EMMA WASSERMAN

The Death of the Soul in Romans 7

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Sin, Death, and the Law in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology

Mohr Siebeck

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For Jeanne, Bud, and Susan Bartlett

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Introduction

Extreme Immorality as Death in Romans 7

Few texts have been more productively interpreted and reinterpreted than chapter 7 of Paul's letter to the Romans. Here Paul presents the dramatic self-narration of a person torn between the demands of God's law and the reality of sin, repeatedly depicting a state of contradiction: "I do not do the good that I want, but I do the very evil that I do not want" (7:19).[1] This lengthy description of self-contradiction culminates with the desperate cry "Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death?" and crucially structures the message of chapter 8 that announces God's merciful intervention through Christ. In the West, a tradition running from Augustine to Martin Luther and John Calvin made Rom 7 central to its understanding of sin and in so doing ascribed a condition of total depravity to all humans and moral conflict even to the Christian. Augustine understood the monologue as a representation of the human will confessing its total incapacity for goodness and made an intense inner struggle with sin the normative human condition.[2] Martin Luther famously rediscovered the Augustinian reading in his own experience: "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction."[3] For Luther, the monologue taught that even the most pious Christian sins before God and revealed the sinfulness of all human striving, even for goodness. On this basis he argued that human beings can only be counted righteous by a gracious God who justifies in spite of their depravity; they are *simul iustus et peccator*, "at the same time righteous and sinner." Later Protestant traditions followed Luther in making Rom 7 a prooftext for theologies of sin and justification. So, for example, in the twentieth century the influential theologian Rudolf Bultmann made Rom 7 amenable to existentialist theology by taking the text as exemplary of how

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[1] Translations of Paul's letters are my own. All other translations are from the Loeb Classical Library unless otherwise noted.

[2] Paula Fredrickson has shown that this reading is characteristic of the late Augustine, in "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self," *JTS* 37 (1986): 3–34.

[3] Lewis W. Spitz and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 34:336.

"human existence is concerned with its authenticity and yet constantly fails to find it."[4] Bultmann thus retained the Augustinian-Lutheran premise that the monologue displays the human as powerless to fulfill its most fundamental desires for goodness by construing this good as a mode of authentic existence.

While the monologue of Rom 7 has been tremendously productive for later interpreters, historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries found it difficult to explain many aspects of the text. Even setting aside major issues such as Paul's understanding of sin, his anthropology, and the Jewish law, historians have had difficulty explaining the identity of the speaker, the nature of its self-described plight, and even the fact that the speaker claims to have died at the beginning of the monologue but then continues to speak for another twenty verses. This study historicizes the language and argument of Rom 7 by situating it within a contemporary moral discourse. I argue that the text elaborates on Platonic assumptions about the nature of the soul and dramatizes the plight of mind totally overwhelmed by passions and desires.

The interpretation developed here owes much to the important critique of Krister Stendahl, who argued powerfully against the dominant Western interpretation of Rom 7 as a representation of human self-consciousness.[5] In his now famous essay, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," Stendahl showed that readers from Augustine onward understood Paul's depiction of introspection and inner turmoil in a way that obscured its historical meaning. This critique was informed by the important work of Werner George Kümmel, who argued that the speaker introduced at 7:7 was a type of fictive "I" rather than an actual person or Paul himself.[6] Kümmel also undermined the universalist reading of Rom 7 as the consummate human struggle by arguing that the speaker describes a distinctively pre-Christian plight. Stendahl's approach further particularized the text by insisting that it addresses specific concerns with the law and should not be taken as a doctrinal position on human nature and the reality of sin. Further, where Luther understood the speaker as Paul

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[4] Bultmann, "Romans 7 and the Anthropology of Paul," in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (trans. Schubert Ogden; Cleveland, Ohio: World, 1960), 151.

[5] Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," reprinted in *Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78–96.

[6] Kümmel, *Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1929; repr., Munich: Kaiser, 1974), esp. 81. Though Kümmel limited himself to considering the fictive "I" only in Paul's other letters, Stanley Stowers develops this basic insight in terms of Greek and Roman rhetorical conventions in *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 264–272, hereafter *Rereading Romans*.

using his own experience to typify the torment of everyman, Stendahl argued that such an interpretation generates contradictions when compared with Paul's self-description in texts such as Rom 9:1, 2 Cor 1:12, and 1 Cor 4:4 where "Paul's tone is one of confidence, not of plagued conscience."[7] This critique further undermined the notion that the text addresses the human condition as such and focused attention on the way the monologue advances Paul's arguments about the law and the situation of the Gentiles.

