

Notes on Romans 7.1-25

This is a synopsis, with some additions and modifications, of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*: New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

E. Sinai and Torah 7.1–8.11

If the two very different paragraphs of Rm 5 form a foundation, and Rm 6 a platform on that foundation, then 7.1–8.11 would be the main building. There's still a floor to go on top (8.12-30), and from there the view will be magnificent (8.31-39); but 7.1–8.11 is the working heart of the section— and, as we'll see, a vital part of Paul's groundwork for Rm 9–11 as well.

The main theme of Rm 7.1–8.11 is the Jewish Torah. This might seem irrelevant for those who have never lived under the Torah, but Paul is telling Israel's story because it is the story that climaxes with Jesus (8.3-4). So we have to understand how Israel's Torah fit in, if we're to understand Jesus.

As in the previous chapter, Paul is still unpacking 5.20-21:

Moreover the Torah came in alongside, so that transgression might abound. But where sin abounded, grace superabounded, so that, as sin has been king unto death, even so might grace be king, through righteousness, unto the life of the [messianic] age, through Jesus the Messiah, our Lord.

The antithesis between slavery and freedom explored in Rm 6 from the standpoint of baptism and Exodus, is still very much in mind as Rm 7 finally addresses the question of the Torah itself. Ever since 2.17-29, 3.19-21, 27-31, and 4.15, this question has been a pressing matter; 5.13-14 and 5.20 sharpened it up, and 6.14-15 increased the tension. Paul must now expound *how 'God has done what the Torah couldn't do'* (8.3; cf 7.5-6 and 2Co 3.1-6), *renewing the covenant in the Messiah and by the Spirit*. The *continuity* of God's

purposes (3.21–4.25 and 5.12-21) includes *discontinuity* between the dispensations of Torah and Spirit.¹

It was all very well to demonstrate from Genesis 15 that those who believe the good news are 'made righteous', becoming covenant members through faith (3.20-31). But doesn't 'condemnation' still threaten us anyway? Don't we all still face the last judgment of which 2.1-16 spoke so powerfully? Rm 7.1–8.11 shows that 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in the Messiah Jesus' because the condemnation of God's final judgment has been brought into the present and dealt with in the Messiah. Thus those in the Messiah, who are indwelt by the Spirit, can face the future with confidence.²

Through Jesus, 'we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of God's glory' (5.2). Our hope is sure, because God has glorified those whom he justified (8.29). But how has this come about? And what were the obstacles? The problems were sin and death, of course; but also (as it turns out) Torah which, in manifesting transgression, also manifested judgment. So insofar as Torah posed a threat to God's people, rather than a promise, it had to be dealt with. But at the same time, the Torah is 'God's Torah' (7.22,25; 8.7), and it has to be *vindicated* against any slurs it might incur. Rm 7.1–8.11 accomplishes all these tasks. Those who have come out from under Torah have no reason to despise God's dispensation— but they need to see it in the right perspective.

Paul has been exploring the New Exodus in Rm 5–8. In Rm 6, he spoke of the Red Sea, and in Rm 8 will speak of Israel's

¹ 2Co 3 is an oblique but important commentary on this theme, as, of course, Galatians. See Wright, *Climax*, chs 7-9.

² I will leave it to the reader to consider how this may be in tension with some popular views of Christianity, but it seems an important question.

wilderness wanderings. Between these, we expect Sinai and the giving of Torah on the one hand, and of the presence of YHWH, dwelling with Israel in the tabernacle, on the other. That is just what Paul has written. Rm 7.7-12 in particular echoes the story of Sinai; 8.1-11 with the tabernacling Spirit.

As mentioned, Torah has turned out to be part of Israel's (and the world's) problem. It multiplies transgression (5.20); it doesn't and can't constitute Israel as the eschatological people comprised of 'all nations' which God promised to Abraham (see 4.15). So the New Exodus is in tension with the old one. Israel's 'I' has both been freed and not freed. This 'I' serves God's Torah with the mind, but with the flesh the Torah of sin. In terms of the Exodus from Egypt, Israel is God's liberated people. In terms of the New Exodus from sin and death, Israel is still in slavery. So the Torah that speaks of freedom reminds Israel of her continuing servitude and its consequences.

When considering the 'I' that dominates 7.7-25, we have to give full weight to Paul's repeated assertions, throughout 6.1-8.11, that the baptized Christian is *not* 'in sin', *not* 'in the flesh', *not* 'under the Torah'. The whole point of Rm 6 was that the Christian is *not* 'in Adam'. The 'old person' has died with the Messiah, and is now theologically 'dead to sin and alive to God in the Messiah'. Moreover, Paul says of himself in Ph 3 that he had been 'blameless' with respect to 'righteousness under the Torah', which just doesn't fit an autobiographical reading of Rm 7.³ But 'I' language can be used for purposes other than literal descriptions of one's own experience. He isn't giving a transcript of 'how it feels' to be 'under the law' instead of 'grace', but a theological analysis of what he said in 2.17-29: Israel, embracing the Torah, finds that Torah turns and condemns them.

Centuries of struggling with Rm 7.7-25 as a psychological or ethical statement—and failing to come up with a wholly satisfactory explanation in those terms—only shows that Paul is actually talking about something else. The fact that sin can still, however illogically, 'reign' in our mortal bodies (6.12) doesn't affect the *status* he has been discussing through Rm 5 and 6, of being 'not under Torah, but under grace' (6.14-15):

6.17-18 You were slaves of sin, but you have obeyed from the heart that type of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

6.22 But now as you are made free from sin, and become slaves to God, you have your fruit

unto holiness, but as the goal, the life of the [messianic] age.

7.4-6 You died to the Torah... so that you might belong to another... but now we are set free from the Torah... to be enslaved in the newness of the Spirit, not in the oldness of the letter.

These statements couldn't be any more clear: Paul isn't expounding a view of Christian life in which we are still, despite everything, 'fleshly, sold under sin' (7.14), or still 'enslaved to the Torah of sin' (7.25) after all. Bluntly: 'you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit' (8.9).

