

“The ‘Wretched Man’ of Romans 7:14-25 as *Reductio ad absurdum*”

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Abstract: The identity and significance of the “Wretched Man” of Romans 7 has intrigued scholars since patristic times. Rom 7:14-25 should be studied within the theological context of the Jewish doctrine of the Two Impulses and within the rhetorical context of Romans. With this parody of the Two Impulse doctrine, Paul protects himself from charges of apostasy from the Torah, and at the same time demonstrates the universal need for the gospel.

FOR WE KNOW THAT THE LAW IS SPIRITUAL; BUT I AM OF THE FLESH, SOLD INTO
SLAVERY UNDER SIN. I DO NOT UNDERSTAND MY OWN ACTIONS. FOR I DO NOT DO
WHAT I WANT, BUT I DO THE VERY THING I HATE (ROM 7:14-15).¹

I. A Brief Description of the Interpretive Issues

Is the Wretched Man a Christian or is he not?² This has been the first consideration since the early church, followed closely by whether the passage is autobiographical. In the 20th century the discussion has been definitively shaped by W. G. Kümmel’s *Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus* (1929).³ He argued that:

1. The existence described in Rom 7:14-25 is markedly different from that described in Romans 6 and 8, and refers to life outside of Christ.
2. Paul’s first person singular “I” is a known rhetorical device; this is not an autobiographical account of his frustration as a Jew or as a Christian.
3. The passage refers generally to life under the Mosaic law.
4. Nevertheless, this description of non-Christian existence is informed by Paul’s Christian anthropology.

To the stack of literature on Romans 7 we will add a refinement of Kümmel’s position, namely, that Paul was consciously engaging with specific tenets of 1st-century Jewish thinking. The Wretched Man is what Paul might have been expected to create if he were piloting his gospel around the rocks of their anthropology. He reduced to absurdity their theology of good and evil and freedom of choice, doing so with this parody of existence under the Torah.

II. Good and Evil and Human Choice in Judaism

The revolution that E. P. Sanders spearheaded is premised most famously on his “covenantal nomism” model. But just as vital is a second premise, that

the lack of a doctrine of original sin in the Augustinian sense is an important point to be grasped if one is to understand Rabbinic “soteriology” or the nature and quality of Jewish life.⁴

Without this insight, the Christian scholar - perhaps recalling Martin Luther’s biography - may end up reconstructing a 1st-century Judaism that never actually existed in history. In it, a hyper-strict “legalism” would furnish the remedy for depravity. But in reality, Judaism teaches the human ability to obey God’s law, a doctrine which in turn creates a rationale for halakhic instruction. As one modern Jewish theologian reminds us:

The anthropology of *Halakhah* is based, as stated above, on the concept of freedom. Man is free to choose, and man’s true humanity is achieved in his free submission to the will of God...Natural man, not ennobled by *Halakhah*, and dominated by his uncontrolled impulses, degrades himself and lowers himself to the level of an animal. What renders man human in the eyes of the *Halakhah* is the voluntary submission to a life of responsibility, and the acceptance of the divine commandments as norms of behavior...By using reason to achieve a life of service within the scope of the divine commandments, man rises from the sub-human state to the human.⁵

Most 1st-century Jews rejected a Platonic dualism between body and soul.⁶ Instead, the moral battle was waged by two inner impulses. In Hebrew literature they are called the *yēšer tôb* (טוֹב יֵצֶר) and the *yēšer raʿ* (רַע יֵצֶר), the good and evil inclinations. A common Greek equivalent of *yēšer* is *diaboulion*/διαβόλιον, or both languages may speak of two “spirits” (*rūah*/רוּח ; *pneuma*/πνεῦμα). A modern representation of the Two Impulses is the cartoon of a good and evil angel sitting on a person’s shoulder and whispering advice. As in the cartoon, the individual makes the final decision.

References to the Two Impulses are scattered throughout rabbinic literature.⁷ For example, in the midrash on Ps 41:1 (“Happy are those who consider the poor”), “poor” was taken to be a code word for the good *yēšer*. From that exegesis comes a benediction: “Because not all people heed the Inclination-to-good, blessed is that man who does heed it.” As neither impulse can be annihilated, the outcome hangs on individual choice, since “a man is able to deliver the Inclination-to-good from the Inclination-to-evil.” Submission to the Torah was the proper technique for fortifying the good *yēšer*, and the synagogue was the social and theological center for its revitalization.

The Two Impulse doctrine would become highly systematized in post-Pauline Judaism. Nevertheless, the idea that people are free to choose between their drives was already commonplace in the Second Temple period and is evidenced by its literature. Paul's contemporaries knew and revered the Wisdom of ben Sirach (2d cent BC), which reminded Israelites of their moral responsibility:

It was he [the Lord] who created humankind in the beginning, and he left them in the power of their own free choice [*yēšer/diaboulion*; the RSV is better with "inclination"]. If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given (Sir 15:14-17).

