

ONCE AGAIN—THE QUESTION OF ‘I’ IN ROMANS 7.7-25

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There is general agreement among New Testament scholars that the Pauline “I” may assume different roles, depending upon the context in which it appears. For example, its function in 1 Corinthians 13.1-13 may be described as impersonal, while it apparently assumes paradigmatic character in Galatians 2.18-21, where Paul’s own lifestyle serves as a pattern for the Galatian Christians. But the subject intended by “I” in Romans 7.7-25 remains one of the most debated issues in the history of New Testament interpretation. Is Paul alone the subject? If so, does he refer to his past (pre-Christian experience) or to his present (Christian experience)? Is the “I” inclusive of others, meaning either “we Christians” or “we humans”? Or is its usage analogous to the impersonal function assumed for it in 1 Corinthians 13?

At this stage in the history of the problem no one could possibly offer a solution that would meet unanimous approval by the scholarly world. But there are several widely held interpretations that do enjoy sound exegetical support, and each of these carries with it certain implications for translation. This article will summarize a few representative interpretations of “I” in Romans 7.7-25 and then offer some suggestions for the translation of the pronoun. But first it will be helpful to note the position that Romans 7 holds in the total letter and to analyze briefly the chapter itself.

CHAPTER 7 IN THE CONTEXT OF ROMANS

Chapters 12-16 of Romans deal with practical and ethical matters which have only a loose connection with the earlier part of the letter. In addition, chapters 9-11, though growing out of a question which arises within the first eight chapters, may nevertheless be viewed as a separate entity. Thus for our purpose only chapters 1-8 need be considered in order to determine the function of chapter 7 in the overall argument and structure of the letter.

1.1-17 forms the introduction to Romans. In these opening verses Paul greets the Christians in Rome (1.1-7), expresses his desire to visit them (1.8-15), and states the theme of the chapters to follow: The Good News is that through faith all people may be put right with God and find salvation (1.16-17).

Having declared the way to be put right with God, Paul now proceeds to demonstrate that Gentiles and Jews alike stand in need of this experience (1.18-3.20). Paul initially raises the question of the relation between the Law and the way to be put right with God in 3.19-20. Although he will not elaborate on this question until chapter 7, it remains a burning issue in his thinking throughout the intervening chapters. Of special concern for this study is the observation that both 3.20 and 7.7 affirm that the knowledge of sin comes through the Law.

In 3.21-30 Paul reiterates the way by which a person may be put right with God. In so doing he simultaneously defines the relation between this experience and the role of the Law within God’s purpose: Even though one cannot be put right with God through the Law, both the Law and the Prophets attest to the way in which this saving event comes about. Paul does not invalidate the Law

by defining its role in these terms; on the contrary, he upholds the purpose for which God intended it (3.31). That people are put right with God through faith rather than through the Law is further confirmed by the example of Abraham (4.1-25).

5.1-11 shows how peace with God and all the resultant joys and virtues of the Christian life derive from the saving work of Christ which is appropriated through faith. Then Paul proceeds to draw a contrast between the old humanity (under the dominion of Adam) which is destined for death and the new humanity (under the dominion of Christ) which is destined for life (5.12-21). The passage 5.20-21 is of particular interest because it once again focuses upon the question of the function of the Law in the history of salvation. Quite possibly these two verses also provide the conclusion to the first unit within chapters 1-11, since chapters 6-8 and 9-11 each end with a hymnic benediction of somewhat similar structure.

In 6.1 Paul introduces a question which he is certain will be raised on the basis of his remarks in 5.20-21: "Should we continue to sin so that God will be able to show the full extent of his forgiving grace?" For Paul the answer is obvious—Christians cannot continue to live in sin because through Christ they have already died to sin, and it no longer rules over them (6.1-14). A companion question is then put forward in 6.15: "Should we continue to sin since we are no longer under the Law but under grace?" Once again the answer is obvious, as Paul indicates in 6.16-23. At this point it is important to note that the two questions lead to the conclusion that to be "under sin" and to be "under the Law" are one and the same thing. This conclusion is strengthened by what is said in 6.14: "Do not allow sin to rule your life. You do not live under the Law but under the grace of God".

Although the earlier part of Romans contains several allusions to the question of the role of the Law in the divine purpose (3.20; 4.14-15; 5.20; 6.14), it is not until chapter 7 that the matter is discussed in detail. There Paul begins by drawing an analogy between the marriage law and the Christian life to demonstrate that the believer is free from the reign of the Law (7.1-6). He then follows with what some scholars have termed his "apology for the Law"—it is holy, though sin transforms it into a tool of death (7.7-13), and it is spiritual, though no one is able to obey its demands (7.14-25).

