

## INSIGHTS FROM POSTMODERNISM'S EMPHASIS ON INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 7

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In reaction to modernism's radical individualism and lack of emphasis on group identities, the recent rise of postmodernism has helped to regain an appreciation for both the corporate dimension of the self and the influence of one's group or interpretive community on the interpretive process.<sup>1</sup> This essay is an attempt to glean some of the positive benefits from this postmodern emphasis and to apply these insights to the interpretation of the notorious *crux interpretum*, Rom 7:7-25.

### I. THE CONCEPTION OF INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

Within the diverse and multidisciplinary reaction to modernism known as postmodernism there are various and sundry expressions of the concept of interpretive communities. Certainly two of the best known and most influential expressions are those set forth by Thomas S. Kuhn in the history of science and Stanley Fish in literary criticism.<sup>2</sup> While others have added their voices to this perspective, Kuhn's and Fish's have been the most formative.

Kuhn has helped us see the importance of the interpretive paradigm within which scientists work and carry out their scientific research. In other words, Kuhn has asserted that there is a sociology of knowledge that is a

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<sup>1</sup> The term "postmodernism" is notoriously difficult and slippery to define. The existence of numerous and conflicting definitions adds to this confusion. The definition that I will work with in this essay is from D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge/Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 44-45. Harvey notes that postmodernism is at root a metaphysical and epistemological skepticism. "To begin with, we find writers like Foucault and Lyotard explicitly attacking any notion that there might be a meta-language, meta-narrative, or meta-theory through which all things can be connected or represented. Universal and eternal truths, if they exist at all, cannot be specified. Condemning meta-narratives (broad interpretive schemas like those deployed by Marx or Freud) as 'totalizing,' they insist upon the plurality of 'power-discourse' formations (Foucault), or of 'language games' (Lyotard). Lyotard in fact defines the postmodern condition simply as 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'."

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed., University of Chicago, 1970), *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in a Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1980), *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

significant interpretive factor in the handling of the data of science. In this sense no data are raw, uninterpreted data. Rather, scientists interpret the data with some sense of a preunderstanding or paradigm that significantly affects their perceptions. This nuancing of the role of scientists regarding their network of relations corrects the mechanistic Enlightenment view of the totally objective scientist/interpreter. It also adds appropriate weight to the role of one's interpretive community in the scientific enterprise.

In a parallel manner, Fish has made the same point about the perceptions of the interpreters of texts. He thereby dislodges texts from the center of authority in favor of readers within their respective interpretive communities.

The notion of "interpretive communities," which had surfaced occasionally in my discourse before, now becomes central to it. Indeed, it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.<sup>3</sup>

While Kuhn and Fish have provoked significant discussion in their respective fields, in a very real sense they simply joined the ongoing dialogue among those working within the field of the sociology of knowledge. In particular, almost thirty years ago Berger and Luckmann made a definitive statement about the social dimension of the interpretive process.<sup>4</sup> This perspective has now been present within academia for over a generation (Kuhn's first edition was in 1962). But the full effects of these interpretive insights are only now being felt.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to critique the fundamental flaws of this emphasis on interpretive communities. Others have done that far more eloquently elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Therefore let me simply note the weaknesses of this perspective regarding its problematic philosophy of language, its inconsistent treatment of the conventional basis of words and meanings, and the enormous leap that is made from legitimate interpretive impediments to epistemological dogma about perception and reality. Such difficulties make unwise the wholesale adoption of the relativistic stance of Kuhn, Fish and others.<sup>6</sup>

In enumerating these criticisms of the perspective of interpretive communities, however, I would not want to say that significant insights into the

<sup>3</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text* 14.

<sup>4</sup> P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> In particular see J. F. Harris, *Against Relativism: A Philosophical Defense of Method* (La Salle: Open Court, 1992), esp. 73-94 on Kuhn and 95-122 on hermeneutics.

<sup>6</sup> For a devastating and insightful treatment of Fish's theories and those of other socio-pragmatic hermeneutical advocates see A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 535-550. Note also that Kuhn modified his earlier views in his later work, *Essential Tension*.

interpretive process are not to be gained from attending to this viewpoint. Since interpretation does involve a network of relations that encompasses interpreters and their communities, these must be addressed in the interpretive process. Additionally, since there is a corporate dimension to the self and no person interprets as a self in individualistic isolation, this adds a corporate dimension to meaning.<sup>7</sup> Also, it is beyond question that our individual perceptions are enormously influenced by our social settings. Therefore as I turn to the formation of the traditional interpretation of Romans 7 it is inevitable that I must address the formation of the interpretive community (or communities) that shaped and sustained this interpretation for well over a millennium.