The text of *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (2d cent BC) may have been altered in places by Christians, but they still give ample witness to the traditional doctrine, for example:

The two ways are good and evil; concerning them are two dispositions (*diaboulia*) within our breasts that choose between them. If the soul wants to follow the good way, all of its deeds are done in righteousness and every sin is immediately repented. Contemplating just deeds and rejecting wickedness, the soul overcomes and uproots sin (*T. Ash.* 1:5-7; cf. *T. Jud.* 20:1-2).

We find the same message in the *Psalms of Solomon*, possibly a Pharisaic text of the 1st century BC. The author, anticipating a concern of later rabbis, cleared God of being the author of sin by stressing human freedom:⁸

Our works (are) in the choosing and power of our souls, to do right and wrong in the works of our hands, and in your righteousness you oversee human beings (*Ps. Sol.* 9:4).

According to 1st-century AD Josephus, the Pharisees believed in free moral choices within a framework of divine sovereignty:

...their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a temperament, whereby what he wills is done, but so that the will of men can act virtuously or viciously (*J. Ant.* 18.1.3).

Within a less deterministic framework the Sadducees taught

...that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men's own choice, and that the one or the other belongs so to every one, that they may act as they please (*J. W.* 2.8.14).

Like Paul in Rom 7:7, the author of 4 Maccabees, probably a 1st-century Jew of the Diaspora,

picked the 10th commandment to illustrate how people may freely choose righteousness:

Not only is reason [*logismos*/λογισμός] proved to rule over the frenzied urge of sexual desire, but also over every desire. Thus the law says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or anything that is your neighbor’s.” In fact, since the law has told us not to covet, I could prove to you all the more that reason is able to control desires (4 Macc 2:4-6).

Paul’s “law of my mind” (probably a subjective genitive, “the set of divine rules I affirm with my mind”) in 7:23 corresponds to “the law of God in my inmost self” in 7:22, and both are roughly analogous to 4 Maccabees’ *logismos*/λογισμός: human reason affirms that God’s rules are reasonable. However, the logic of 4 Maccabees would have been lost on the apostle, who perceived that “sin, seizing an opportunity in the [10th] commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness” (Rom 7:8).

The reclusive Dead Sea community is renowned for thinking in dualistic terms of light and darkness, or the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. According to the *Manual of Discipline* (2d cent BC), God

...has allotted these (two Spirits) in equal parts until the final end, and has set between their divisions eternal hatred (1QS 4:16-17).

But in addition the DSS commonly used the language of “inclinations,”⁹ notably in the *Hôdăyôt* and in the short text “A Plea for Deliverance” (first half of the 1st cent AD):

Let not Satan rule over me, nor an unclean spirit; neither let pain nor the evil inclination [*yēšer rāʿ*] take possession of my bones (11QPs^a Plea 15-16, from *DJD* 4.77; cf. B. Otzen, “צַר,” *TDOT* 6.265).

For those in the New Covenant of the Qumran community there was divine relief from the otherwise unremitting impulse:

[For it is not] according to my sin that Thou hast judged me and Thou hast not abandoned me because of the wickedness of my inclination, but hast succoured my life from the Pit (1QH 5:5-6).

Of course, the doctrine of good and evil was not uniform throughout Judaism. The Dead Sea community stressed divine election to righteousness and the continuity between the inclinations and the spirit world, while Philo wrote in Hellenistic terms.¹⁰ It is not necessary for our purposes to argue for homogeneity, but only to show that the basic pattern was widespread. In his Pharisaic training, and in his contacts with the synagogues of Palestine or the Diaspora, Paul would have continually encountered an anthropology according to which:

- every person is endowed with the ability to make moral choices (depending on the group, divine predestination may lie behind the human choice)

- every person possesses an inclination to good and an inclination to evil, either of which may be resisted or followed, but never killed off
- Gentiles, without the benefit of the Torah, will naturally choose to follow the evil impulse to their destruction
- Israelites, beneficiaries of God's election and covenant, are enabled to strengthen the good impulse by attending to the Torah (in the DSS, the Torah as interpreted by the Teacher of Righteousness)

Finally, although Christians may imagine differently, salvation was never predicated on perfectly heeding the good impulse. Rather, it rested on God's covenant with Abraham, whose seed would inherit the kingdom so long as they did not surrender their destiny to the evil impulse. But in Romans Paul demolished the prospects even of that modest attainment.