Despite this, preachers and theologians have tended to find in Rm 5-8 a portrait of moral struggle that seems familiar, and assumed that that it's all about needing to struggle 'in faith' and not 'under law'. Others have taught that Spirit-filled Christians can be sinless and perfect in this life, so that Rm 7 is a portrait of what we leave behind when we come to Jesus and go on to Rm 8. Either way, Rm 7 becomes a transcript of 'experience' of struggling to live by means of 'law' and effort, instead of relying on the Spirit.

We can set all that aside. As we'll see, the 'I' of 7.7-25 belongs to Paul's two main controlling narratives: (a) the story of Adam, Israel, and Messiah, and (b) that of the New Exodus. And in Romans, *nomos* always means the *Mosaic* 'Law', the Torah; Rm 7 is one of Paul's fullest discussions of it. So in saying 'I', Paul is speaking of how Israel recapitulated Adam's sin when Torah arrived (7.7-12); and of Israel continuing to live under Torah thereafter (7.13-25).

So we will be greatly helped in our reading if we remember at every step of his argument in Rm 7 that 'I' stands for 'Israel'.

But why does he speak in the first person? In Rm 9-11, he will describe with deep anguish the plight of his 'kinsfolk according to the flesh'. Speaking of the 'I' who is still 'made of flesh' (7.14) is a way of *not* saying 'they', of *not* distancing himself from the plight of Israel. Moreover, his description of the 'I's' moral ignorance and inability—'I don't know what I'm doing', and so forth in 7.15-16, 19-20—casts its sin as unwilling or unwitting. He will then present Jesus' death as a 'sin-offering' (8.3), which is precisely the OT remedy for unwilling or unwitting sin.

Paul described Adam's condition in 1.18-2.16; then 2.17-29 placed 'the Jew' firmly on the map of Adamic sin; he re-emphasized the point in 3.19-20; and in 5.20 drew it together in summary. The Torah only increases and exacerbates the plight of humankind 'in Adam'.

A long tradition from Aristotle to Ovid and beyond observed that even the most morally acute philosopher could

³ This was the starting point for Krister Stendahl's epochal essay 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West'. See Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Fortress: Philadelphia: 1976) 78-96; also available at jbburnett.com/resources/stendahl-paul-and-the-west.pdf.

approve the good, while still continuing to perform evil.⁴ In Galatians 5 Paul argued that if we put ourselves under the Torah, we would only be living once more in the realm of the 'flesh'. Getting circumcised and keeping kosher will just bring us back to the *pagan* state as we were in before (see also Ga 4.8-11). The parallel between Ga 5.16-18 and Rm 7 is quite close: 'the flesh lusts against the Spirit', writes Paul in Ga 5.17, 'and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are opposed to each other, so that you cannot do the things you want'. And then the punch line: 'But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Torah', which is precisely the point of 7.1-8.11.

The word 'sin' occurs over 20 times in 7.1-8.11, always in the sense of a power let loose in the world, which manifests itself in actions that result from idolatry (1.18-32), and that run counter to God's purposes for humankind in general and to the Torah in particular (as in the present passage and, e.g., 6.19).

The argument of 7.1-8.11 falls into five clear paragraphs:

- 7.1-6 No longer Torah's bride, but the Messiah's
- 7.7-12 Does Torah = sin?
- 7.13-20 Does Torah = death?
- 7.21-25 Israel and sin (God's Torah and sin's Torah)
- 8.1-11 Messiah and Spirit: God's answer to sin, death, and Torah.

Romans 8.1-11 actually belongs with Rm 7.1-25, but we will treat it with the rest of Rm 8 because of the constraints of our class schedule.

1. No Longer Torah's Bride, But the Messiah's 7.1-6

7.1. The first word of Rm 7 is, 'Or...'— in Greek, the single letter *ē*. This 'or' looks back to 6.14-15. 'You are not under the Torah... or don't you know that the Torah rules over someone only during their lifetime?' In other words, you could assume you still *were* under the Torah only if you ignored one of the most basic things about it. Unfortunately, not only the NIV and the NRSV, but the KJV omit this important word, so you'll need to write it in if you use those translations.

'The Torah rules over someone only during their lifetime' (7.1). A death has indeed occurred that results in our being 'no longer under the Torah'. But whose?

Paul is speaking, he says, 'to those who know the Torah' (7.1), and he calls them 'brothers'. He uses this term sparingly in the main part of Romans (1.13; 8.12; 10.1; 11.25; cf 12.1; 15.14; 15.30; 16.17), so here, especially since it's repeated in

7.4, it seems emphatic. Since he says to 'those who know the Torah' that 'you (pl.) died to the Torah' (7.4), it would seem that his addressees had actually been in some sense 'under the Torah'. And yet his audience seems mostly Gentile. So it's likely that the Roman church was comprised mainly of God-fearers (people sympathetic to Judaism, and even believers, but unwilling to get circumcised, etc) and/or Jewish proselytes and converts.

7.2-3. In explaining (*gar*, 'for, because') his point that the Torah applies only as long as someone is alive, Paul offers what is usually called 'an illustration from marriage': if a woman's husband dies, she's free of the Torah's law that binds her to him. This doesn't mean that the Torah was her 'first husband', but that the Torah bound the woman to the 'first husband', and when he died, it no longer applied. So far, so good.

7.4. But now he says, 'you' died, and now 'you' belong to another! Paul isn't arguing from the 'illustration'; he's making the point he wanted to make anyway, to which the marriage picture contributes only as far as it goes. If 'you' were in some sense the Torah's bride, then in a similar sense, 'you' are the Messiah's 'bride'⁵ now— and this new union will 'bear fruit for God'. This picks up the image of fruitfulness from 6.21-22, recasting it as one of childbearing.

'You died to the Torah' is very close to Ga 2.19, 'through the Torah I died to the Torah'— and note the use of 'I' language there as well. It means 'by death, you came out from under the Torah's domain', as 7.1 implies. But who is the 'you' that 'died'? The previous chapter repeated seven times:

- 'we died to sin' (6.2);
- we 'were baptized into the Messiah's death' (6.3),
- 'we were buried with him into death' (6.4),
- 'we were planted with him in the likeness of his death' (6.5),
- 'our old person was co-crucified' (6.6),
- 'we died with the Messiah' (6.8),
- 'reckon yourselves dead to sin' (6.11).