## II THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION OF ROM 7:7-25

<sup>7</sup>What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law, for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet."<sup>8</sup> But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind, for apart from the Law sin is dead.<sup>9</sup> And I was once alive apart from the Law, but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died,<sup>10</sup> and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me,<sup>11</sup> for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.<sup>12</sup> So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

<sup>13</sup>Therefore, did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather, it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.<sup>14</sup> For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.<sup>15</sup> For that which I am doing, I do not understand, for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.<sup>16</sup> But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good.<sup>17</sup> So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me.<sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh, for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.<sup>19</sup> For the good that I wish, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.<sup>20</sup> But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer doing it, but sin which dwells in me.<sup>21</sup> I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good.<sup>22</sup> For I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man,<sup>23</sup> but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.<sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?<sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the Law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a defense of the corporate dimension of the self see *Selves, People, and Person: What Does It Mean to Be a Self?* (ed. L. S. Rouner, Notre Dame University of Notre Dame, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> This translation follows the NASB except for three exceptions. I follow the paragraph divisions of *UBSGNT*, I start a new paragraph at v. 13, and I capitalize the "L" in the "law" of God in vv. 22-25.

The issue that Paul addresses in Romans 7 is the Jewish issue of the authority of the Law (Torah) over a person now that the Messiah has come and died and been resurrected (e.g. 7:4–6). These kinds of Jewish issues and their relevance to Gentile believers in Christ were of great significance during the NT era and demanded the Church's intense attention from time to time (e.g. Matthew 5–7; Acts 15; Galatians). But after the two Jewish revolts in AD 66–74 and AD 135, very few Jewish people believed in Jesus as the Messiah for several hundred years. This is why writings like the *Dialogue with Trypho* by Justin Martyr (AD 110–165) are somewhat rare by the second century of the Church era.

The resulting shift among Christian interpreters was away from a perspective that was sensitive to Jewish-Gentile relations within the Church to a perspective that was essentially Gentile in its orientation. While it is perfectly normal that certain issues may become culturally irrelevant as time passes, it appears that much of the apostle Paul's concern about Jewish-Gentile relations quickly became archaic because of the essential disappearance of the Jewish part of the Church. Consequently issues involving Jewish-Gentile relationships became uninteresting and irrelevant. When this kind of cultural irrelevance sets in, it seems to demand a change in the perspective of the interpretive community if the ongoing relevance of the Word of God is to be maintained in various passages. This appears to be the case from early in the second century onward.

For example, it appears that in the second century the main interpretive question that was asked on Romans 7 was whether Paul was describing his experience as a non-Christian (i.e., in his Jewish, pre-converted state) or as a Christian. Obviously, such an interpretive question only gives two possible answers. Therefore it is understandable that the early Church was divided in its interpretation primarily between these two views.

The early Greek fathers generally followed the view that Paul's autobiographical language referred to his pre-converted, Jewish state. This interpretation has generally been championed by German interpreters in this century who have largely followed the lead of W. G. Kummel.<sup>9</sup>

The interpretation that the "I" of Romans 7 refers to Paul as a Christian was championed by the Greek father Methodius<sup>10</sup> and the Latin fathers Ambrose and Ambrosiaster.<sup>11</sup> But it was Augustine's later view that Paul was describing himself as a Christian (a clear retraction of his earlier view of Paul speaking in the name of unregenerate persons) that was so powerful in helping to form the broad-based medieval view.<sup>12</sup> This is the view that

<sup>9</sup> W. G. Kummel, *Romer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus* (UNT 17, Leipzig: J. D. Hinrichs, 1929). For a lengthy list of German interpreters see D. B. Garlington, "Romans 7:14–25 and the Creation Theology of Paul," *Trinity Journal* (1990) 198 n. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Methodius *Ex libro resurrectione* (PG 18 cols. 299 ff.).

<sup>11</sup> Ambrose *De Abraham* 2:6:27 (PL 14 col. 467), Ambrosiaster *Commentaria in XIII epistolas beati Pauli* (PL 17 col. 111–116).

<sup>12</sup> For Augustine's earlier, unregenerate view see PL 35 col. 2071, for his later, Christian view see PL 32 cols. 620 ff., 629 ff.

Thomas Aquinas championed.<sup>13</sup> It is also the view adopted by the majority of the sixteenth-century Reformers, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin.<sup>14</sup>

At present there are at least five major views of Rom 7:7–25 that have flowed out of the two ancient interpretations. While there is some disparity among these views, they nevertheless are products of the same ancient interpretive community that was formed during the second century. These views are in continuity with one another because of their relationship to the major interpretive question asked of Romans 7: “Is Paul describing his pre-Christian or Christian state?” (1) The “I” is Paul as a non-Christian viewed from his later Christian perspective.<sup>15</sup> (2) The “I” is the representative experience of all, Christian or non-Christian, who try to live under law (i.e. try to be righteous and holy by their own efforts).<sup>16</sup> (3) The “I” refers to Adam, or to humanity in Adam, with the Genesis 3 narrative being viewed as paradigmatic.<sup>17</sup> (4) The “I” refers to Paul in the years immediately following his conversion when he still tried to live under the Law before learning to live by the Spirit (this view is often called “the victorious Christian life” view).<sup>18</sup> (5) The “I” is representative of Paul and any normal Christian who is simultaneously justified, yet still a sinner and struggling with the normal tension between living in two ages at the same time.<sup>19</sup>

Central to the ancient paradigm or interpretive community of Paul’s theology in general (and Romans 7 in particular) is the understanding of Paul from the perspective of guilt and legalism. In other words Paul was viewed as a typical first-century Pharisee in that he struggled with a sense of guilt before God and sought to allay his guilt by doing the works of Torah in a legalistic manner. In particular the late-medieval and Reformation understanding developed this interpretive paradigm to its fullest form. Luther’s introductory comments in his 1535 lectures on Galatians vividly express this interpretive grid in his inimitable style:

But such is human weakness and misery that in the terrors of conscience and in the danger of death we look at nothing except our own works, our worthiness, and the Law. When the Law shows us our sin, our past life immediately comes to our mind. Then the sinner, in his great anguish of mind, groans and says to himself “Oh, how damnably I have lived! If only I could live longer! Then I would amend my life.” Thus human reason cannot refrain from looking at active

<sup>13</sup> T. Aquinas, *Super epistolas S. Pauli lectura* (8th ed., ed. R. Cai, Turin 1953) 1:101.