Thus all humanity stands under the condemnation of the "law of sin and death", except for those who are set free by the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (8.1-2). This theme is continued throughout the remainder of chapter 8, and it may well be that in the benediction of 8.38-39 Paul has in mind the "peace" to which he referred in 5.1. If this observation is valid, chapters 5-8 form an enclosure in which a single line of thought is introduced and then brought in full circle to its logical conclusion.

ANALYSIS OF ROMANS 7

Paul opens the chapter with an analogy between the marriage law and the relation of the believer to God's Law (verses 1-6): A married woman is bound by the marriage law only so long as her husband lives; should he die, the woman is set free from the law that bound her to him (verses 1-3). Verse 4a is transitional; this is indicated by both the particle ("so that") and the noun of

but “that he had this experience before converting to Christianity”. He begins by discussing Paul’s use of the present tense in 7.14-25, which is often appealed to in defense of the alternative interpretation. Gundry finds a parallel to this passage in Philippians 3.3-6, where Paul employs the present tense with respect to his Judaistic past. The function of the present tense is then to make vivid a recollection of Paul’s own past life.

Moreover, there are linguistic reasons for the apparent intrusion of the present tense: (1) In each of these two passages the present tense is “triggered” by a present tense used of another subject (Rom 7.14a; Phil 3.4b), and (2) in both instances the present tense is accompanied by the first person singular pronoun.

The autobiographical character of “I” in Romans 7.14-25 (and in 7.7-13) is firmly established on the basis of the parallel between it and the autobiographical “I” of Philippians 3.4-6. Otherwise the emphatic “I myself” of verse 25 and the outcry of verse 24 become nothing more than an exercise in theatrics. Even if Paul is referring to his own experience as typical or representative, it nevertheless remains his own personal experience. And in passages where one may argue for a rhetorical “I” (Roman 3.7; 1 Corinthians 6.12,15; 10.29-30; 13.1-3,11-12; 14.11,14-15; Galatians 2.18-21), Paul himself cannot be excluded.

“You shall not lust” refers neither to a command which God gave to Adam and Eve nor to the giving of the Law at Sinai. Either of these interpretations would immediately make the “I” completely unautobiographical, while the second would also require that sin be viewed as dead in the period prior to Moses. The most logical interpretation is that which sees here Paul’s attainment of *bar mitzvah*, which would explain why Paul slips into the “I”-style. It was because this was something that he himself experienced as a Jew, and so did not apply to the majority of his readers who were Gentiles. Thus Paul here employs his Jewish experience to reveal the inability of the Law to place anyone in a right relationship with God. When writing of those experiences which he shared as well with his Gentile audience, he uses “we”, “us”, and “our” (chapters 6 and 8).

Paul has in mind the earlier years of his life before he became *bar mitzvah*, and that is why he signals out the particular sin of lust: Prior to puberty, lust may be spoken of as “dead”, but it becomes active (“springs to life”) in a boy at about this time. Thereby, the phrase “apart from the Law” refers neither to a period in Jewish history nor to a time in world history, but to a phase in Paul’s own personal history, the years of his early boyhood before he reached puberty.

Gundry then takes up the objection that other passages (Acts 22.3; Galatians 1.13-14; Philippians 3.4-6) do not speak of Paul’s pre-conversion experience as one of frustration, but rather of self-righteous contentment. In this regard he draws three conclusions: (1) Paul’s zealotness for Judaism and his advancement in that religion does not contradict the thesis that Paul experienced an inner struggle with sexual desire. (2) There is no need to assume that such a struggle was the primary element in Paul’s conversion; he is consistent in attributing this to an appearance of the risen Lord. (3) Paul’s “confidence in the flesh” need not presuppose a claim to perfection; it merely

signals “right ancestry and a preponderance to right conduct”.