What does he mean, though, by saying, 'You died to the Torah *through the body of the Messiah*'? In Ga 2.19 Paul said, 'through the Torah I died to the Torah', and explained this by saying, 'I am crucified with the Messiah'. So—

- (a) When Jesus the Messiah died bodily, he died to the Torah.
- (b) We are in the Messiah by baptism and shared in his death.
- (c) The Messiah's *body* is the site of our membership in him.

⁴ For an example roughly contemporary with Paul, see Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.26.

⁵ For the Christian as the Messiah's bride, see 2Co 11.2; Eph 5.25-32.

7.5-6. Paul now explains 7.4 with a two-sided description of the old life and the new. This functions as a double heading over the two following sections, 7.7-25 and 8.1-11. It also awakens echoes of the 'new covenant' theology of 2Co 3. Paul evokes various biblical passages affirming the Torah's goodness, without affirming that it remains the final criterion of who God's people are.

'When we were in the flesh'—

- Obviously from this very statement, 'flesh' doesn't mean just the physical substance of which humans are made; in that sense, obviously, we're still 'in the flesh'. So when and what was that status of 'flesh', that we're not 'in', now?
- NIV translates 'when we were controlled by the sinful nature'. This implies (with Luther and Calvin) either that human nature itself is sinful (and we're no longer in that); or that humans have more than one 'nature', of which one is 'sinful'.
- 'Flesh' denotes physicality seen on the one hand as corruptible and on the other as *rebellious*; it's another way of saying 'in Adam', of demarcating the humanity characterized by sin and its result, death. To be 'in the flesh' is to live under the domain of sin and death, and thus to be in the condition marked by the first half of the various **antitheses** both of 5.12-21 and of 6.16-23.

Those 'in the flesh' discover that 'the passions of sins' are at work in them to bear fruit for death. We could have gathered as much from 5.12-21, and indeed from 1.18-2.16. But Paul now says these passions are 'through the Torah'. It's strange to think of the Torah arousing sinful passions, but what he's saying comports with 6.14-15 and, behind that, with 5.20 again:

6.14-15 For sin shall not lord it over you: for you are not under the Torah, but under grace. What then? shall we be 'sinners', because we are not under the Torah, but under grace? God forbid.

5.20 The Torah entered, that the transgression might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.

'But now we have been released from the Torah'— this 'but now' echoes 3.21 and 6.22, introducing the moment of redemption; 'released from the Torah' here echoes 'she's released from the Torah concerning her husband' in 7.2. We and the Torah have nothing more now to say to one another since we have 'died [to that] in which we were held captive'⁶— another reference to the death of the 'old human

being', as in 6.6; what 'held us captive' is the Torah— and have exchanged our old slavery for a new one, 'being slaves (*douleuein*) now 'in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter', which links back to 6.16-22, where Paul had talked about being slaves of grace or of sin.

The contrast of the old and the new slavery evokes 2Co 3.6: 'God has qualified us', says Paul, 'to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life'. This generates the great contrast of 2Co 3.7-18, whose associations with Paul's thought throughout Rm 7.1-8.11 are too numerous and complex to track here.⁷ 'Covenant' is a rare word in Paul, but it reflects something absolutely foundational to his thinking: God's is faithful to all he has revealed and promised in the past. This isn't undercut by the fact that, because of sin and death, he had to do something quite unexpected. Underneath the radical discontinuity caused by the good news's breaking in upon Israel and the world, caused indeed by the earth-shattering death of the Messiah, there remains the creator and covenant God's faithfulness to the promises he made to Abraham, and indeed his faithfulness to the promise, in the Torah, of new life for Abraham's worldwide family, despite the sin and death that were brought into the world 'through the one man' (5.12).

The new covenant is designed precisely to take account of the problems inherent in the original covenant. The old was written in letters on tablets of stone, but the new is to be written on the heart, as Jeremiah promised (Jr 31.31-34). We should keep the discussion of Rm 2 in mind throughout 7.1-8.11. In 2.29, Paul contrasted 'the Jew who is a Jew in secret' with the Jew who was a Jew only 'in what is manifest'; and 'the circumcision of the heart', a matter of the Spirit, with 'the letter'. The Torah was inadequate to create and sustain ethnic Israel as God's people, but pointed toward the creation of a new people in whom God's will would be done, described somewhat self-contradictorily as 'the uncircumcision that keeps the Torah' (2.26-7). At that stage it was impossible, without more explanation, to see whom Paul was speaking of. The present passage provides that explanation.

A new mode of 'slavery' has been opened up, to which Torah pointed but which it couldn't bring to pass. God has renewed the covenant, and what the Torah couldn't do, he has done. The new 'enslavement'— enslavement to 'obedience' (6.16), to the 'pattern of teaching' (6.17), to 'righteousness' (6.18), to God (6.22)— is one in which the heart is transformed by the Spirit (5.5), in which the whole person is promised new life (8.10-11). This life in the Spirit will dominate Rm 8.

reading introduced into the Greek *Textus Receptus* (1565) without ms. support, on the basis of a guess at Chrysostom's reading.

⁷ On 2 Corinthians 3, see Wright, *Climax*, chap. 9.

⁶ The KJV's 'that [thing] being dead in which we were held', implies that either the Torah or the old Adam was dead. This is Beza's hypotheticalal

The rest of the Rm 7 is clearly subdivided, as can be seen from Paul's careful and logical connectives, as follows:

7.7-12 Does Torah = Sin?

The Torah's arrival on Sinai brought about a recapitulation of Adam's sin. This wasn't the Torah's fault; sin seized its chance and made the Torah its unwilling base of operations. Torah is good.

7.13-20 Does Torah = Death?

Following the sin/death logic that dominates the entire section, Paul now asks: 'Did this good Torah, then, cause 'my' death?' No; sin, not the Torah—and not the 'I' (Israel), remarkably enough!— is still responsible.

7. 21-25 Israel and Sin (God's Torah and Sin's Torah)

The third paragraph draws the conclusion in terms of the double-sided Torah, corresponding to the double-sided 'I' (Israel): because of sin, the Torah can't give life, and the 'I' (Israel) can't attain it. This is the problem of the Torah, and of the 'I' (Israel), in the terms Paul will address in the first paragraph of Rm 8.