<sup>14</sup> M. Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (London 1961) 200 ff.; J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh 1961) 146 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g. H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 126–130.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. R. N. Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty* (New York: Harper, 1964) 88–95.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g. E. Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 192–197.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. e.g. W. D. Lawrence, “The Traitor in the Gates: The Christian’s Conflict with the Flesh,” *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost* (ed. S. D. Toussaint and C. H. Dyer, Chicago: Moody, 1986) 115–131.

<sup>19</sup> Many who hold this view understand Rom 7:7–13 as Paul’s description of himself in his pre-conversion Jewish state (aorist tense) and 7:14–25 as his description of himself in his present Christian condition (present tense).

righteousness, that is, its own righteousness; nor can it shift its gaze to passive, that is, Christian righteousness. So deeply is this evil rooted in us, and so completely have we acquired this unhappy habit! Taking advantage of the weakness of our nature, Satan increases and aggravates these thoughts in us<sup>20</sup>

The Reformers advanced the medieval paradigm by emphasizing the divine antidote to humanity's guilt problem: justification by faith, rather than justification by works. Of course Luther and others were powerfully impacted by Paul's emphasis on faith-righteousness versus works-righteousness. In fact those epistles that emphasized justification by faith (Galatians and Romans) became the lens through which the rest of Paul's epistles, the remainder of the NT, and even the whole Bible was viewed and interpreted. As many have noted, this perspective became Luther's "canon within the canon."

The vulnerability of paradigms, according to Kuhn, is that they can be overturned when they are no longer sufficient to deal with an overwhelming number of anomalies. We are presently witnessing the subverting of the traditional interpretive paradigm of Paul's theology and the attempt to replace it with a new perspective on the apostle. My goal is to demonstrate that the traditional interpretation of Rom 7:7–25 is one of the anomalies that supports this replacement.

### III. THE FORMATION OF THE NEW PAULINE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

If Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) is viewed as the informal yet primary shaper of the traditional interpretive community for Pauline theology,<sup>21</sup> then his formative work has certainly withstood the rigors of centuries of theologizing. The last twenty-five years, however, have brought profound changes in the very foundations of Pauline theology.

The primary change that has occurred in interpreting Pauline theology does not even directly deal with Paul but with first-century Judaism. Specifically, recent scholars have asserted that "Judaism of the first century was not a religion based on earning acceptance with God through the merit of righteousness based on the works of Law-obedience."<sup>22</sup> In other words the legalistic context in which Paul was supposed to have been immersed as a Pharisee is now being hotly contested. Interestingly enough, earlier scholars had made this point with great fervor.<sup>23</sup> But it was not until the recent

<sup>20</sup> *Luther's Works* (St Louis Concordia, 1963) 26 5

<sup>21</sup> This is K Stendahl's opinion in "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR* 56 (1963) 199–215, reprinted in Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1976) 78–96

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to D A Hagner for his insights into the new perspective on Paul in "Paul and Judaism—The Jewish Matrix of Early Christianity Issues in the Current Debate," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993) 111–130

<sup>23</sup> Cf e.g. G F Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge Harvard University, 1927–30) esp 1 110–121, 520–545, R T Herford, *Judaism in the New Testament Period* (London Lindsey, 1928), C G Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teaching* (1930, reprinted, New York Ktav, 1970)

works by E. P. Sanders appeared that the so-called Copernican revolution in Pauline studies began.<sup>24</sup>

Those who are reshaping our understanding of Paul's theology assert not only that first-century Judaism was not the legalistic religion that Christians for centuries have believed it was but that justification by faith is not the center of Paul's theology (nor the center of the NT nor of the whole Bible). Rather, they follow the earlier conclusion of Albert Schweitzer: "The doctrine of righteousness by faith is therefore a subsidiary crater, which has formed within the rim of the main crater—the mystical doctrine of redemption through being-in-Christ."<sup>25</sup>

The answer to the question "How could the Church so fundamentally have misunderstood and misinterpreted Paul's theology and first-century Judaism for over a millennium and a half?" brings us back to the issue of interpretive communities. The beginning of this misunderstanding of Paul and first-century Judaism is rooted in the disappearance of Jewish believers from the Church and the redefining of Paul's concerns in largely Gentile categories. In other words the early Church formed a distorted interpretive community regarding these issues because of the seeming irrelevance of Paul's original categories. In the words of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., they formed a generic conception of the whole of Paul's theology and of the matrix of first-century Judaism, which then entrapped them in a hermeneutical circle:

Thus, the distressing unwillingness of many interpreters to relinquish their sense of certainty is the result not of native close-mindedness but of imprisonment in a hermeneutic circle. Literary and biblical interpreters are not by nature more willful and un-self-critical than other men. On the contrary, they very often listen patiently to contrary opinions, and after careful consideration, they often decide that the contrary hypotheses "do not correspond to the text." And of course they are right. The meanings they reject could not possibly arise except on the basis of a quite alien conception of the text. It is very difficult to dislodge or relinquish one's own genre idea, since that idea seems so totally adequate to the text. After all, since the text is largely constituted by the hypothesis, how could the hypothesis fail to seem inevitable and certain?<sup>26</sup>

Given the early Church's comfort with its Gentile conception of Paul's theology, it is not difficult to imagine how Luther could build on this interpretive foundation and found his theology upon the long-standing view of Paul and the Judaism that spawned him. In fact this is now one of the primary critiques of the traditional interpretive community of Pauline theology. Specifically the criticism is that Paul's theology has been misunderstood in recent centuries because it has been read through the lens of Luther and the Reformation. In this context the term "the Lutheran view of Paul" has a pejorative ring to it. As Krister Stendahl and others have noted, Luther's view of Paul as a person struggling with agonizing personal guilt and the burden

<sup>24</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Seabury, 1931) 225.

<sup>26</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967) 166.

of self-justification probably tells us more about late medieval piety than it does about the apostle.<sup>27</sup>

While there are several major corollaries that flow out of this revised view of Paul and first-century Judaism, one is particularly important for our purposes. This has to do with Paul's main concern. Rather than being focused on the universal human problem with guilt (as understood by Augustine and Luther), it appears that Paul's main concern was the terms of conversion for the Gentiles and how they would relate to Jews within the body of Christ. Again, given the disappearance of Jewish believers in Christ after the two Jewish revolts in AD 66–74 and 135, this central concern of Paul soon became a nonissue in the ancient Church. Therefore the very core of Pauline theology was reshaped according to more culturally relevant concerns. The Jewish Christian missionary Paul was reshaped in the image of the Gentile Christian interpretive community. It is this ancient distortion that Luther and the other Reformers simply enhanced and extended.

When applied to the interpretation of Romans 7, the traditional paradigm assumed that Paul's main categories were that of "Christian" and "non-Christian," and the major interpretations have fallen on one side or the other of this divide. Additionally the focus has tended to center on the guilt that Paul expresses in the passage, not just regarding the Mosaic Law but now in relation to God's demands in general. In other words the passage's very specific concern with obedience to the Mosaic Law is generally broadened to any kind of legalistic efforts on the part of religious persons to justify themselves before God. The centrality of the works-righteousness/justification-by-faith lens is readily observable in this interpretation. For those who interpret Paul's remarks in Romans 7 as representative of a Christian, "the Law" is also assumed to be something more generic than the Mosaic Law. It is usually understood as God's more general demands and the Christian's agonizing struggle to satisfy divine expectations. Since Augustine's time the focus is generally on the inner turmoil that this struggle engenders.

#### IV. ROMANS 7:7–25 AND THE NEW PAULINE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

While I would not go so far as many in the newly-emerging Pauline interpretive community who cast out any concern by Paul about Jewish legalism,<sup>28</sup> I would agree with the new paradigm that this is not Paul's primary focus in Romans 7. Rather, Paul's concern in this passage more closely aligns with those one would expect from a Jewish Christian missionary and pioneer church planter among the Gentiles.<sup>29</sup> This is why Paul's bifurcation of humanity in this epistle is not into Christians and

<sup>27</sup> Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews* 85–86

<sup>28</sup> Cf e.g. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* 543–556

<sup>29</sup> For a development of this perspective within the whole epistle to the Romans see P S Minear, *The Obedience of Faith: The Purposes of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans* (SBT 18, Naperville Allenson, 1971)



non-Christians but into Jews and Gentiles. In fact this latter set of terms occurs more in Romans than in all the rest of Paul's epistles combined. Central to Paul's understanding of "the gospel"—the main theme of Romans—is how this good news distinctly intersects Jewish and Gentile cultures and yet unites these diverse racial and cultural entities into the one people of God.

This uniting of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ was of immediate interest to the Christians in Rome when Paul wrote his epistle. Most agree that Paul is writing from Greece (probably Corinth) as Acts 20:1–3 records. The three months Paul spent there were during the winter of AD 56–57. This date is significant because it was only two years after the Jews (including Jewish Christians) had been allowed to assemble again within the confines of Rome. Claudius Caesar had issued an edict in 49 that essentially expelled all Jews from Rome (e.g. Acts 18:1–2).<sup>30</sup> It was not until Nero became Caesar that this edict was lifted in 54. These events were immensely significant to the church in Rome because it had apparently been started by Roman Jews who may have been converted at Pentecost (Acts 2:10). This means that the Jewish Christians in Rome were probably the senior members of the church, and it probably reflected a large amount of Jewish culture. In fact the church in Rome may still have been meeting in a number of the Roman synagogues on the first day of the week until the Jews were expelled.