Some of the more salient observations contained in the remainder of the article by Gundry may be summarized as follows: (1) The phrase “as to the righteousness in the Law, being blameless” (Philippians 3.6) is written from the standpoint of outside observers, while Romans 7.7-25 relates to an inward struggle which cannot be seen by others. (2) There is no contradiction between Paul’s wretched condition of Romans 7.14-25 and his pre-Christian Pharisaism. A Pharisee would take great delight in God’s Law, though he might feel frustration with regard to certain specific commandments. Only pagans delight in sin (Romans 1.18-32); Jews take no delight in breaking God’s Law. (3) The mind which takes delight in God’s Law (7.16,22) is not the regenerate mind, but rather “a moral monitor” present in all people (see 1.32; 1.18-20; 2.14-15); thus even pagans would be conscious of their own inner struggle. (4) That the Christian simultaneously lives in two ages does not offer an explanation for the contrasts between 7.14-25 and 6.1—7.6; 8.1-39. The fact of the matter is that the “I” of 7.14-25 is “imprisoned”; it is totally incapable of doing anything that is good. Therefore “*this death*” of 7.24 is of a different nature than the physical death referred to in 8.10, and the deliverance for which the “wretched man” longs is that of conversion, not of the release from the physical body at the day of death. (5) Finally, according to the pre-Christian interpretation, 7.25b is not anti-climactic. Regardless of what viewpoint one accepts, Paul takes a step backward in 25b to made a conclusion concerning either verses 7-24 or verses 14-24. If a Christian is speaking, then the backward step is radical either from a chronological viewpoint (25b = present struggle; 25a = future resurrection) or from the viewpoint of the speaker (25b = terribly defeated Christian or non-Christian; 25a = victorious Christian). In addition 8.1 also assumes a backward step, where the theme of justification is introduced before proceeding on again to that of sanctification. Thus 7.14-25 may not be said to describe or to excuse moral failure on the part of the Christian. Instead, all of 7.7-25 moves toward the “availability of moral victory in Romans 8.1-17, a victory that is characteristic as well as possible”.

Reflectional interpretation

Among others, Paul Althaus³ is of the persuasion that Romans 7 depicts the plight of the non-Christian (man under the Law) from the vantage point of the Christian. At the outset of his discussion Althaus underscores the necessity of approaching the exegetical question from a purely historical perspective, attempting thereby to determine precisely what the apostle himself intended in the context. He notes that this guideline is of the utmost importance, since in the history of the exegesis of this chapter the interpreter’s theological presuppositions have often determined the meaning found in the text.

For Althaus, at least one thing is certain: In spite of the shift to the present tense in 7.14-25, this entire passage is an elaboration of “for when we were in the flesh” of verse 5. In contrast verse 6 describes the present: The Spirit is now

³ *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Das Neue Testament Deutsch, 1971) 77-81. This is, in general, the position reached in C.E.B. Cranfield’s recent volume on Romans in the *New International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, vol. 2 1979), 342-7.

that 25a stands between 24 and 25b. But this is no real problem, since 25a does not actually contain an answer to 24, but merely a brief shout of thanksgiving.

Kümmel draws several conclusions from his analysis of chapter 7. (1) Although the chapter appears in the context of Paul's discussion of the consequences of justification for the life of the believer, it does not really deal with this subject, at least not from the same perspective as the chapters which surround it. (2) 7.7-24 is a reasoned argument in defense of the Law, affirming the impossibility of drawing a purely logical conclusion from 7.7a: "Shall we say, then, that the Law itself is sinful?" (TEV). Paul's allusion to his own experience is merely the medium through which he chooses to demonstrate the holiness of the Law; it does not in any way intimate that Paul's own life is the subject under discussion. (3) The intention of 7.7-13 is a defense of the Law. Paul's account of man's struggle under the Law connects with the theme of 6.23, by which the man of 7.14-25 is contrasted with that of 8.1-17. Thus the employment of the first person singular represents not only Paul's own confession, but it simulataneously becomes the medium through which Paul identifies himself with his readers, as he does in 8.4-17. To recapitulate: Chapter 7 appears in the context of Paul's defense of the Law, and as such it is not intended to be autobiographical. Its position between chapters 6 and 8 establishes a contrast between the subjects (or at least between the viewpoints) of chapters 7 and 8. Finally, the description of the "I" cannot be merely personal, limited to Paul himself.

Who then is the subject of Romans 7? Kümmel notes that the most frequent answer is Paul himself. In particular modern exegetes have placed special weight on the observation that in 7.7-13 Paul speaks of himself. Since it is unthinkable that this describes Paul's life as a Christian, the only option is to see here Paul's experience as a Jew. But most interpreters of this persuasion narrow the time down to that of Paul's childhood: "I did not know" and "I was alive" are viewed as descriptive of the paradise-like experience of his childhood, the period before he became conscious of the guilt of sin.

To this Kümmel objects: In context "I was alive" means "I was truly alive", and it is unthinkable that Paul would have spoken of his pre-conversion experience in such terms. He interpreted his Pharisaic past as loss (Philippians 3.7) and his conversion as a new creation (2 Cor 4.6—5.17); he saw genuine religious zeal in Judaism, but not according to knowledge (Rom 10.2). Moreover, Paul makes a sharp distinction between the pre-Christian and the Christian life (1 Cor 6.11). Thus it is all but impossible to interpret "I was alive" as a description of Paul's childhood.

