fault (than would be the case with a visually unimpaired newborn). The fault happened prior to the baby's conception, when that individual rational being turned away from God the precise amount that garnered the punishment of becoming a human soul that would be implanted in a blind body. While there are certainly variations in the human condition that correspond to pre-existent fault, we also see here Origen's belief that all humans universally share a level of fault that requires them to receive human bodies as punishment. The universal human experience of the sufferings associated with embodiment has a single cause that applies to all humans universally: All humans in their pre-existent nonmaterial state turned away from God the precise amount that leads to human embodiment. Therefore, for Origen, the pre-existence ensoulment model is the mechanism that explains why and how all humans, without exception, exist justly in a fallen state. While it seems that the pre-existence model of ensoulment excludes Adam from any role in the universal fall of humanity, Origen does give Adam a significant role in the fall by delineating a unity of humanity in Adam that depends upon humans existing "in Adam's loins."

> If then Levi, who is born in the fourth generation after Abraham, is declared as having been in the loins of Abraham, how much more were all men, those who are born and have been born in this world, in Adam's loins when he was still in paradise when he was himself driven out from there, and through him the death which had come to him from the transgression consequently passed through to them as well, who were dwelling in his loins . . . Through Adam, from

[8] Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 12.4. [9] Origen, *On First Principles* 1.8.1.

whom all mortals derive their origin, that sin is said to have entered, and through sin, death.[10]

The theological coordination of the fall of pre-existent souls with this belief that sin and death enter the human race through Adam has been a source of constant confusion to commentators.[11] It might seem that Origen sees pre-existence as explaining the fall of the soul, and the unity of humanity in Adam as explaining only the fall of the material body; however, Origen excludes such a simplistic delineation when he argues that the sin committed by Adam transmits a death of the soul: "'And through sin,' he says, 'death.' Without a doubt this is the death concerning which the prophet says, 'The soul which sins will die.'"[12] Whatever the precise details of the relationship between the pre-existence ensoulment model and the unity of humanity in Adam, Origen espouses both of these ideas within his explanation of the universality of the fall.

Tertullian, the father of traducianism, demonstrates that his ensoulment model, like pre-existence for Origen, serves the function of explaining how individual humans participate in the universal human experience of fallenness. Also like Origen, though in a much more straightforward fashion, Tertullian uses traducianism to argue that Adam is able to initiate a universal fall because he is the progenitor of all humans. For Tertullian, both body and soul come into being through the procreative process: He gives a very vivid account of ejaculation as involving both the body and soul of the father and, therefore, communicating both body and soul to the fetus. Adam, as the great-great-great grandfather of all humanity, is the physical progenitor, via the reproductive process, of the body and soul of all humans, and, since both the body and soul of Adam are fallen, he passes on to all humans a fallen body and fallen soul.

> For although we shall allow that there are two kinds of seed – that of the body and that of the soul – we still declare that they are inseparable, and therefore contemporaneous and simultaneous in origin. Indeed (if I run the risk of offending modesty even, in my desire to prove the truth), I cannot help asking, whether we do not, in that very heat of extreme gratification when the generative fluid is ejected, feel that somewhat of our soul has gone from us? And do we not experience a faintness and prostration along with a dimness of sight? This, then, must be the soul-producing seed, which arises at once from the out-drip of the soul, just as

[10] Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 5.1.14.
[11] See the review of the literature offered by Przyszychowska, *We Were All in Adam*, 73–78.
[12] Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 5.1.19.