During the five years of Jewish absence (AD 49–54) the Roman church was apparently "gentilized," perhaps even dispersing into the homes of some of the wealthier Gentile members (e.g. Rom 16:3–16).<sup>31</sup> When some of the Jewish Christians returned, one can imagine their horror at how the church had been changed or, from their perspective, ruined. Additionally, many of the more culturally conservative Jewish Christians may never have set foot in a Gentile home. Therefore they were doubly horrified at the new setting of the assembly. By the time Paul wrote his epistle the Roman Christians have had two years of racial and cultural tension. Therefore a significant part of Paul's intention in this letter is to address this internal tension and defuse the Jew/Gentile polarization.<sup>32</sup> Some even see this as the main purpose of the epistle.<sup>33</sup> This helps explain why Paul's bifurcation of humanity in Romans is one of Jews and Gentiles, not Christians and non-Christians.

Within the struggle between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, the Jewish Christians may have believed that they had the ultimate equalizer

<sup>30</sup> According to the Roman historian Suetonius, Claudius did this because of "Jews who persisted in rioting at the instigation of Chrestus" (*Life of Claudius* 25.2)

<sup>31</sup> See W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to Its Problems* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968) 95–104

<sup>32</sup> The Gentile Christians in Rome also had to contend with a particularly rabid anti-Semitism that was erupting in the Roman empire at this time. See W. Wiefel, "The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity," *The Romans Debate* (rev. ed., ed. K. P. Donfried, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 85–101

<sup>33</sup> Cf. e.g. Minear, *Obedience*

because they were the ones who knew the Law and would therefore always be needed to teach Torah to the Gentile Christians. In the first six chapters of Romans, Paul addressed this issue only obliquely. But he made some statements that must have raised concern among his fellow Jewish Christians. In particular he asserted that the gospel (not Torah) is both the power of God and the righteousness of God that is presently being revealed (1:16–17; 3:21–23). He leveled the ground under both Jewish and Gentile peoples in 2:11–16 by emphasizing doing the Law, not just possessing it. He also asserted that by works of the Law would no flesh be justified (3:19–20). Paul also spoke of the Law bringing wrath (4:13–16) and being introduced so that transgression might increase (5:20). The most disturbing thing that Paul may have said, however, was that sin was master over his readers when they were under Torah, but that mastery had now been broken because they are now under grace, not Torah (6:14). The time had now arrived for Paul to address this issue of the present role of the Mosaic Law in the life of God's people in a straightforward and systematic manner.

Romans 7 is, in fact, Paul's clarification to the Jewish Christians in Rome about what role Torah is to play in the restraining of God's people from sinning. This topic had been rhetorically introduced in Rom 6:1. The issue is "What restrains God's people from sinning willfully?" The Jewish Christians had a ready answer: Torah. Paul turns to them in 7:1 and forthrightly addresses this issue.

We know that Paul is addressing the Jewish Christians on this issue because of three factors. (1) The vocative address of 7:1 is to the "brethren," whom Paul then specifies in a partitive manner: "For I am speaking to those who know the Law." (2) This law must be Torah, not Roman law or law in general, because the specific example in 7:2–3 was a debated point of Torah. Additionally, Paul's use of the Torah to make the point that death immediately severs the marriage bond was not true under Roman law. Widows were required by Roman law to mourn and remain unmarried for one year after their husband's death, lest they lose all that was to come to them from their husband's estate.<sup>34</sup> Also, Paul's previous forty uses of the term "law" all directly refer to the Mosaic Law or play off of that obvious identity that had already been established within the context (e.g. 2:12–15). (3) Paul's application about the Law in 7:4–6 clearly points to the Mosaic covenant because this is Paul's typical old-covenant/new-covenant contrast (cf. 2 Cor 3:1–11). In other words the marriage illustration is underscoring that God's people have moved from one covenant relationship (the Mosaic covenant) to another under Christ (the new covenant) by dying to the first. The first relationship bore fruit to death (7:5), and now the second offers the hope of bearing fruit for God (7:4). But this will only happen when they serve in newness of the Spirit, not in oldness of the letter of the Law (7:6).

What is the specific point that Paul makes with his Jewish Christian recipients in Rom 7:1–6? It is that to advocate the use of the Mosaic Law as

<sup>34</sup> See P E Corbett, *The Roman Law of Marriage* (Oxford Clarendon, 1930, reprinted 1969) 249

a restraint or guide in the Christian life is inappropriate. It is as inappropriate as continuing to live under a previous mate's authority after he is dead and the covenantal relationship has been dissolved. Hence for them to advocate that they and the Gentile Christians must live under the authority of the Mosaic Torah is totally inappropriate. In fact, why would they want to continue to live under the authority of Torah, given the inadequacy of Torah's restraining abilities when they were in the flesh? "For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit to death" (Rom 7:5 NASB). Life under the new covenant, however, stands in vivid contrast to life under the old: "*But now* we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter" (7:6 NASB; italics mine).

Paul now turns to successive development of these brief capsulizations of life under the old and new covenants. The old covenant lifestyle is described in Rom 7:7–25, and the new covenant way of life is expanded upon in 8:1–7. It is to his revealing depiction of the Mosaic Law's inadequacy to control the flesh in 7:7–25 that we now turn.