Subsequent interpreters of Rom 7 have largely taken Stendahl's critique seriously but have struggled to find historical contexts that could help to explain many aspects of the text, especially the identity of the speaker. In verse 7 there is a distinctive shift, as if someone suddenly turns and asks Paul a question about what he has just stated. Out of this conversational exchange a voice emerges that speaks in the first person about some form of inner turmoil. Interpreters have taken this as Paul speaking autobiographically, a figure such as Adam, an arrogant Jew, or an exemplar of the Christian or pre-Christian experience.[8] Yet even where interpreters agree on a basic position, they often differ substantively on what types of evidence justify the view or how it should be used. For example, Joseph Fitzmyer works through five possibilities for identifying the speaker and concludes that Paul here depicts the plight of "unregenerate humanity faced by the Mosaic law."[9] Though Fitzmyer does attempt to locate the text historically, he only appeals to texts from Qumran to support this reading, especially *1QH* 4:30–38, which describes a person reflecting on sin and human wickedness.[10] Fitzmyer takes the text as a model for the supposed confession of Rom 7, even though the only clear connections

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[7] Stendahl, "Introspective Conscience," 92.

[8] I cite only one or two examples of each of the main positions. For the autobiographical reading, see C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Collins, 1959), 122–133; that of a Jewish boy prior to a mature interaction with the law, W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London: SPCK, 1955), 15–35; the late Augustinian reading of 7:7–13 as the plight of mankind generally, and 7:14–25 as the Christian, C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 341; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1988), 1.382–383; the unregenerate human being generally, Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 192; and for the common association of the speaker with Adam, see discussion and n. 12 below.

[9] Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 465.

[10] For similar approaches, see Mark A. Seifrid, "The Subject of Rom 7:14–25," *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1992): 322; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (trans. Scott J. Hafemann; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 109–110.

between the texts are that a narrator speaks in the first person and shows an interest in sin. This literature does not account for many features of Rom 7, such as sin's location in the body; its activities in killing, enslaving, and imprisoning the speaker; the roles of the passions, mind, inner person, flesh, and body; or the speaker's extended self-reflection on its internal division and repeated complaints that it is unable to put its good intentions into action. In a different way, James D. G. Dunn catalogs a range of positions on the identification of the speaker but then attempts to harmonize them all through a supposed Adamic allusion.[11] Although the Adamic reading of the monologue has been very popular, strong arguments have been made against it.[12] John J. Collins and John R. Levison have shown that there are almost no texts dated prior to the destruction of the temple that make Adam's disobedience into a centerpiece of reflection on the origins of human evil.[13] The implication of these arguments is that without further literary cues to warrant such a connection or echo, there is no justification for taking the speaker as Adam or someone suffering from an Adamic plight. In addition, Rom 7 does not fit with the story of Gen 2–3 because Adam does not encounter the law. Yet, Dunn insists, "the typical-

[11] Dunn, *Romans*, 1.382–383.

[12] Many interpreters argue for some kind of allusion or direct connection to Adam but on very different grounds. So, Cranfield (*Romans*, 350) understands Romans 7:7–25 as a direct exposition on the text of Gen 2–3; Käsemann insists that "methodologically the starting point should be that a story is told in vv. 9–11 and that the event depicted can refer strictly to Adam" (*Commentary*, 196); for a similar approach, see Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology* (trans. John P. Galvin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 183. In a different way, N. T. Wright (*The Climax of Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 227) states without argument or explanation that Paul views the arrival of the law as a recapitulation of the sin of Adam; Glen Holland ("The Self Against the Self in Romans 7:7–25," in *The Rhetorical Interpretation of Scripture: Essays from the 1996 Malibu Conference* [ed. S. E. Porter and D. L. Stamps; JSNT supp. ser. 180; Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 265) argues that the character should be understood as a kind of Adamic Gentile; and Pheme Perkins ("Pauline Anthropology in Light of Nag Hammadi," *CBQ* 48 [1986]: 517) understands the voice speaking throughout as that of Adam, as does R. N. Longnecker (*Paul, Apostle of Liberty: The Origin and Nature of Paul's Christianity* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1976], 92–97).