III. Good and Evil and Human Choice in Romans 7

We have suggested that a "mirror-reading" of Rom 7:14-25 may reflect certain tenets of 1st-century Jewish anthropology which Paul caricatured in order to reinforce the Torah's ineffectiveness. Let us examine just a few aspects of the Wretched Man to see if our model has a firm basis in the text:

THE WRETCHED MAN IS SOLD AS A SLAVE TO SIN (7:14) - This phrase must be understood contextually, in light of Romans 1 and 6, but also in light of its linguistic background. Moo notes (454) that the LXX typically used *praskō*/πράσκω to refer to the selling of slaves. While this is relevant, further help is found by studying the whole phrase "sold to do evil" (as in Dunn, *Romans 1-8* 388). For in the LXX, the four appearances of *eimi pepramenos*/εἰμι πεπράμενος that relate to the covenant do not denote conflict or temptation, but a full-blown descent into idolatry or other gross sin. So it is with Ahab in 3 Kgdms 20:20: "And Ahab said to Elijah, 'Have you found me, my enemy?' And [Elijah] said, 'I have found [you], because to no end you have been sold to do evil before the Lord.'" (διότι μάτην πέπρασαι ποιῆσαι τὸ πονηρὸν ἐνώπιον κυρίου). While πέπρασαι could be understood as either a middle or passive voice here, the phrase is grammatically passive in other passages. 3 Kgdms 20:25 reiterates that "[Ahab] was sold to do evil before the Lord" (ἐπράθη ποιῆσαι τὸ πονηρὸν ἐνώπιον κυρίου in A, omitted in B). According to 4 Kgdms 17:17, Israel practiced a long catalogue of abominations and thus "they were sold to do evil in the eyes of the Lord to provoke him to wrath" (ἐπράθησαν τοῦ ποιῆσαι τὸ πονηρὸν ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς κυρίου παρνοργίσαι αὐτόν), incurring exile upon the northern kingdom. In 1 Macc 1:15 the Jews who rejected circumcision were "sold to do evil" (ἐπράθησαν τοῦ ποιῆσαι τὸ πονηρόν), which is explained as "they went apostate from the holy covenant" (ἠέστησαν ἀπὸ διαθήκης ἁγίας). Consistently, "being sold to do evil" denotes calamitous apostasy which leads straight to judgment. Paul's phrase "sold *under* sin" (*eimi pepramenos hupo tēn hamartian*/εἰμι πεπραμένος ὑπὸ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν) is altered slightly from the LXX because of Paul's personification of sin as slavedriver.

This observation points up a connection between Romans 7 and the description of apostasy in

Rom 1:24. When the nations exchanged the worship of the creator for idols, God gave them over (*paradidōmi*/παράδιδωμι) to further idolatry and perversion. They were taken captive (*aichmalōtizō*/αἰχμαλωτίζω, 7:23), in bondage to sin (*douleuō*/δουλεύω, 6:13), and ruled by it (*basileuō*/βασιλεύω). The Wretched Man is enslaved by the “law of sin that dwells in my members” in 7:23, probably a subjective genitive with the sense of “the rules laid down by sin in my members.” For Christians, conversely, the Adamic bondage is broken (6:11) and the redeemed are able to choose righteousness over sin (6:12), even if they do so with difficulty.

We have no license to weaken the force of Paul’s language in 7:14. The Man is an unredeemed apostate, *de jure* an idolater and reprobate. He belongs in the camp of Ahab and the Hellenizing traitors. While 1st-century Jews might say that they were wrestling with the evil impulse, the promise was that sin could be foiled by a love for the Torah. But the Man personifies the tension that the apostle found in Judaism earlier in Romans:

You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? (Rom 2:22b-23)

They are in the bondage of 1:18-32 even if their sins take better form.

THE WRETCHED MAN LOVES THE TORAH (7:14, 16, 22, 25) - The obvious referent of *nomos*/νόμος in these verses (but not in 7:21, 23) is the Torah (most commentators; *contra* Dodd 100), its meaning in Rom 6:14-15, 7:1, 2?, 3?, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, the law which Israel still serves. The verb for “delight in the law” in 22 (*sunēdomai*/συνήδομαι) is not found in the LXX in this sort of statement, but is similar enough to other verbs (*melataō*/μελατάω or *thelō*/θέλω and their cognates) found in Psalm 118 LXX to describe a desire to obey the Torah.

That a respect for God’s law is inadequate without obedience was a truism among Jews and Christians. Of obvious import, despite its post-Pauline composition, is 4 Ezra 7:72:

For this reason, therefore, those who dwell on earth shall be tormented, because though they had understanding they committed iniquity, and though they received the commandments they did not keep them, and though they obtained the Law they dealt unfaithfully with what they received.

