

An Exegesis of Romans 7:7-25

Romans 7:7-25 has been called “the most discussed and fought over part of Romans” which “presents us with one of the greatest problems in the New Testament”¹². It has been argued that this section of Romans was intended to justify the regenerate person’s struggle with sin. However, I feel this to be mistaken. Instead, my purpose in writing this is to illustrate how this passage is meant to emphasize how, in the light of the ministry of the Spirit, which Paul develops in Romans 8, the unregenerate person’s complete release from condemnation is accomplished. This will be accomplished by taking into consideration Romans 3:19-20.

These verses state:

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

When taken into consideration, Romans 3:19-20 helps us to understand more easily the intentions of Paul in the later books of Romans. My analysis will focus specifically and most intensely upon verses 14-25.

To further help with my interpretation, I am going to illustrate the previous interpretations of these verses, and how Romans 3:19-20 helps to clarify how previous interpretations concentrated on different aspects of the verse that stifled the interpretations.

The 7th chapter of Romans then becomes a description of the ministry of the Law. I believe that we are meant to understand how ministry leads those to whom it is speaking to the revelation of the presence of sin that is dwelling within them, and how this presence leads those to a forced captivity. Furthermore, we can see how this results in the need for a Savior

to be present in these people's lives.

The Identity of "I"

In order to accomplish all of this, the first thing that must be done is to discuss the identity of the "I," the referent speaker of the verses of Romans 7:7-25. The authoritative view of the identity comes from Werner Kummels. No interpretation of Romans 7:7-25 can be complete without mention of Kummels work. To sum up the view, it can be stated that "the 'I' is a rhetorical figure of speech used to depict the non-Christian under the Law"³. I wish to examine various portions of the verses to explain exactly why this is.

Romans 7:7 reads "Therefore what will we say, the Law is sin? May it never be! But I would not have known sin except through the Law. For I also had not known desire, except the Law was saying, "You shall not desire." I feel that this verse's main intention is to make it very clear that the Law and sin should not be confused with each other. The tendency to do so comes from their interrelation. Shadows cannot exist without light, but these are obviously two different aspects entirely. Instead, they are both a reaction to each other. Furthermore, I wish to state that Paul is not stating that sin and the Law do not have the sort of immature relation of a parent telling a child to keep their hand out of the cookie jar, which only makes the child want to have a cookie all the more. This mistake can be made quite easily with a shallow view of the statement that "I also had not known desire, except the Law was saying, "You shall not desire." Instead, this statement is saying that people have their natural desires that exist within us because we are born with sin. On our own we are not able to determine divine Law. As imperfect creatures we need to be told how we are to act. This is the purpose of the Law. It is not until the Law tells us "You shall not desire" that we understand that this feeling that dwells within us is something that we are to resist.

The connection of the Law with sin is what previous interpretations relied upon to make

² 1. Anders Ny Gren, Commentary on Romasn. Tr. C. Rasmussen. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1944) 284.

the case that Paul was justifying the regenerate person's struggle with sin. Furthermore, I wish to state that it is mostly because the relationship between the two was mistaken that these interpretations were made. First I need to address the connection between the Law in sin. While the speaker of the verses in consideration stated that he only knew sin because he knew the Law, this does not mean that the person who does not know the Law is not sinning.

As the first person pronoun is being used in this context, it might be our initial reaction to think that Paul is simply speaking of his own experience. However, this would not be as effective as the way in which Paul actually utilizes the "I". To be taken into consideration is the speaker's reference to existing before knowledge of the Law: "The notion that Paul, or any other Jew for that matter, would have ever conceived of himself as being alive "apart from the Law" (7:9) is rejected. In essence, there is no time in which Paul would have ever considered himself to be not under the Law, so therefore the speaker of these verses could not possibly be Paul. Considering that the "I" could not refer to Paul, we must then consider why Paul would use the singular pronoun in these passages if it is not to imbue the verses with a sense of personal history. Referring to his own story would have personalized the story for the reader, but as this couldn't possibly be the case, it becomes necessitous to consider other options.

As stated earlier, the "I" is used as a rhetorical device. Since Paul isn't able to personalize this section through his own story, he attempts to personalize it by making it impersonal, meaning that anyone who is under this condition, who can be said to be the audience to which this section is specifically written for, can identify with what is being said, making it their own story: "But then there is let for them only one remaining solution, that the "I" is a figure of speech, that is, that Paul through the first person expresses a general thought

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in a lively manner”⁴

Historical Perspectives

In the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul is fundamentally writing a letter to his peers and is primarily providing a reference point represented as the law. He is discussing the law as a standard which he and his readers are accountable to while identifying human nature as the direct opposition to that standard. Beyond this, for a law to exist in any form, there has to be one who decides the law and enforces that law juxtaposed against the representation of those who are under said law as well as the authority of the entity issuing the law. Paul also exudes a tone in Romans 7: 7-25 which indicates that he places himself on the same level with those who he is actually addressing, while considering the hierarchy established by the existence of the law.