#### V. ROMANS 7:7–25: A DIFFERENT INTERPRETATION

Paul's basic point about life under the oldness of the Mosaic Law in Rom 7:7–25 is not that Torah is sinful (for it is holy and spiritual) but that the Law is nevertheless an inadequate means for bodily restraint because of its designed purpose and its powerlessness over the flesh. In 7:7–13 Paul reminds his recipients that the Mosaic law's designed purpose was to show how utterly sinful sin was through Torah's holy standard and to make the Israelites constantly aware that indwelling sin brought death. In 7:14–25 Paul vividly portrays how the Law's powerlessness over flesh was obvious to pious Israelites during the era of the Mosaic Law because of the wretched dividedness they experienced between their inner persons and their bodies, due to the latter being under indwelling sin's mastery.

These two subdivisions of Rom 7:7–25 are marked off by a shift from the undefined Greek aorist tense in 7:7–13 (these events are simply noted as having happened) to the Greek present tense in 7:14–25 (giving these struggles a certain timelessness). This shift also creates a certain backgrounding and foregrounding sense. Specifically the coming of the Mosaic Law in 7:7–13 is established as the background with the use of the unspecified aorist tense.<sup>35</sup> This sets the stage for the more vivid present tense in 7:14–25, which places in the foreground the consistent struggle that occurred among pious Israelites throughout Israel's post-Sinai history.

Additionally, the entire section of 7:7–25 is characterized by a rather rare use of the first-person-singular voice. But it is interesting to note that

<sup>35</sup> Among those who interpret "when the commandment came" in Rom 7:9 as the coming of the Mosaic Law to Israel at Mount Sinai is D. J. Moo, "Israel and Paul in Romans 7:7–12," *NTS* 32 (1986) 122–135.

the two paragraphs within this "I" section are each begun with a first-person plural ("we" in 7:7, 14). Such a shifting between the first-person singular and plural also exists in Gal 2:14–22, where Paul begins in the plural (2:14–17) and adroitly shifts to the singular (2:18–22). It is no coincidence that both of these passages are dealing with Jewish Christians' use of the Mosaic Law. This then raises the issue of the meaning of Paul's use of "I" in Romans 7.

Since the monograph on Romans 7 by Kummel in 1929,<sup>36</sup> most interpreters have understood Paul's use of "I" as representational language. In other words he is not just describing his own experience under the Mosaic Law but is speaking as a representative of a larger group of people. Of course the debate centers around what group of people Paul is representing. There have been two main identifications that have come out of the traditional interpretive community. The first is that Paul is representing "non-Christians": either all humans who try to live under law/legalism, or all Jews seeking to justify themselves by works of the Law. The second identification is that Paul is representing "Christians": either those who are abnormally failing in living the Christian life because of relying upon the law, or those who are experiencing the normal struggles of the "two-age tension" of the Christian life. This latter view is the predominant one and can be traced back to Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin among its main adherents.

Three points are worth noting in response to the reasoning of the traditional interpretive community. (1) The representational language is an accurate understanding according to first-century standards. First-century Mediterranean cultures were not individualistic in their orientation, as western cultures have increasingly become in recent generations. Rather, they derived their identity from the group in which they were embedded:

To such a social pattern, a concept of selfhood which marks public identity contextually and relativistically, but yet does so in terms—tribal, territorial, linguistic, religious, familial—which grow out of the more private and settled arenas of life and have a deep and permanent resonance there, would seem particularly appropriate. Indeed the social pattern would seem virtually to create this concept of selfhood.<sup>37</sup>

(2) In such a culture, individual experience that is unique is uninteresting and irrelevant since both identity and appropriate standards of behavior are derived from group, not individual, norms. While this does not eliminate the possibility that Paul was describing his individual experience, it does demand that his experience be representative of his group identity if it is to be meaningful to his recipients. Therefore the most likely group identification that Paul would have in light of those he is addressing in Romans 7 ("those who know the Law" in 7:1) is that of an Israelite who

<sup>36</sup> Kummel, *Romer 7*

<sup>37</sup> C. Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View' On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," *Meaning in Anthropology* (ed. K. H. Basso and H. A. Selby, Albuquerque University of New Mexico, 1976) 234

also knows the Law and has lived under its authority. Therefore Paul's "I" in Rom 7:7–25 is most likely representative of both his experience and that of all pious Israelites. This is why Paul apparently felt the freedom to move back and forth between his individual experience and that of his group in both Romans 7 and Galatians 2.

(3) If Paul is speaking as a representative of his people Israel's reception of the Law at Sinai (7:7–13) and as a representative of their struggle under its diagnostic and condemning function throughout their history (7:14–25), then the experience of Rom 7:7–25 transcends Paul's own personal experience. Clearly Paul was only representationally present when the commandment came at Sinai (7:9). Therefore the death he experienced at that time was through solidarity with the generation of Israelites that left Egypt. This is an obvious but important point to make about this passage because it reveals the emphasis of Paul's focus. While recent western interpretation of Romans 7 has tended to focus upon the psychology of the struggle of the "I" in 7:14–25, this is a misplaced emphasis. Granted, it is a possible interpretation of the data, but an unlikely one. Paul's transcendent emphasis points in a different direction.