2. Does Torah = Sin?

7.7-12

7.7a-c. Rm 7.5-6 says something so outrageous that it immediately forces a question that will lead in to Paul's main argument. If the Torah arouses 'the passions of sins', then surely this means that the Torah is sin!

7.7d-8a. Paul denies the charge, but affirms the point that led to it ('yet, if it had not been for the Torah I would not have known (*ouk egnōn*) sin'). But what does it mean 'to know sin'? Some take it simply as knowing *about* sin: 'I wouldn't have known what sin was'.

We've run into the word for 'knowledge' here (*ginōskō*) in its noun form twice before:

1.28 'even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge (*epignōsis*), God gave them over to a reprobate mind'.

3.20 'through the Torah comes knowledge (*epignōsis*) of sin'.

The next line is supposed to be an explanation (*gar*, 'for, because'), yet Paul only seems to repeat himself: I wouldn't have understood (*ouk eidein*) covetousness if the Torah hadn't said 'you shall not covet'.

Here's it's not so much that the Torah gave the 'I' (Israel) information about sin in general, and coveting in particular, or even just specified what sin and coveting were (as if people didn't already know); the Torah *produced* coveting and

sin; the Torah's arrival was the occasion for the 'I' (Israel) to 'know' it from the inside, as it were. So sin 'seized its opportunity' or 'made its base of operations'⁸ in the commandment. And, exploiting this opportunity, sin 'worked in 'me' all kinds of covetousness'.⁹ This still, of course, appears to be an indictment of the Torah, although Paul is building in to his picture a description of 'sin' at work that will result in the Torah's exoneration four verses hence. The Torah, though weak, is not the source of the problem, just its unwilling channel.

But when did it do this? Many people, taking the 'I' literally, have supposed Paul to be referring to his own experience of first becoming aware of the commandments, perhaps at the awakening of sexual desire.¹⁰ But Paul actually has 5.20 in mind again: the Torah came in, so that the *trespass* might abound. The tenth commandment (Ex 20.17; Dt 5.21) is the only one of the Ten that goes to motive rather than to specific misdeeds, and as such undergirds all the others.¹¹ Paul's reference to this commandment suggests that he has in mind all of them in general, and 'with the coming of the commandment' (7.9) suggests the time when the Torah was first given on Sinai.

So this isn't about Paul himself as a prototype of the post-Lutheran enlightened Western individual; it is about the moment in Israel's history, and indeed in the history of humankind (5.13-14), when humans were faced with a specific command *like they were in Eden*, so that the miscellaneous sin that had existed 'from Adam to Moses' (5.14) would again, *as in Eden*, become 'trespass', breaking a known law. And in Eden, it's the *arrival* of the commandment not to eat that becomes the occasion to break it.

That explains why Paul refers to the fall of Adam (Gn 3) in 7.11: sin 'deceived (*exēpatēsen*) me... and killed me'. The verb signals exactly what Paul is thinking of: 'The serpent deceived (*ēpatēsen*) me, and I ate' (Gn 3.13; cf also 2Co 11.3). What happened on Sinai recapitulated what happened

⁸ The Greek word here *aphormē* is a military term meaning a 'base of operations', but it was regularly used in the more general sense of an 'opportunity'. See BDAG.

⁹ In a work roughly contemporary with Paul, 4 Mac 2.5-6, a Jewish writer uses the commandment 'you shall not covet' to more or less exactly the opposite effect, arguing that since the Torah commands this it must be the case that 'reason' can overcome the passions.

¹⁰ 4 Maccabees 2 shows how 'coveting' could refer to sexual desire, though obviously of wider application; this application of the word is not uncommon in the literature of the time.

¹¹ See DN Freedman, "The Nine Commandments: The Secret Progress of Israel's Sins", Chapter 39 of DN Freedman, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 1997), pp 457-469, available online at jbbur-nett.com/resources/freedman_9commandments.pdf.

in Eden.¹² Paul is telling Israel's story in terms of Adam's story.

7.8b-10. When Paul says, 'apart from the Torah, sin is dead', this seems to sit uncomfortably with his earlier statement that

'until the Torah sin was in the world, but sin isn't imputed when there's no Torah. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who hadn't sinned after the likeness of Adam's transgression...' (5.13-14).

—Or at least, putting 'apart from the Torah, sin is dead' (7.8b) together with the passage just quoted, he seems to be suggesting that when individuals sin and die, sin isn't growing and flourishing, but when the Torah appears, then it gains a new lease of life, analogous to the way it 'came to life' when the commandment was given in Eden. Only Israel has a *face-to-face* relationship with the one creator God. Thus, when God gave the Torah to Israel, this was the first time human beings had had a specific commandment since Eden.

'I was once alive apart from the Torah'— again, keep in mind that the 'I' is Israel, not Paul. Israel, from Abraham to Sinai, corresponds to Adam in the garden before the fateful command not to eat, even though, of course, 'sin reigned in death' (5.21) and 'death reigned from Adam to Moses' (5.13).

'But when the commandment arrived, sin sprang to life, and I died'. At the very moment God was giving the Torah to Moses, Aaron and the children of Israel were making the golden calf— and some rabbinic writings looked back at that as the time when Israel first imbibed iniquity. Paul is still thinking of what he said in 1.22-23,28 where, refusing to 'retain God in their knowledge (*epignōsis*)' (1.28), people 'exchanged' God's glory for an idol and ended up worshipping likenesses of humans and animals (1.22-23). The word 'exchanging' echoes Ps 106.20, which speaks of Israel in the wilderness 'exchanging' the living God for the golden calf. So at Sinai and whenever it sinned subsequently, Israel repeated 'the likeness of Adam's transgression' (5.14).