In this text, the nations of the world fail the Torah. But that doctrine, says Paul, is true also of those who “love the Torah” (Ps 118:97 LXX, using *agapaō*/ἀγαπάω, as in 118:113, 127, 159, 163, 165) but do not perform it.

But how, it is argued by defenders of the Regenerate Man view, could Paul affirm that “there is no one who seeks God” (3:11) and at the same time make an unregenerate “delight in the law of God in my inmost self” (7:22)? In fact, Paul affirmed precisely that in Romans 2 (esp. 2:17-18). He later restated that “I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened” (Rom 10:2).

THE WRETCHED MAN HOPES IN VAIN (7:15-20, cp. with 8:7-8) - Paul uses *thelō* /θέλω a full seven times in this passage to speak of an ineffectual desire to obey (contrast Ps 118:35 LXX, where it refers to an effectual desire). This is why Moffatt's translation and the NASB prefer "I wish." What a stark contrast to the assuring words of Judaism: "If you choose (or "wish"; *thelō*/θέλω), you can keep the commandments" (Sir 15:15, see above).

The Wretched Man experiences general moral failure, a fact that the proponents of the Regenerate viewpoint must minimize.¹¹ By his own admission he "cannot do it" (7:18). Paul goes beyond the prayers of the *Hôdăyôt*, which still assume the likelihood of forgiveness and victory over the dark side (see below). In Romans 7 sin is intractable, defeat is the constant. Yet Paul will later maintain that the redeemed are able to fulfill the law, if they keep the love commandment (Rom 13:8-10).

It is time to make clear that the Wretched Man's experience is quite different from Martin Luther's dismay as a monk, popularly thought to parallel Romans 7. The Wretched Man is in despair because he cannot perform the works of the Torah, no matter how he sets his mind to it. Luther, by contrast, testified that "however irreproachable my life as a monk, I felt myself, in the presence of God, to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience." (cited in Moo 450 n. 22) Luther was no moral failure! His torment grew alongside the realization that God's holiness far transcended any performance. The Wretched Man never reached even that level of religious success.

THE WRETCHED MAN IS FLESHLY (*sarkinos*/σαρκινός, 7:14) - Luther found this an apt description of the Christian, *simul justus et peccator*. But "of the flesh" is synonymous with "living in the flesh" in 7:5 and with life "according to the flesh" in 8:5-8, terms that Paul uses to describe life apart from Christ and the Spirit. Paul differed from the Qumran literature at this point. In Qumran literature "flesh" denotes humanity which deliberately defies the law.¹² For Paul, "flesh" is associated with a futile attempt to obey the Torah, and the human bondage to sin. On some level of significance, the Wretched Man is a *peccator in totum*, a complete sinner. In his life, something approximating the evil *yēšer* always has the last word, and the good *yēšer* as such is a cruel fiction.

One objection to our viewpoint is that it does not account for the possible parallel in Gal 5:17:

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

The two passages sound alike, but the contrasts are even more telling. In Romans 7, the tension is between impotent longings and sinful actions. In Galatians 5, there is a battle between the powerful Holy Spirit and a human weakness for sin, a battle that the Christian may win: "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal 5:16). Unlike the fiasco in Romans 7, the battle in Galatians 5 is real, with an undecided outcome.

THE WRETCHED MAN IS IN DESPAIR (7:24) - He cries out, “Wretched (*talaipōros*/ταλαίπωρος) man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” This body (*sōma*/σῶμα) is the recipient of the penalty of apostasy (5:12), a fate that is only highlighted by the Torah (7:10).

The comparative form *talaipōros*/ταλαίπωρος was common in contemporary literature to refer to the mentally or emotionally tormented. There was often a note of inner conflict, which according to Aeschylus occurred within the tortured Prometheus (*Prometheus Bound* 317) and according to Epictetus can arise from unrequited love. In Romans 7 it accompanies the fatal inability to obey God’s law.

Did Paul himself ever face inner wretchedness? One of the insights of the “New Perspective” is the unlikelihood that Paul lived as a frustrated Jew, leaving himself open to messianism. Phil 3:7-11 is the clearest picture we have of his pre-Christian psychology and speaks of spiritual success. So:

Only through justification has he achieved the correct insight into the actual tragic condition of his pre-Christian existence as Jew [*sic*]. One can estimate sin in all its negative dimensions only after having been set free from its domination...Paul composed Romans 7 with a Christian view of this pre-Christian existence.¹³

Martin Luther’s want of righteousness grew in proportion to his consciousness of sin. For Paul, the crippling nature of sin was uncovered only in hindsight.

IV. Paul and the *Yēser* Tradition

The struggle of the impulses “obviously was a favourite theme of discussion in the age of Paul.”¹⁴ Is not the Wretched Man vignette informed by that tradition?