Naturally, one may presume to identify with Paul when considering that the nature of a man, ‘the flesh’ is prone to deviate from spiritual goodness and order. Paul’s use of the first person references “I”, may then primarily be viewed as a first person narrative which can be taken at face value. Upon reading the passage at a glance, it can be challenging to view the “I” used by Paul as little more than an absent minded reference to self, for the purpose of allowing his readers to relate to him. It is however, the subject matter of this passage, that can conjure a sense of higher and more spiritual meaning to the use or rather the identity, of the word “I” by Paul.

Paul chooses to bring to light the weakness of the flesh as a cautionary reminder and a reference point. By using the first person narrative, Paul can point out that though he is one man, he is representative of mankind in general in the sense that all mankind is destined to have a sinful or ‘fleshly’ nature, “7What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law, (Romans 7:7-25). This

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exert from the seventh chapter of Romans universally sets a bar for mankind's relation to the law itself. Paul effectively describes the law as a function of sin both of which must exist simultaneously. If there was no sin, there would be no law and thus to understand sin, one must understand the law as it is the standard which both defines sin and exists because of it.

8But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire (Romans 7:7-25). Paul then indicates that it is almost as though sin respectively, perpetuates as a means of resistance to the law. This is akin to a child who may be told not to touch a hot plate, the child may not have ever considered doing so had a rule and warning not to deviate from that rule, been implemented.

For apart from law, sin is dead. 9Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. 10I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.

When discussing the identity of the "I" in Romans 7:7-25, one ventures onto a subject which has been at the heart of a great deal of debate for some time. To begin discussing the opposing sides of the topic, it is first necessary to delve into the brief history of said debate. Saint Augustine was perhaps the catalyst to the alternative query on the now legendary debate moral of Paul's writing in the seventh chapter of Romans. Up until the time of Augustine, the seventh chapter of Romans was thought to be written by a man who though conscious of his sinful ways and knowledgeable as to the conflict his actions posed against the standards of the law of God, was in fact a man deficient in the faith of a Christian. It was generally assumed that the Paul of Romans 7 was in fact, not yet in a covenant relationship with God under the new law, which by this point, in Biblical time tables, was equal to a conscious decision to become a Christian and then acting accordingly.

Augustine, however, expanded upon this by indicating that though Paul was certainly fluent in the law set forth by God and was not entirely successful at being proactive in the

necessary path or mind set of a true Christian, but was ultimately a Christian none the less. Furthermore, Augustine found Paul to be guilty only of acting on impulses of the flesh but also in turn, being honest about his shortcomings to himself, his readers and God. Considering the emphasis that Paul places upon the flesh in these passages in Romans, the assertion that the flesh cannot bear any weight in a person's divine aspirations, and importance of the flesh in Augustine's teachings, we can see how important this section of Romans was to Augustine's teachings. Truly this school of thought elevated Paul's effectiveness in earning his readers' empathy for the purposes of adequately describing the flesh and the law of God which opposes actions done in and of the flesh. Augustine's view provided an interpretation which allowed for hope among Christians. This ideology became the accepted interpretation until the nineteenth century.

Martin Luther had a unique platform regarding the "I" of Paul's seventh chapter of Romans as well. Luther focused his interpretation of the "I" on Paul's admittance to being "unspiritual" after indicating that the law is in fact of spiritual subject and origin. This was thought by Luther to be indicative of Paul's human struggle with sin which expanded beyond the control of his mortality under God. This would encourage the idea that Christians are in fact saved regardless of their propensity to act in a sinful or fleshly manner. Luther argued that the Paul of Romans was a man cursed by sin rendering him a victim so to speak, of the urges of the flesh. As we can see, this interpretation runs in sharp contrast to the one that I wish to put forth. Part of the reason for this historical interpretation comes from the fact that there were still many contradictory doctrines that had still yet to be purged from the church at this time. Also, it should be taken into consideration that Lutheranism was the first real break from the Catholic church, and while Luther initially broke with the Catholic Church, Lutheranism is still closer in doctrine than most other denominations.

This interpretation of obedience to the law versus the wages of sin, indicates that

Christianity is more of an attempt at spiritual goodness in deed and thought; regardless of one's tendencies to act out sinfully according to fleshly desires. Luther was opposed by many who felt that there is no possibility that a deviant from the commandments of God, could ever truly be a Christian. The core to this opposition tends to defy Biblical promise on the pretences that works or actions are not counted in the eyes of God while faith is.