Thus 'the commandment, which was unto life, was itself found to be unto death for "me" [Israel]' (7.10). Yet even if, as 4 Ezra 9.33-37 points out, those who received the Torah sinned and perished; still, the Torah remains glorious.¹³

If this is Adam's story, then the phrase, 'the commandment which was unto life' alludes to the tree of life in Genesis (and in rabbinic texts, the Torah and Wisdom are sometimes

compared to a tree of life).¹⁴ It also alludes to Lv 18.5 ('if a person does them, he shall live by them'), which Paul will quote in 10.5, in a section belonging closely with the present one, and to covenantal passages in Deuteronomy which promise life for those who keep Torah (see Dt 4.1; 6.24; 8.1; 30.15-20; cf Ps Sol 14.1; see also Rm 10.5-11). This is the irony of Torah, and it points forward to the paradoxical fulfilling of Torah's intention by the Spirit in 8.1-11. Torah intended to give life, but because of sin all it gives is death.

7.11. Paul explains (*gar*, 'for, because') what he has just said by repeating 7.8: sin 'took opportunity' or 'made its base of operations' in the commandment— and deceived me, and killed me. As mentioned above, he's talking about the serpent here— 'the serpent deceived me, and I ate' (Gn 3.13)— though he's told the story so that other levels could be heard as well.

The preliminary picture is thus complete:

- (a) Sin and the Torah are two different things, but
- (b) Sin has taken over the Torah, which had promised life; and now
- (c) Using Torah as its base of operations, sin produces death.

This is of course why 'by Torah deeds shall no flesh be justified in his sight' (3.20); why the Torah became 'a dispensation of death' (2Co 3.7-11); why, despite the glory of the first Exodus and the first covenant, a New Exodus and a renewed covenant are necessary.

7.12. With the conclusion of 7.11 in mind, Paul answers the question in 7.7— 'Is the Torah then sin?' No, cleared of identity with sin, Torah is 'holy and just and good'. As in 3.31b, Paul vehemently affirms the Torah's goodness, rejecting any kind of Marcionism¹⁵ outright. We Gentile Christians can't cut off the trunk of the tree into which we've been grafted (11.16-24). We have to understand the strange but

¹² Other Jewish exegesis linked Eden and Sinai as well. See *bSanh* 38b; 102a; *Exod. Rab.* 21.1; 30.7; 32.1, 7.11. See Rm 1.23; 9.15-16; the connections between these passages are important.

¹³ Cf 2Co 3.7.

¹⁴ Cf Pr 3.13-19; the Torah scrolls are put back into the ark in a synagogue service with the prayer, "It is a tree of life to those who take hold of it, and those who support it are praiseworthy. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace. Bring us back Lord to You, and we shall come, renew our days as of old."

¹⁵ Marcion, bishop of Sinope in Pontus (ca 85-160 AD), taught that the Old Testament was incompatible with Jesus' teachings, and that the god of the Old Testament had been subjugated by the good NT god taught by Jesus. This dual-god notion allowed him to reconcile the 'contradictions' between Old Covenant theology and the Gospel by rejecting the Old Testament, including of course the Torah, and even much of the New Testament (he approved only of Paul and parts of Luke). In 144 AD, he became one of the first major heretics excommunicated by the church, but the church he founded expanded throughout the known world within his lifetime, and for several centuries was a serious rival to Orthodoxy. His rejection of much of the scriptures prompted the church to formalize its canon— that is, to state formally what the tradition of holy books it had received from the apostles actually was.

vital role that the Torah played in the saving purposes of the one God. Rm 7 is poised between 3.1-9 ('What advantage does a Jew have? Much in every way!', 3.1-2) on the one hand and 9.30-10.13 on the other ('But Israel, which followed after the Torah of righteousness, has not attained to the Torah of righteousness', 9.31). Was God's covenant with Israel just a mistake, then? No, but its purpose was stranger than anyone could have imagined.

3. Does Torah = Death? 7.13-16

Asking a new question in 7.13, Paul switches from the past tense he's been using in 7.7-12 to the present in 7.14-25. This has sometimes been explained as Paul first looking at his own or someone else's previous experience in 7.7-12, and then turning to describe his current experience in 7.14-25. This is unwarranted when the letter is understood in its own terms. As we've seen, 7.7-12 told of what happened when Torah first arrived in Israel, when Israel recapitulated Adam's sin (7.9-11; cf 5.20a); now he describes the ongoing state of the 'I' (Israel) under the Torah, caught between the one Exodus and the other, freed from Egypt and yet not freed from the 'Egypt' of sin and death.

As usual, the connective words (ignored in some translations) are important in this passage; Paul isn't providing a string of loosely connected musings, but a carefully structured sequence of thought.

In 7.13, Paul asks whether the Torah, now proved to be good, was yet the cause of death, and answers that it was not Torah, but sin that brought death. He then explains (*gar*, 'for, because') in 7.14 and what follows.

Rm 7.13-20 subdivides as follows:

7.13-16 The goodness of the Torah, despite sin and death in the 'I' (Israel);

7.17-20 The paradoxical behavior of the 'I' (Israel)—not really at fault, but once again under sin.

As before, 'I' is Israel under Torah. The point is that, even under Torah, Israel is in the Adam-sphere, the realm of sin and death (5.20; cf 6.14; 7.5).

7.13a. The question 'So did that 'good thing' [i.e., the Torah, 7.12] become death for me?' is natural one. 'Sin reigned in death' (5.20-21), and Torah seemed to have exacerbated its reign; 7.5 repeated the point vividly. But the good Torah has now been firmly distinguished from 'sin'. But is it yet responsible for death because sin used it as its base of operations? Paul rejects this idea, and sets about to back up his rejection and to advance his underlying argument about the power and sinfulness of sin itself, toward the point where it is finally dealt with (8.3).

7.13b. All the blame attaches once more to sin itself. Sin, *so that* it might appear as sin, worked death in me through

'that good thing', *so that* sin might be exceedingly sinful through the commandment.

The expression 'so that' (*hina*) is similar to those in 5.20-21, where 'the Torah came in alongside, *so that* the trespass might abound; but where sin abounded, grace superabounded, *so that* as sin reigned in death, even so might grace reign'. But why would God want trespass to abound? God's way of dealing with sin isn't to hold it at arm's length. It's not a matter of damage control, just trying to restrict sin's operation or make it stop at some point. Torah wasn't given so that Israel might become (as far as possible, anyway) a sin-free zone; it was given 'unto life' (7.10). But sin has infected the entire human race, Israel included. If Torah could have actually given the life it was 'unto', then it would have done so (Ga 3.21b; cf Ga 2.21). But at the heart of the human race itself, and using the Torah for its base of operations, 'sin works death for "me" [Israel]' (7.13b). It was Torah's task to draw sin to its height, to make it appear in its true colors, to be shown up as 'exceedingly sinful'. Sin must be seen to be sin, as that which ruled in death (5.21).