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good [good impulse?], evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law [evil impulse?] at war with the law of my mind (Rom 7:21-23a).

W. D. Davies believes that, indeed, “we are justified in tracing a direct connection with the doctrine of the Two Impulses.” Paul in his turn was “contesting the Rabbinic view that the law gives deliverance from the tyranny of the evil impulse.”¹⁵ In Davies’ view, then, Paul and the rabbis agreed that the problem lies in the competing inner drives; they parted company in the matter of its resolution.

Recently, Douglas Moo (458 n. 49) has sided with Davies:

Paul’s idea of “indwelling sin” and the flesh in this passage (cf. vv. 18, 25) is

borrowed from the rabbinic concept of the “evil desire” (*yēšer hâraʿ*) - that tendency toward the evil which the rabbis taught exists in every person. In contrast to the rabbis, Paul claims that deliverance from the domination of this “evil desire” comes not through the law or through the power of the “good desire” (*yēšer hattôb*), but through God’s grace in Christ.

Peter Stuhlmacher agrees (110) that Paul has rejected

the early Jewish hope, which he also once shared, that conversion and earnest striving for the good demanded from the Torah could indeed free a person from the power of sin.¹⁶

Their finding is that Paul accepted the synagogue’s language and its anthropological assumptions but not its soteriology.¹⁷ They have turned up a useful point, but one that needs modifying: Paul did not see Christ as the solution to the evil impulse as envisioned in the Jewish model. There is evidence that Paul is reaching further back, reworking the question of human need itself:

- First, his Wretched Man is a study in pessimism. In any known Jewish viewpoint, he could not be so hopeless.
- Second, the Man’s will is useless in moving him to obey God in the Torah. Judaism would thoroughly disagree, no matter what weight each sect gave to divine election.
- Third, in Paul’s model the Torah does not strengthen some good impulse. What corresponds to that inclination is mere “wishing.” This goes directly contrary to the socio-theological role of the synagogue.

Before his conversion Paul, too, might have found the Wretched Man anthropology impossibly grim. He has drifted far from his days as a young rabbi, when he might have portrayed the battle in these terms:

Evil lies within me, but I know that something good dwells within me, too. But it is I who must decide. If I want to do the good, I can do it; if I wish to lust after evil, I can do that as well, and be cut off from the covenant. Blessed man that I am! through the Torah, God instructs me how I might escape from death to life!

Some scholars have noted that disparity and suggested that Paul, while rejecting mainstream Judaism, was influenced by other traditions. H. Braun concludes that while Paul’s doctrine clashes with the optimism of *Ps. Sol.* 9:4 (see above), he agrees with Qumran theology in its extremely negative view of human sin.¹⁸ They differ in that Qumran provides salvation to obey the law while Paul preaches salvation from the law. P. Stuhlmacher and H. J. Schoeps likewise attempt to ease the tension between Paul and Judaism by focusing on some uncharacteristic Jewish statements (notably from *4 Ezra* and the *Hôdāyôt* of Qumran), Stuhlmacher concluding that “such meditations come very near to Pauline ideas.”¹⁹

This does not resolve the theological tension. The DSS never minimized the power of the good impulse, which in the eschatological community is given and energized by God himself. To be sure, the Qumran communitarians confessed their participation in sinful humanity. They would sing the hymn, “can man born of man have understanding? And can flesh born of the gui[lty] inclination be glorious..?” (1QH IX:15-16). But the *Hôdăyôt* must be approached as an integrated whole, not just for the gloomy statements in the opening stanzas. Thus the communicant can later tell God that, “Thou has cleansed the perverse spirit from great sin that he might watch with the army of Saints...” (1QH III:21-22) and “I knew there was hope for them that are converted from rebellion and that abandon sin by [...] and by walking in the way of Thy heart without any perversion.” (1 QH VI:6-7) They attributed their current success to God’s mercy and election and the gift of the spirit of righteousness: “Thou hast poured forth [Thy] holy Spirit upon Thy servant [and hast clea]nsed my heart [from all the rebellions of] my [sin]s!” (1QH XVII:26) Their Teacher of Righteousness could speak of the Torah “which Thou hast graven in my heart” (1 QH IV:10). They have deep joy at God’s favor (esp. 1QH XI:3-7). Again, in the *Manual of Discipline* the communitarian identified with sinful humanity: “As for me, I belong to wicked humanity, to the assembly of perverse flesh” (1QS XI:9). But there was no bogging down in defeat for long. Shortly after this line comes a change of behavior by God’s mercy: “from His hand comes perfection of way” (1QS XI:10-11), and God will “establish my steps in the way” (1QS XI:13).

The differences with Pauline thought are decisive. At Qumran, human sinfulness is still predicated on the expression of two warring impulses and still delivered by obedience to the Torah.