John Calvin would later lend an interpretation that closely resembled the interpretation of Augustine. They both understood the "I" in this passage, as referring to part of a dichotomy which existed certainly in Paul thus representing humankind as a whole. By viewing Paul as a composition of two separate and opposite entities; the spiritually changed Christian and the carnal man controlled by fleshly desires and actions, the nature of "I" could be decided based on the wording of these particular passages. It was Luther and Augustine who identified the author of the passages to in fact be the carnal and fleshly component of Paul rather than the spiritually changed entity. This interpretation can be said to expand however on the ideology that sin functions as a slave master and Paul is effectively engaging in a highly spiritual struggle between the sin which cannot be overcome mortally and a faith in God which renders one's sins both null and void in the eyes of God and the law.

To examine more specifically the varying interpretations of the overall context intended by Paul, it is necessary to look more closely at specific portions of the text being discussed, in order to comprehend the reasoning behind such interpretation. The thirteenth verse of the seventh chapter of Romans is an almost mathematical explanation of the substance of sin versus the law of God. "13Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful"(Romans:13).

Paul first notes that sin is death but the reciprocal of that is life granted by means of the law. It is as though Paul is indicating that sin perhaps must exist in humanity for the sole

purpose of allowing for goodness, Godliness and the law of God which ultimately gives life. Luther was known for his adamancy on the issue of salvation as a free gift which is offered by God and once accepted by man, sets in stone a certainty in eternity. Calvin's deliberation on the topic was in agreement with the ideology of Luther in that they believed death to be the only alternative to the sinful nature of man. Where their views converged, however, was at the junction of accountability concerning the carnal and fleshly desires of man. It was believed by those who followed the interpretation of Augustine and Luther that the sinful nature of man could not be helped and therefore, the sinful man who sought salvation was absolved of any and all responsibility for their nature. It should be noted that it was during the time of Augustine that this interpretation became dominant. Previously under different beliefs, it was thought that people were able to attain sinlessness and entry into heaven through their own will to follow the word of God. This doctrine, referred to as Pelagianism, held that the body on its own was not to be considered to be sinful in nature on its own, and this belief stemmed from the view that God would not make inherently sinful beings. The doctrine of original sin, which Augustine was especially influential in, eventually became the dominant view, though Augustine has been accused at times of carrying over his beliefs from Manicheism. The doctrine of original sin has become so widespread and accepted that it sounds bizarre to many to consider that a belief such as Pelagianism was ever held by those within the church.

Certainly, the contrast of sin against the purity of the law is applicable in both of their viewpoints. This contrast is an almost poetic abstract of opposites as death is the one thing that man naturally spends a lifetime to overcome or avoid while avoiding the sinful nature virtually impossible. The existence of the two in parallel in verse 13 can almost serve to account fuel that propels human nature.

To continue with the in depth examination the interpretation of Luther and Augustine, it is necessary to again, point specifically to the passages within the exert being studied.

Romans 7:14-25 was also pondered by Arminius in the fifteen hundreds yielding an interpretation which was virtually in opposition with that of Luther and Augustine. Arminius agreed that the author of Romans was indeed the carnal man within Paul but he also felt that because Paul was so deeply amidst a struggle with sin and what he knew to be right, he was controlled and compelled by the carnal man inside of him without the presence of a righteous spirit.

The past few centuries have been marked with an interpretation of the Paul of Romans 7 as a man who was in fact a “Christian under the law”. This view was somewhat different from the interpretation set forth by Augustine in that it indicates that Paul was making an effort to act as a Christian should act. Rather than seeing Paul as a man of sin, the commonly accepted interpretation of Paul is now a man who is no different from anyone else as all are in fact, in possession of the fleshly nature.

In Light of Romans 3:19-20

When taken into consideration on its own, these previously mentioned interpretations have been prevalent. However, as stated before, a new insight into Romans 7:7-25 can be gained through Romans 3:19-20:

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

Jewett has written extensively on this topic, and while I agree with much of what is written, I still wish to make my own interpretation stand out from Jewett's. First, let us mention that Jewett states that: “It is clear from the context that ‘law’ is being used here in the inclusive sense of all Scriptures”.

⁵The knowledge that traditional systems of achieving honor and avoiding shame are sinful and must be abandoned is the view with the final clause of this periscope”.

“While Paul’s conversion led to his abandonment of this dilemma along with the bloodshed that such fanatical obedience always entails, here he insists that the law itself conveys the truth for everyone: whether Jew or Gentile, barbarian or Greek, educated or uneducated, “weak” or “strong.” Every boastful mouth must be closed in view of the righteousness of God, a requirement that has a direct bearing on the missional purpose of this letter”⁶⁷.

⁵ Jewett, 264.

⁶ Jewett, 267.

⁷ Jewett, 266.