Our interest in the west in the internal struggle of the persons represented in this passage has caused us to make rather facile leaps in interpreting key terms within the passage. For example, those who see the Genesis 3 narrative in the background nimbly expand the sense of "law" to include God's instruction to Adam and Eve. Those who see all humanity represented in the struggle with law/legalism make the same leap beyond Israel's Law in this context. The same expansion of "law" to any kind of divine restriction or any kind of legalism is made by those who see Christians represented in the struggle of Romans 7. In other words an implicit universalizing of Paul's terminology is rather widespread. There seems to be little hesitation in abstracting Paul's use of "law" in any one of several directions. Of course this flies in the face of his previous forty uses of *nomos* in Romans 1–6 that focused on the Mosaic Law and in the face of the Mosaic Law focus in 8:1–4. But it appears that such context-specific information is ignored when confronted with a broader interpretive paradigm. Again, our Gentile eyes have not seen the Jewish elements within this passage.

Equally problematic are the theological problems that accompany the traditional interpretive paradigm. For one thing, the interpretations that see non-Christians represented in Rom 7:7–25 are hard-pressed to explain how 7:21–22 can describe the innermost desires of non-Christians: "I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man." Is this how Paul would describe those apart from God—even the most earnest of unbelievers? Is this what the very core (inner person) of those who do not know God is like? If this is so, then it is very difficult to square with Paul's overt discussion of Jews and Gentiles under sin in Rom 3:9–20.

The same theological incredulity surfaces, however, when one encounters those interpretations that see Christians represented in Romans 7. Is it really likely that Paul can be describing the experience of Christians

when he describes the person of 7:14 as being "of flesh, sold into bondage to sin"? This is particularly difficult to accept following the robust declaration of the opposite in Romans 6: Christians are freed from sin's bondage (6:2, 4, 6-7, 11, 14-15, 17-18, 20, 22). Additionally, Paul follows the morose description of spiritual bondage and impotence in 7:7-25 with an equally antithetical statement of the Christians' freedom from sin's bondage in Romans 8 (e.g. vv. 2-4, 9, 11, 12-13). Is the apostle swinging schizophrenically between contradictory descriptions of the spiritual state of Christians? Is he "nuancing" the freedom from sin that he asserts Christians possess in Romans 6 and 8 by stating that they really do not possess such freedom at all in Romans 7? I find such explanations both untenable and unconvincing.

Therefore the most satisfying conclusion to the identity of the persons represented in Rom 7:7-25 is that they are neither non-Christians nor Christians but pious, believing Israelites. They are not unbelievers because they represent the best and truest believers in Israel during the old-covenant era. They are true believers during the Mosaic Law era who did earnestly wish to do good (7:21) and did joyfully concur with the Law of God in the core of their being (7:22). But the difficulty they experienced was that they were still under the mastery of sin because they were still under the Law (6:14). They were true, old-covenant believers before Christ, but they were still "of flesh, sold in bondage to sin" (7:14b). This is because sin's bondage over human beings was not broken until Jesus came and died substitutionally for his people and rose again (8:1-4). It is only in his saving acts that sin's mastery was broken (cf. 6:1-11). The Mosaic Law could not do this because of the weakness of the flesh (8:31). Therefore God did it in the sending of his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (8:3b).

Paul's twofold point in Romans 7 to "those who know the Law" is that it is inappropriate as a new-covenant restraint for God's people (7:1-6) and it was always inadequate as an old-covenant constraint for God's people (7:7-25). The problem was not with the Law's lack of holiness but with the power of sin's mastery over God's people during the Law era. This is why Paul's main point in 7:7-25 is not so much about the psychological frustration of those being represented as about the broader contours of that era regarding sin's dominion. Sin's dominion paralleled Law's dominion in the Mosaic era. Those who were "in Moses" were, unfortunately, still "in Adam." Therefore being "in Moses" was not enough to offset being "in Adam." This is why Paul's declaration in 8:1 is so triumphant: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Therefore the Jewish Christians in Rome should not attempt to foist the Mosaic Law as a means of Christian constraint upon the Gentile Christians. God has provided a far more appropriate and adequate way to deal with our struggle to control our bodies.

Paul's point in Rom 8:1-17 is that "in Christ" we have been freed from the wretchedness and condemnation that characterized life in the flesh under the Mosaic Law. We have been given the appropriate and adequate means for bodily discipline in the person of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In

8:1–11 Paul asserts that bodily discipline is appropriately achieved by walking according to the standard of the Spirit, not according to the standard of the Mosaic Law of the flesh, because only the resurrecting Spirit of God can give life to our mortal body. In 8:12–17 the apostle concludes that we adequately achieve bodily discipline by putting to death the deeds of our body by depending upon the Holy Spirit who leads the children of God and produces an inner sense of family intimacy with God our Father.

To heighten the contrast between life in the flesh/under the Mosaic covenant (7:5/7:7–25) and life in the Spirit/under the new covenant (7:6/8:1–17), Paul scrupulously avoids any mention of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in 7:7–25. It is not that the Spirit was not involved in the life of God's people during the whole Mosaic Law era. Reading the OT testifies to his presence and ministry in the life of Israel. But the old-covenant era is not characterized by the work of the Holy Spirit like the new-covenant era is (e.g. Ezek 36:24–27). Rather, by contrast, the old-covenant era is characterized by Paul as an era of bodily frailty and weakness. The tandem term to "Law" that Paul uses to express this frailty is "flesh" (*sarx*). The Law era was the flesh era, and Paul uses these two terms interchangeably throughout these types of discussion (e.g. Rom 8:3–4; cf. Gal 5:16–18). Therefore to be under the Mosaic Law was to be "in the flesh." The believer in Jesus Christ has been delivered from both the authority of the Law and from the frailty of the sphere of the flesh: "However, you are not in the flesh but in the spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Rom 8:9, NASB).