It was the power of the Christ event that allowed Paul the luxury of despair over unredeemed humanity. The Two Impulse formula is built on assumptions that Paul repudiated with his Adam-Christ doctrine in Romans 5. He turned the man of free and effectual will into the Wretched Man who cries for salvation from outside himself.

V. Romans 7:14-25 within its Literary and Rhetorical Context

The exegetical problems in our passage are complicated by the empathy that Christians feel for the Wretched Man. They too wonder how they can conceivably be righteous on demand, and this feeling sends many to the Regenerate Man interpretation. But even the Unregenerate Man proponents debate what is Paul’s exact point here. It is best to assume that he had more than one aim. Negatively, he proved that he was not an infidel. No, those who wished to obey the Torah but did not were the real apostates. Positively, he illustrated the universal need for the gospel. The Roman church might not have been counted on to underwrite a gospel mission to Spain (Rom 15:23-24) unless it was convinced of the gospel’s consequence for all nations. By discrediting the tradition of a good impulse, Paul allowed the gospel to stand alone as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom

1:16).

Scattered throughout the first half of Romans are arguments that would have been used in the first instance within the synagogue, but which are now adapted to a (mainly Gentile) Christian audience (cf. Rom 3:1-31 - esp. 3:19-20! - and 4:1-25). Paul employed the device known as “diatribe” in 2:17 (“You call yourself a Jew”). He could carry on an imagined argument with a rhetorical audience (the synagogue) in front of his actual literary audience. He set that stratagem in motion early on, in Rom 1:18-32. This paragraph would have established common ground by condemning Gentile wickedness.

In the meantime his imagined Jewish interlocutors might be thought to respond: Yes, it is true for the Gentile that sin invariably leads to death, but for Israel the law is a joy, the bridge from death to life. After all, “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD” (Lev 18:5, with which Paul deals in Rom 10:5 and Gal 3:12). And so Romans 2 sees a gradual movement to the failure of people who are blessed with the law. Paul’s rhetorical audience in 2:2-3 is the synagogue:

You say, “We know that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.” Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God?

He lays the foundation for his Christian anthropology in Romans 5, and then in Romans 6 demonstrates how Christians are able - and obligated - to live righteously. He mentions in 6:14-15 that Christians are “not under law.” He will put that issue to one side until he can establish the meaning of union with Christ by grace alone (Dunn, *Romans 1-8* 367). Paul’s goal now is to reinforce 6:14-15 while defending himself against a possible charge that he is equating the Torah with sin (7:7) or death (7:13). That sort of accusation led to Stephen’s martyrdom, according to Acts 6:11-14, and later the Mishnah would damn anyone who denied that the Torah came from heaven (*m. Sanh.* 10.1). Paul affirmed with the synagogue the divine origin of the Torah, while still pivoting the discussion to his point, that the Torah was not effective in changing an evil heart.

Throughout Romans 7 he is speaking rhetorically “to those who know the law” (7:1). It’s worth exploring whether Paul may even be using his opponents’ language. In 7:14, for example, “we know that the law is spiritual.” It is generally conceded (Stuhlmacher 111) that it would be uncharacteristic of the synagogue to call the Torah “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*/πνευματικός). The typical Jewish paradigm was that the prophetic Spirit of God inspired those who wrote the Scriptures (4 *Ezra* 14:21). Later rabbis would speak of the law coming “from heaven” or “from the Spirit,” which is similar to Paul’s thought here (Ziesler 195; *TDNT* 6.437). But that observation doesn’t answer every question. Judaizing Christians might have used that language as well as the language of 7:10, that the Torah is “holy, righteous, good, unto life.” At any rate it matters little, since Paul will now press the issues in own terms. He confesses (7:16) “I agree [*sumfēmi*/σύμφημι, but “agree with” whom? the synagogue? Judaizers?] that the law is good.”

But it matters not in terms of my behavior. The corporate “we” (7:14) switches to the singular verbs and pronouns that appear in every verse to the end of the chapter. Paul demonstrates that in the end the struggle is fought in every person, and is not helped by the knowledge shared with a sociological group.

Paul is deliberately being ironic, rejecting and recasting some established terminology and assumptions. What Davies and Moo have detected in Rom 7:14-25 is not the doctrine of the Two Impulses, but its parody. In a moment of panicked awareness the Man exclaims, “I am...sold into slavery under sin. I’m an apostate in God’s eyes and the accepted path of deliverance only underscores my bondage!” The Wretched Man is a *reductio ad absurdum* of any system that hinges on a good impulse as a way of escape.