But not seen only. The 'so that' expressions of 7.13, coupled with those of 5.20-21, look on to 8.3-4: God gave Torah in order to draw sin into one place, '*so that* the Torah's righteous verdict might be fulfilled in us' (8.4). The 'condemnation' (*katakrima*) of 5.18 is removed. 'There is therefore now no *katakrima* for those in the Messiah Jesus' (8.1), precisely because sin itself has been condemned once and for all (8.3). The place where it has been condemned is in the 'flesh' of the Messiah, who represents Israel, under whose Torah 'sin had abounded'. Adam, and Israel, were the 'flesh' where sin had taken up residence; by being 'born of the seed of David according to the flesh' (1.3), the Messiah became the flesh where sin could be condemned (8.3). The double 'so that' of 7.13 points to the cross as it emerges in the entire argument.

7.14. In order to exonerate Torah, Paul now analyzes further the 'I' (Israel) that is caught up in sin and hence in death. He contrasts the true nature of Torah with the nature of the human being (and Israel precisely as 'in Adam'). Torah is spiritual, he says, but 'I' (Israel) am 'fleshly', sold under sin. The spirit/flesh contrast that runs through the present section extends and clarifies the Adam/Messiah contrast of Rm 5 and the slave/free contrast of Rm 6. Torah is on the God-side, the Messiah-side, and the 'I' (Israel) is on the Adam-side.

'We know that the the Torah is spiritual: but I am made of flesh, sold under sin' (7.14). The word 'flesh' (*sarx*)¹⁶ never means just 'human nature' for Paul, nor does it refer to our physical nature as opposed to our mind, soul, or spirit. It always means human nature as corruptible, decaying, dying,

¹⁶ See, e.g., 1Co 3.1,3; 2Co 3.3; 10.4.

and/or rebelling, deceiving, and sinning. Here, Paul uses an adjective form whose ending signifies 'made out of', as opposed to merely 'like' (*sárkinos* as opposed to *sarkikós*). The 'I', Israel 'according to the flesh' (cf 9.5; 11.14; 1Co 10.18), is 'made out of flesh', is fleshly *in nature*; it belongs to the Adamic solidarity, and is a slave to the 'Egypt' of sin and death. Because of this, the Torah, which is 'spiritual' (7.14), is not only morally but *ontologically* mismatched with this 'I' (Israel), as with Adamic humanity at large. The problem isn't Torah, but the sort of person 'I' (Israel-in-Adam) am.

7.15. To explain (*gar*, 'for, because') his statement that 'I am made of flesh' (7.14) Paul offers an account of the 'I' (Israel)'s behavior (7.15). The key clause is the first: 'I don't know what I'm doing'. The NRSV and the NIV turn this into 'I don't understand', and that's part of what it means, but Paul is saying that the actions in question are 'sins of *ignorance*'.¹⁷ He further explains (a second *gar*) in terms of *unwilling* sin as well: what 'I' (Israel) do isn't what 'I' (Israel) want, but what 'I' (Israel) hate. This paradox already hints at the solution; ignorant and unwilling sins are taken care of in the Torah by a sin offering (see 8.3).

As with 2.17-29, Paul isn't talking about how individual Jews, much less individual post-Enlightenment moderns, are trapped in sin. He himself was 'blameless in terms of righteousness under the Torah' (Ph 3.6). In saying 'I', he is talking of Israel as a whole. Israel delighted in Torah but was always aware that Torah was always being broken, that she was still in Exile.¹⁸ Israel wasn't a sinless holy nation, obeying Torah gladly; she would never have gone into exile had she been so. Sin, Adamic life, was evident all through her 'fleshly' condition. In the light of his Damascus road experience, Paul would even turn this critique upon himself and his 'former life in Judaism' (Ga 1.13), acknowledging that his zeal for Torah had missed the way quite radically.¹⁹ He will in fact cover all of that in 9.30-10.4, but meanwhile, through his vivid rhetorical 'I', he presents Israel-as-a-whole-under-Torah's plight. Torah is not the nasty, nit-picking, scrupulous, arbitrary legalism that people often imagine it to be. It pictures a truly human life, deeply honoring to God— and Israel as a people constantly failing to live up to it.

7.16. Does Torah = death, then? The conclusion drawn in 7.16 from 7.13b-15 reinforces the 'certainly not' of 13a: 'If, then, I do the thing I don't want, I agree that the Torah is noble'. Any charges against it— that it might have been evil,

that it might have caused 'my' death— are dropped. The 'I' (Israel) agrees with Torah, and confirms its goodness, even while admitting that it can't measure up to it.

4. Israel and Sin

7.17-20

7.17-20. The next four verses say nothing about Torah, but concentrate on the 'I' (Israel) and its relation to sin. Torah has been exonerated; Paul will draw conclusions about that in a moment (7.21-25), and then present God's remedy for the whole situation (8.1-11). But for now, he focuses on Israel's 'fleshly' state, developing 7.14b-15.

This section doesn't portray the 'sinner's cloven ego'. The 'I' (Israel) is frustrated, but in fact, like Torah, exonerated— with the blame going (of course) to sin. Paul has moved the problem off of Torah and on to the 'I' (Israel), and now moves it off the 'I' (Israel) and on to sin itself, so that he can show, in 8.1-11, how God has 'condemned sin in the flesh' of the Messiah (8.3).

7.17. 'Now, however' (*nyni de*, cf Rm 3.21; 6.22; 7.6,17; 15.23,25) marks a new point, getting to the heart of the problem: if 'I' (Israel) agree that the Torah is 'holy, just, and good' (7.12) and 'noble' (7.16), then 'It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me': 'my' responsibility is not just diminished, but abrogated.