[13] Collins, "The Origin of Evil in Apocalyptic Literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Seers, Sibyls, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 287–300; Levison, *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism: From Sirach to 2 Baruch* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988); for strong critiques of the Adam reading of Rom 7, see Robert H. Gundry, "The Moral Frustration of Paul Before His Conversion: Sexual Lust in Romans 7:7–25," in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday* (ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murry J. Harris; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 229–232; Stowers, *Rereading Romans*, 86–88; and L. Ann Jervis, "'The Commandment Which Is for Life' (Romans 7:10): Sin's Use of the Obedience of Faith," *JSNT* 27.2 (2004): 193–196.

ity of the experience of everyman expressed in the archetypal language of Gen 2–3 presumably therefore should be allowed to embrace a wide and diverse range of particular experiences."[14] For Dunn, the supposed Adamic allusions provide the basis for an all-encompassing meaning that includes Paul's own experience and that of all other human beings, past and present. He synthesizes a range of positions on the assumption that all share the plight that later Christian traditions ascribe to human nature under the influence of Augustine and Luther.

This study argues that Rom 7 can be better understood by appreciating its appropriation of Platonic language and assumptions. The approach taken here owes much to Stanley Stowers and Troels Engberg-Pedersen, who have both made strong arguments that Rom 7 draws on Greek moral traditions to depict moral weakness (ἀκρασία). Though they tend to focus on the second half of the monologue, both provide rich contextual readings of the conflict between thought and action that draw on moral traditions alive in Paul's day. In the twentieth century, scholars pointed to parallels between the cries of 7:15 and 7:19 – "I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate" – and the dramatic cries of Medea or Phaedra, but most dismissed their relevance for understanding Paul's text. For instance, Bultmann interprets 7:7–25 as the paradigmatic story of human willfulness and self-reliance.[15] On this view, there can be no parallel to Ovid's "I see the better…. but I follow the worse" (*Metam*. 7.20), because Bultmann's theological paradigm insists that even human acts like identifying something as good and wanting to do it are acts of sinful self-reliance.[16] In a different way, Gerd Theissen surveys a range of the moral literature but claims that it represents a kind of contradiction that can only be understood retrospectively and so cannot be relevant to Rom 7, even though many of the texts he cites contradict this claim.[17] A confused picture of the moral literature thus obscures its resonance with Rom 7.[18] In contrast, Stowers and Engberg-Pedersen take a more comprehensive and integrative approach to ancient ethics and philosophy. One result is that both understand the central issue in 7:14–25 as precisely what Bultmann and many others dismissed: knowing the good but not being able to put this knowledge into

[14] Dunn, *Romans*, 1.383.

[15] Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Kendrick Grobel; New York: Scribner, 1951), 248.

[16] Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 248.

[17] Theissen, *Psychological Aspects*, 219. Theissen relies on H. Hommel's "Das 7. Kapitel des Römerbriefs im licht antiker Überlieferung," *Theologia Viatorum* 8 (1961/1962): 90–116. Others note the parallels only in passing, as do Fitzmyer (*Romans*, 474–475) and Dunn (*Romans*, 1.389).

[18] Theissen (*Psychological Aspects*, 220, n. 58) does note that Epictetus, *Diatr*. 2.26.1, seems to contradict his position.

action.[19] Stowers and Engberg-Pedersen also attempt to integrate these insights from ancient ethics into their analysis of the letter in ways that substantively alter its interpretation.

In *A Rereading of Romans*, Stowers draws on decades of work among scholars of ancient philosophy and identifies a discourse of self-mastery that centers on the passions. Not only does Rom 7:7–25 contain a paradigmatic discussion of the moral-psychological problem of moral weakness, but this ethical discourse also informs Paul's interests in the passions and self-mastery throughout the letter (1:24, 1:26–27, 6:12, 7:5, 7:7, 7:8; cf. Gal 5:16–17, 5:24). While Stowers develops the discourse of self-mastery largely without specific philosophical orientation, Engberg-Pedersen's *Paul and the Stoics* finds a specifically Stoic ethical model in virtually all of Paul's letters. On this reading, Paul's theological paradigm is analogous to Stoic models of moral development in that the person progresses from a state of total focus on oneself to a communal focus on others. Although differing from each other on numerous points, both interpreters take a holistic approach to ancient philosophy and develop complex philosophical models and discourses. As a result, both Stowers and Engberg-Pedersen agree that Paul's interest in the passions makes sense in light of the ethical discourse of his day that makes passions and desires its central preoccupation. Both also agree that Rom 7:14–25 contains a classic depiction of moral weakness.[20] My argument builds on the work of both scholars but comes to different conclusions about the specific type of moral problem at issue in Rom 7.