Kümmel and others cite some classical parallels to this moral struggle; Ovid and Epictetus are the most commonly adduced.¹⁵ We may also pinpoint some instances in which a 1st-century satirist used the first-person singular in that same fashion. It was a favored device of Juvenal and Persius when they want to describe ironic or baffling moral situations (e.g., Juvenal, *Satires* 3.21-322; Persius, *Satires* 3 and 4). In one example, Juvenal began his address to a known adulterer with “I should like to know, Naevolus, why you so often look gloomy when I meet you, knitting your brow like a vanquished Marsyas” (*Satires* 9.1-4). In him “one can detect in a sickly body the secret torments of the soul” (9.18-19). Then Juvenal switches (9.27-89) to an exaggerated and contrived monologue of lament and self-justification that he places on Naevolus’ lips. Among its sentiments:

Many men have found profit in my mode of life; but I have made nothing substantial out of my labours...What greater monster is there in the world than a miserly debauchee?...I am less accounted of than the poor hind who ploughs his master’s field...

Isaiah too provides a biblical precedent with his parody of idolatry in Isa 44:9-20, especially 19:

No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted the meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?”

The caricature of the Wretched Man gave Paul a dramatic structure through which he could portray both the impolitic truth about Judaism and the universality of the gospel.

ENDNOTES

¹Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV; DSS from Dupont-Sommer; pseudepigraphal from Charlesworth; Psalms midrash from Braude; Josephus from Whiston; Philo and classical texts from Loeb. LXX translations are the author's own rendering of the Rahlfs text. We will preserve the traditional masculine gender of the "Wretched Man."

²Those who take the Unregenerate Man view include: Origen, most of the Greek Fathers, the early Augustine; commentators J. A. Bengel, Frederic Godet, Sanday and Headlam, C. H. Dodd, Franz Leenhardt, Ernst Käsemann, Paul Achtemeier, J. T. Ziesler, Douglas Moo, Peter Stuhlmacher, J. A. Fitzmyer. Also Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: an outline of his theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 126-30; Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 179-265; Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 109-13; Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms*, AGJU: 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 146; J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 216-7; Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984) 76-7; Jan Lambrecht, *The Wretched "I" and its Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 90. Bultmann gives an existentialist reading of that viewpoint in "Romans 7 and the Anthropology of Paul (1932)," in *Existence and Faith* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960) 173-85.

Those who prefer the Regenerate Man view include: most of the Latin Fathers, including the later Augustine (see *Retract.* 1.22.1); Aquinas, the Reformers, the Westminster Confession 16.6; commentators Charles Hodge, R. C. H. Lenski, Karl Barth, Anders Nygren, Ulrich Wilckens, F. F. Bruce, William Hendriksen, John Murray, C. E. B. Cranfield, J. D. G. Dunn, Leon Morris. Also Louis Berkhof, Herman Bavinck, G. C. Berkhouwer; Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert* (New Haven: Yale, 1990); D. B. Garlington, "Romans 7:14-25 and the Creation Theology of Paul," *TrinJ* 11/NS (1990) 197-235. For a review of 16th century interpretation see David C. Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Divided Self of Romans 7," in *Augustine, the Harvest, and Theology (1300-1650)*, ed K. Hagen (Leiden: Brill, 1990) 300-13.

The interpretation that the Wretched Man could be either regenerate or unregenerate: C. L. Mitton, "Romans vii Reconsidered," *ExpT* 65 (1953-54) 78-81, 99-103, 132-5; R. N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964) 114-6; John M. Espy, "Paul's 'Robust Conscience' Re-examined," *NTS* 31 (1985) 161-88.

³Kümmel's viewpoint is ably represented by Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). For detailed criticism of Kümmel see J. D. G. Dunn, "Romans 7:14-25 in the Theology of Paul," in *Essays on Apostolic Themes*, ed P. Ebert (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1985) 49-70.

⁴*Paul and Palestinian Judaism: a comparison of patterns of religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 115.

⁵David S. Shapiro (113-114), “The Ideological Foundations of the *Halakhah* [1967],” in *Understanding Jewish Theology: Classical Issues and Modern Perspectives*, ed J. Neusner (New York: Ktav, 1973). Several studies compare Jewish and Christian anthropology on this point, for example *The Human Condition in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed F. E. Greenspahn (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1986); Joel Marcus, “The Evil Inclination in the Epistle of James,” *CBQ* 44 (1982) 606-21; Stanley E. Porter, “The Pauline Concept of Original Sin, in Light of Rabbinic Background,” *TynBul* 41/1 (1990) 3-30. Robert Gordis (“The Nature of Man in the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Judaism* 2 [1953] 101-9) defends the Two Impulses as the biblical viewpoint and states that “...it must be emphasized that normative Judaism never maintained the view that man’s nature is innately evil.” Samuel S. Cohen (“Original Sin [1948],” in *Essays in Jewish Theology* [Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1987] 219-72) concludes that Rom 7:7-10 is derived from the mystery religions, not from Judaism.