The 'indwelling' of sin is a new idea, analogous with the indwelling of the Spirit in 8.9,11. Paul blamed sin for death, excusing Torah from complicity; now he blames sin for the 'fleshly' state of the 'I' (Israel). He's not saying people aren't responsible for their own evil acts (as if 'the devil made me do it'), but that Israel *qua* Israel isn't the cause of her own breaking Torah. The next two verses will explain this new proposition, and 7.20 will restate it, in conclusion.

7.18-19. The idea of being indwelt by sin is now advanced in its negative form, to explain (*gar*, 'for, because') what he has just said: it is sin that dwells within the 'I' (Israel) (7.17), that is, within its flesh, not the 'good thing', the Torah (7.12,13,18). This indwelling gives the power to act: 'for to will lies close to me, but to perform the good, not' (7.18b). Paul is setting up a contrast with the indwelling of the Spirit, doing what 'I' couldn't, in the following chapter. His further explanation in 7.19 is a near-repetition of 7.15b, adding 'good' and 'bad', and replacing 'the thing I hate' with 'the thing I don't want'. All this drives a wedge between the 'I' (Israel) that wills, or doesn't will, and the 'flesh' where sin dwells and the 'good thing' (=Torah, 7.12-13) doesn't.

The negative is emphatic, and it goes with the verb: 'the good thing doesn't dwell in me'. This is different from saying, morosely, 'nothing good dwells within me' (NRSV, NIV)— such translations throw the point in the wrong direction, but Paul knows what he's saying! The good thing (Torah) doesn't dwell in me— sin does. And in the next chapter he will say that when the Spirit comes into me instead, then

¹⁷ We're reminded of Lk 23.34, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they're doing', although the verbs are different in all cases.

¹⁸ Note how the prayer cited in footnote 14 ends with the hope of being 'brought back' to the land of Israel and ultimately to God.

¹⁹ See N.T. Wright, 'Paul, Arabia and Elijah (Galatians 1.17)', *JBL* 115 (1996) 683-92, available at ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Paul_Arabia_Elijah.pdf. In 1 Tm 1.12-10 Paul says his persecuting the church constituted him as first among sinners (*hamartoloi*); cf 1Co 15.9-11.

'God's Torah' (that 'good thing') will come as well. The 'I'— Israel according to the flesh— may be on Torah's side; but, like Torah, it's powerless to prevent sin from doing what it wants in the flesh, and eventually bringing death.

7.20. The conclusion practically repeats 7.17 word for word: 'if what I don't want is what I do, it's no longer I that do it, but sin dwelling in me'. It's exceedingly rare for Paul to repeat anything this way. Why does he emphasize this point so strongly? The 'I' (Israel), though fleshly and the dwelling-place of sin, is both exonerated and left in subjection to sin and death. The 'I' is Israel according to the flesh, Israel 'in Adam', Israel whose 'Adamic' condition has been exacerbated by Torah. All the charges laid at the door of Israel from 2.17 onward, are true, valid, and serious, but *there's nothing wrong with being Israel in itself*.

Paul is determined to maintain both the God-giveness of the covenant with Israel, the goodness of being Jewish, and the impossibility of finding eschatological life through that Torah alone. Israel itself, the 'I' that continues to live under Torah, continues to discover that Torah points to sin within Israel and condemns it to death. The Torah is God-given; Israel's delight in Torah (think of Psalm 119!) is good, not bad; but Israel suffers from the same disease as the rest of the human race— indwelling sin.

5. God's Torah and Sin's Torah 7.21-25

7.21. Paul now brings his argument about the Torah and Israel under Torah to a double conclusion. As usual, he opens with a broad statement, fills it out with a couple of explanations, and moves to a conclusion— though this time the conclusion is more of an outburst.

'This, then, is what I find about the Torah'. The verb *heuriskō* has the sense of 'reach findings'; it's the same verb Archimedes used (in the past tense) when he cried, *Eureka!* upon figuring out how to calculate the amount of gold in King Hiero's crown. We could translate 7.21 as, 'This, then, is my conclusion about the Torah'.

Most commentators and translators imagine that what Paul concludes is not something about 'the Torah', but about 'law', in the sense of a general moral principle. Such readers then suggest that in the rest of the chapter, and in Rm 8, Paul plays with the word 'law', using it in a bewildering variety of senses, all different, except that none have much to do with the Torah at all. After all, how could St Paul be talking to *us* about something so specific as the *Jewish Torah*??

But the chapter began with a complex argument about Torah, which grew directly out of 5.20 and 6.14 where there was no question that *nomos* meant Torah; the questions of 7.7 (does Torah = sin?) and 7.13 (does Torah = death?) were questions about the Torah to which his argument has driven him; and we're now at the point where he's drawing all the threads together. In fact he even speaks here, of *the nomos*,

ton nomon. So anyone who has come through the discussion so far, where almost every verse has been about the *nomos*, the 'Torah', and now hears, 'This, then, is my conclusion about the *nomos*', would be bound to understand 'the *nomos*' as 'the Torah'.

The initial conclusion starts from the description of the 'I' (Israel) in 7.15-16,17-20, in order to work back from there to what can be concluded about the Torah. 'So— this is what I conclude about the Torah: that for me, when I want to do the good thing, the evil thing lies close at hand to me' (7.21). In 7.7-12, Paul was alluding to the fact (already suggested in 5.20) that when Torah arrived in Israel, Israel recapitulated Adam's sin. Now, somewhat faintly but still audibly for those attuned not only to Scripture but to Jewish traditions about Scripture, he alludes to Cain.²⁰ 'Sin is lurking in wait for you', said God to Cain, facing him with the choice between good and evil. Cain, choosing evil, committed murder, and found himself a wanderer and a fugitive, bearing forever the memory of his brother's blood.²¹ 'Wretched man that I am', says the 'I' (Israel) of Rm 7; 'who will deliver me from this body of death?' When Torah arrived, Israel acted out Adam's trespass; living in the present under Torah, Israel continues to act out the sad paradox of Cain. Paul will show in Rm 8 how God has addressed this problem, too.

7.22-23. Commentators read 'God's Torah' in 7.22 as referring to the Mosaic Torah, but they assume Paul is talking about a different 'law' altogether when he says 'another Torah' (*heteron nomon*) in 7.23. So too with 'sin's Torah' at the end of 7.23, repeated at the close of 7.25. But these 'negative' formulations *just pick up and spell out what Paul has already said about Torah in 5.20, 7.5, and particularly 7.8-11 and 7.13*.