While Stowers and Engberg-Pedersen identify Rom 7:7–25 with moral weakness, I argue that the immorality in view is a more entrenched and extreme form of immorality than moral weakness as usually understood.[21]

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[19] Others had previously taken the discussions of moral weakness more seriously, such as A. Van Den Beld, "Romans 7:14–25 and the Problem of *Akrasia*," *Rel. Stud*. 21 (1985): 495–515; Hommel, "Das 7. Kapitel des Römerbriefs," 90–116. For more recent discussions, see Holland, "The Self Against the Self," 260–271; Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric in Its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 228–250; Reinhard von Bendemann, "Die kritische Diastase von Wissen, Wollen und Handeln: Traditionsgeschichtliche Spurensuche eines hellenistischen Topos in Römer 7," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 95 (2004): 35–63.

[20] Engberg-Pedersen develops this position in *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 2000), 239–246, and more recently in "The Reception of Greco-Roman Culture in the New Testament: The Case of Romans 7:7–25," in *The New Testament as Reception* (ed. Mogens Müller and Henrik Tronier; JSNT supp. ser. 230; New York: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 32–57.

[21] Stowers (*Rereading Romans*, 279) briefly suggests that Rom 6–8 describes sin in a way that is close to the condition of ἀκολασία, "a set disposition to do wrong," but he does not pursue the issue further.

By the Roman period most philosophers and moralists viewed the role of moral teachers as involving educating persons and setting them on a path toward virtue.[22] This idea of moral development usually entails some type of relational scale or spectrum of moral types along which a person progresses or regresses. The wise man or sage represents moral perfection and the achievement of thriving or blessedness (εὐδαιμονία) and bounds one end of the spectrum as an ideal type. Most people, however, fall short of this ideal and so require moral reform to help them progress toward the state embodied by the wise man. Conversely, a concept of the moral degenerate also bounds the negative end of this spectrum so that the wise man has the wholly vicious and immoral person as his other. Though particular formulations vary, I refer to this negative type as someone suffering from extreme immorality, soul-death, or moral failure. The following sketch captures the relation between moral weakness and extreme immorality:

(+) always good – almost always– sometimes good – almost never– never good (-)

On this model, moral weakness usually corresponds to "sometimes good" or "almost never good," and extreme immorality to "never good" or something very close to it.

Taking the plight of Rom 7 as that of extreme immorality rather than moral weakness better accounts for the repeated complaints that the mind has become completely dominated by sin as well as the language of death, imprisonment, warfare, and slavery. In particular, the plight described in the monologue strongly resembles the moral-psychological state that Philo of Alexandria sometimes describes as "the death of the soul." So Philo interprets God's warning that Adam will die if he eats from the tree of life as referring to the death of the soul:

> The death of the man is the separation of the soul from the body, but the death of the soul is the decay of virtue and the bringing in of wickedness (ὁ δὲ ψυχῆς θάνατος ἀρετῆς μὲν φθορά ἐστι, κακίας δὲ ἀνάληψις). It is for this reason that God says not only "die" but "die the death," indicating not the death common to us all, but that special death properly so called, which is that of the soul becoming entombed in passions and wickedness of all kinds (ὅς ἐστι ψυχῆς ἐντυμβευομένης πάθεσι καὶ κακίαις ἁπάσαις). (*Leg.* 1.105–106)

This text sharply distinguishes bodily death from a type of moral-psychological death. Philo, consistent with his Platonism, insists that the death of the soul does not convey the actual death or destruction of any

[22] The early Stoics held that there was no such progress, but rather a total, sudden, and completely transforming commitment; however, later Stoics adopted schemes of progress and reform.