⁶PHEME PERKINS, “Pauline Anthropology in Light of Nag Hammadi,” *CBQ* 48 (1986) 512-22.

⁷See the extensive data in Frank C. Porter, “The *Yeṣer Hâra*: a study in the Jewish doctrine of sin,” in *Biblical and Semitic Studies* (New York: Scribners, 1901) 91-156.

⁸Reuven P. Bulka, “To Be Good or Evil: Which is More Natural?” *Journal of Psychology and Judaism* 14/2 (Summer, 1990) 53-71.

⁹See Roland E. Murphy, “*Yēṣer* in the Qumran Literature,” *Bib* 39 (1958) 334-44; also Hermann Lichtenberger, *Studien zum Menschenbild in Texten der Qumrangemeinde*, SUNT: 15 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980) 77-87.

¹⁰Philo: “So then in this way He puts before us both truths; first that men have been made with a knowledge both of good and evil, its opposite; secondly, that it is their duty to choose the better rather than the worse, because they have, as it were, within them an incorruptible judge in the reasoning faculty, which will accept all that right reason [*logismos*/λογισμός] suggests and reject the promptings of its opposite” (Philo, *Deus Imm.* 10.50). See comments by Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo* (2 vols; Cambridge: Harvard, 1968) 1.438.

¹¹They have to take it as improbably hyperbolic: e. g., Martin Luther (*Lectures on Romans*, Vol 25 of *Luther’s Works* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1972] 330): Paul is “trying to say that he does not do the good as often and as much and with as much ease as he would like.” Calvin (*Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948] 274): “the faithful never reach the goal of righteousness as long as they dwell in the flesh.” Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988] 287-88, 293): “For surely this *is* the experience of the believer. No believer is completely sinless...what he does is never completely what he wants to do.” William Hendriksen (*Romans 1-8* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980] 226): “The situation pictured in 7:14-25 is not all dark.”

¹²*Qumran und das neue Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1966) 2.176.

¹³Lambrecht 86; also Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 123-4; Moo 466.

¹⁴H. J. Schoeps, *Paul*, trans H. Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 184.

¹⁵*Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (4th ed; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 23-24.

¹⁶*Paul's Letter to the Romans*, trans S. J. Hafemann (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 110.

¹⁷That view is widely accepted by those who have read Romans 7 against a Jewish background. Cf. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* 391 and his supporter Garlington 219-21. G. F. Moore (*Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim* [2 vols; Cambridge: Harvard, 1927] 1.479-84) says (484) that "man's experience is of a contrariety of impulses, such as is described by R. Alexander and R. Tanhum in the prayers quoted elsewhere; or as Paul express it in Christianized Hellenistic form in the seventh chapter of Romans." H. Räisänen states (110): "This experiential wisdom is to some extent paralleled by the confessions of sin found at Qumran, and Rabbinic speculations about the power of the evil inclination over man come rather close to it, too." To the student of Rom 7:15, Strack and Billerbeck (3.239) give the advice: "Zum Kampf des guten u. bösen Triebes im Menschen s. den Exkurs: Der gute u. der böse Trieb..." [On the battle of the good and evil inclination in a man see the Excursus: The Good and the Evil Inclination].

¹⁸"Paulus wie Qumran lehren: Der Mensch ist extrem sündig" [Paul, as Qumran, teaches: Man is extremely sinful], H. Braun (15), "Römer 7, 7-25 und das Selbstverständnis des Qumran-Frommen," *ZThK* 56 (1959) 1-18. See also the notes in Braun's *Qumran 2, in loc.*, where he argues (174) that the inner struggle in Qumran literature does not correspond to Romans 7, but to Gal 5:17. Cf. also Roland Bergmeier, "Röm 7,7-25a (8,2): Der Mensch - das Gesetz - Gott - Paulus - die Exegese im Widerspruch?" *KD* 31 (Ap-Je 1985) 162-72; Lichtenberger 77-87. It is worth noting on the contrary position that W. D. Davies can argue ("Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Flesh and Spirit," in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed K. Stendahl [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958] 157-82) that Paul stands in complete accordance with rabbinic theology and is more distantly related to Qumran dualism.

¹⁹Stuhlmacher 109; also Schoeps 186; Joseph Bonsirven, *Palestinian Judaism in the Time of Jesus Christ*, trans W. Wolf (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 100-5; Mark A. Seifrid, "The Subject of Rom 7:14-25," *NovT* 34/4 (1992) 322-3.

¹⁵Cf. Ronald V. Huggins, "Alleged Classical Parallels to Paul's 'What I want I do not do, but what I hate, that I do,'" *WTJ* 54 (1992) 153-61.