On 'sin's Torah', we can compare: 'the sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is Torah' (1Co 15.56), and to this, Paul adds at once, 'Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus the Messiah' (1Co 15.57). This is obviously the same train of thought as here. Paul isn't introducing anything new about 'another law'; he's just referring in a sharp and striking fashion to what he's been saying about the Torah all along. Torah itself is 'holy, just and good' (7.12), but sin 'worked death in me' *through* the 'good thing' (7.13). Insofar as the Torah is given by God, it is 'God's Torah' (7.22,25; 8.7), 'holy, just and good' (7.12), something rightly to be delighted in. But insofar as it's been made into sin's base of operations (7.8,11) it's been taken over by sin, and has become 'the Torah of sin'.

²⁰ The full argument, which depends on the remarkable convergence or many Jewish traditions about Cain with what Paul says in 7.13-25 as a whole, is presented in Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, chap. 12.

²¹ Gen 4.7-16; the LXX of Gen 4.7 is so confused that one should not expect to find verbal parallels; the case is made by the multiple thematic convergence, set out in Wright, *ibid*.

The double Torah then fits the strange double identity of the 'I', of Israel under Torah. The 'I' (Israel) itself is in principle exonerated (7.17-20); but insofar as it's 'in Adam'—'made of flesh' (*sárkinos*, 7.14)—sin and death are at work in its 'members' (7.23; cf 6.13,19; 7.5). Here in 7.22-23 Paul expresses this duality in terms of the 'mind' and 'members' (recalling 7.12-14), further explaining the 'mind' with the phrase 'the inner person': with the 'mind' or 'inner person', the 'I' (Israel) delights in God's Torah.²² The problem isn't 'legalism' or 'nomism', or *homo religiosus*, but *sin*: sin has taken over Torah, made it a base of operations, and now (continuing the military metaphor from 7.8,11,12-14 and indeed from 6.13, which mentions 'weapons of righteousness/injustice')—makes full-scale war as the 'other Torah', the Torah as it appears in 5.20 and 7.5. And in this war the 'I' (Israel) is taken captive, a prisoner of war and a slave under the rule of 'the Torah of sin'. Still exploring 5.20-21, Paul is again describing the captivity, the enslavement, the 'Egypt' of sin and death, exacerbated by Torah, from which the Messiah and only the Messiah can deliver. This, seen with Christian hindsight, is the plight of the 'I', of Israel, including the pre-Christian Paul himself, under Torah.

7.24. Paul's famous cry of despair, put into the mouth of the 'I' (Israel), echoes but goes beyond the great tradition not only of the biblical psalms of lament but of later Jewish lamentations.²³ 'Wretched man that I am': Israel too is 'in Adam', is a human being like all other human beings. Like Cain, bearing about the mark of his brother's death, the 'I' (Israel) finds itself unable to escape from 'this body of death', referring perhaps both to its own 'made of flesh' state but also to the solidarity of sin, of Adamic humanity, with which it is unavoidably bound up (cf 6.6). The problem isn't so much sin itself, but the death that results from it. The promise of life held out by the Torah (with Eden's tantalizing tree of life remembered in the background) appears a mirage. 'Sin reigned in death', and Torah just tightened the noose (5.21, in the light of 5.20); the 'I' (Israel) finds itself enslaved under that regime. 'The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is Torah' (1Co 15.56). What the 'wretched person' needs is deliverance, and so Paul cries out, 'Who will deliver me?'

7.25a. The full answer is about to be given in Rm 8, and indeed in the passage that, building on Rm 5-8 as a whole, speaks of the salvation that is open to ethnic Israel along with the Gentiles (Rm 11). But, as in 1Co 15.57, Paul can't resist anticipating; the answer is 'God': 'Thanks be to God (the one who will deliver me) through Jesus the Messiah, our Lord'. This verse looks back to 5.21, where 'grace' is obviously a periphrasis for 'God' (cf too 6.23), and on to 8.3, where 'God' is the emphatic subject of one of the most im-

portant sentences in the entire letter: 'God... condemned sin in the flesh'.

A full triple statement of Jesus' identity concludes 7.25—'Jesus, the Messiah, our Lord'. This weighty christological summary matches those of 4.24-25, 5.11,21, and 6.23, and points toward the christology and consequent soteriology of 8.1-11,17,29-30 and supremely of 8.31-39.

7.25b. The 'I myself' (*autos egō*) in 7.25b is emphatic and means, 'I, Paul, as part of the solidarity of Israel according to the flesh'. The same phrase appears in 9.3, where Paul expresses his own solidarity with his 'kinsmen according to the flesh', whom are in rebellion against the good news, in a passage whose deepest point (9.14-23) is very close to 7.13-25.

The contrast between the two things that are true of the 'I' (Israel) is made by distinguishing 'mind' and 'flesh'. 'Mind' refers to both the *epignōsis*, the 'knowledge' or 'recognition' of 1.28, 3.20, and 10.2, to the intention or will spoken of in 7.15-16,18-21, and to the 'inner person' of 7.22. It goes with the 'Torah of my mind' in 7.23. In 1.28, the 'mind' is darkened and must be renewed. Here in 7.25b, it delights in God's Torah, but remains powerless to put it into practice. But in 12.2, renewed by God, it becomes is the source of that full transformation in which the person is able to discover in practice what God's will actually is (cf 8.5-8). For the moment, the 'I' (Israel) of Rm 7 remains frustrated, rightly delighting in the Torah but finding that its solidarity with Adam bars the way to life. That is the contrast Paul is emphasizing.

As it is, the Torah just binds Israel to Adam. Without the death of the 'old human', as in 6.6 and 7.2-3, that is all Torah can do. But when the sickness is properly diagnosed, it can be treated. God has done what Torah couldn't do— not because Torah was bad, but because, through sin and the 'flesh', it was weak. It couldn't give the life it promised. But Israel and her Messiah were the place where sin was heaped up and made manifest for what it was, so that it could be dealt with once and for all.

²² For a good examples within scripture, see Ps 19 or 119.

²³ Such as, e.g., the *Hodayot* of the Dead Sea Scrolls.