In contexts such as Romans 7–8 and Galatians 3–6, which center on the classification of the contrast between the old and new covenants for Jewish Christians, "flesh/Law" and "Spirit" are representative of these respective covenants/eras. This is why Paul can definitively state in Rom 8:9 that Christians have their identity in the sphere or era of the Spirit, not in the sphere or era of the flesh. One cannot have it both ways. The distinctive mark of our sonship is having the Spirit of God (8:14). Christians have left behind the identity of bodily frailty that "flesh" connotes. We have entered a new covenant and thereby a new era in God's program. Our lives are not to be characterized primarily by human frailty but by divine enablement.

These are classic Pauline distinctions, and he is remarkably consistent in his usage of this antithesis between flesh and Spirit. This is why Paul's statement in 7:14b ("but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin") cannot possibly be true of the new-covenant believer. Rather, it is a definitive description that repeats Paul's description in 7:5 of life under the old covenant: "For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit to death." The contrast in 7:6 is of life under the new covenant, which is life apart from the flesh and the Law: "But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we served in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter." But once again our ignorance of the significance of this whole discussion for the Jewish Christians whom it addresses leads us in wrong interpretive directions.

VI. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES  
IN THE INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 7

We have now reached the end of this lengthy discussion of the role of interpretive communities in the understanding of Rom 7:7–25. My premise has been that the early Church took a wrong turn on this significant passage because of a change in the cultural makeup of the people of God. The result has been over 1500 years of theologizing that seems to have been wrongheaded. This is a bold statement. But if it is accurate it should be vindicated. This vindication should be underscored by the further establishing of the new paradigm or interpretive community of Pauline theology, which should give us better insights into the racial and cultural concerns of the apostle Paul.

In saying this, however, one should not get the idea that the interpretation advocated here is a very recent one in the history of the Church. On the contrary, it is a very ancient, though a scant minority, understanding of this passage. Standing virtually alone in the ancient Church, John Chrysostom (AD 344/354–407), the bishop of Constantinople and most distinguished of the Greek patristic preachers, understood the “I” of Rom 7:7–13 as referring to Israel in its encounter with the Law at Mount Sinai.<sup>38</sup> A few other Pauline scholars have followed in his path.<sup>39</sup> But the vast majority of those in the Church have followed the traditional interpretive community and have filtered Israel out of their interpretation.

The existence of this traditional interpretive community for over a millennium and a half warrants two final observations about the dynamic of interpretive communities. (1) Without embracing a relativistic understanding of texts and meaning we should nevertheless be far more sensitive and healthily self-conscious about our interpretive assumptions. These assumptions are a major factor in the interpretive process, and we can no longer pretend that they do not exist. Rather, we should accept their existence as a very real part of our finite human experience. Nowhere is this truer than in the interpretation of very ancient and culturally distant texts like the Bible. This does not place the understanding of these texts beyond our reach. But it does demand a stronger emphasis on understanding those means that bridge these temporal and cultural gaps—that is, the genres of the Bible and the generic conceptions of each Biblical book and its various sections. This places a significant educational burden on the teachers of the Church to prepare God’s people to read the Bible with these kinds of sensitivities and with these kinds of interpretive skills. This task is complicated when many in the Church do not realize or value the need for such skills.

<sup>38</sup> *Saint Chrysostom Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans* (NPNF 9 416–439)

<sup>39</sup> Cf e.g. E. Stauffer, “ego,” *TDNT* 2 358–362, J. Lambrecht, “Man before and without Christ Romans 7 and Pauline Anthropology,” *LS* 5 (1974) 18–33, N. T. Wright, *The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans* (dissertation, Oxford: Oxford University, 1980) 145–146



(2) Perhaps God's people can be persuaded more readily of the value of understanding the genres of the Bible and the structure of a Biblical book's argument if these insights provide even greater edification of the Church. Hopefully this has been demonstrated in my treatment of Rom 7:7–25. Contrary to the predominant interpretation that understands the Christian life to be characterized by a divided and debilitating struggle with sin, I believe that Romans 7 teaches that such a struggle has been superseded by the work of Jesus Christ and by the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is not to say that Christians no longer struggle with sin in their lives (e.g. Rom 6:12–14; 8:12–13). But it is to say that this struggle is a battle that we are well equipped to win because of our definitive break with the mastery of sin and because of the indwelling Holy Spirit. If this understanding of the passage is correct, then the experience of Rom 7:7–25 is not worthy to be brought under the banner of the new covenant. Rather, it is a depiction of an earlier, preparatory era in God's program. To confuse this with life in Christ is to impoverish the Church theologically. As in the case with the ancient Church and this passage, such an interpretation tells us more about the interpreters than it does about the text. Such problems are legion when we ignore the role that our interpretive communities play in the interpretive process.