Moreover, to assume that Paul was once alive "apart from the Law" contradicts the Jewish teaching that a child is under the Law from his earliest days. Even if it is true that the Jewish boy was responsible for the entire Law from age 13 (that is, at puberty) onward, there were some specific commands that had to be obeyed at a much earlier age. In addition there is not any really convincing evidence that the *bar mitzvah* itself was actually instituted until the Middle Ages, which would automatically rule out this supposed interpretation of the text. In reality there is never a moment in the Jewish boy's life when he is "apart from the Law".

Other interpretations are swiftly discredited (the Jewish people; mankind

represented in Adam; the psychological development which takes place in every person), by showing that none of them finds support in the context. Kümmel then argues that the only viable alternative is the rhetorical interpretation, a stylistic feature found as well in other of the Pauline correspondence. This interpretation also has in its favor: (1) It eliminates the difficulties found by the other interpretations; (2) the original recipients of the letter would have understood the "I" in this way; and (3) the shift from the aorist of 7.7-13 to the present 7.14-24 no longer occasions any difficulty: the aorists tell of the occasion which the Law used to kill man, while the presents describe the continuing circumstances brought about by this event.

According to Kümmel, the question "Who is the subject?" may be wrongly phrased. Actually the subject is no one and everyone; it is best expressed by "one", since the reference is not to anyone in particular, but to everyone in general. It is a more or less hypothetical presentation of the truth that sin uses the Law as a means of bringing death to man, and that man under the Law cannot redeem himself from this predicament. Thus "I was alive" is used in the pregnant sense (= "I was truly alive"), while "once" is used of no definite point in time, but rather of the total life situation.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the lengthy and complex exegetical history of Romans 7, it seems almost presumptuous to assume that one could possibly make a fresh contribution toward the solution of the riddle surrounding the "I". Nevertheless, even on the basis of this abbreviated review of the problem, it may be possible to draw together a few observations that have emerged relevant to the interpretation and translation of the pronoun.

(1) It is all but axiomatic that Paul's *primary goal* in the chapter is that of *defining the role of the Law in the history of salvation*. To accomplish this aim he must simultaneously affirm its divine origin and deny its ability to establish a person in a right relation with God. Thus his real concerns are neither psychological nor metaphysical, but rather theological, occasioned by the practical problem of the actual existence of the Law.⁵ Paul hopes to destroy at its very roots the Jewish belief that righteousness may be established through the Law; only through the work of Christ, which makes possible the possession of God's Spirit, may this be accomplished.⁶ Although Paul concedes that the original intention of the Law may have been to bring life, he notes in the same breath that in reality it brought death (7.10).

(2) In the first instance Paul addresses himself to the problem of the Jewish Law, but he intends as well to make his words applicable to persons beyond the sphere of its influence. Thus his commentary on the Mosaic legislation has implications for the entire Gentile world to which God has revealed himself through the "laws" of conscience and nature (1.18-20). In this respect Jews and Gentiles share a common experience: they each have encountered God's "law" and have been shattered by it. So it is that verses 14-25, in which may be found

⁵ Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966), 178.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

certain parallels to the Jewish concepts of “the good impulse” and “the evil impulse”, apply equally well to man under the natural “law”.

(3) The tenth commandment, used by Paul to illustrate the power of sin, is not to be limited to the notion of lust. This was definitely not the original intent of the commandment, and there is nothing in Romans 7 that intimates of such an exclusive interpretation of it. To the contrary, this commandment is the most inclusive of all those which govern human relationships, and Paul may well have chosen it as an illustration precisely for this reason. To argue for an autobiographical “I” on the basis of this interpretation is thereby excluded.

(4) The so-called “age of innocence” (7.9-10) need not (and, I think, does not!) refer to the time in Paul’s life before he became *bar mitzvah* with its assumed arousal of sexual desire.⁷ It remains to be demonstrated that Paul has the *bar mitzvah* in mind, and if he did, to what degree he would be willing to limit the tenth commandment to that of lust. Michel⁸ draws attention to the manner in which Paul consistently places himself on the opposite side of the fence from the rabbis with regard to the Law, and there is no *a priori* reason to assume that he would not have done otherwise with respect to the interpretation of the *bar mitzvah* as well. Moreover, the evidence that the *bar mitzvah* even existed in Paul’s day is not altogether convincing.

(5) The “I” of Romans 7 is best understood as descriptive of man wrenched apart under the rule of the Law. Its closest analogy would then be the historical-paradigmatic usage of “I” in Galatians 2,⁹ as the following observations suggest: (a) In Galatians Paul is definitely addressing himself to Jewish believers who are concerned with the role of the Law in salvation (2.15-16); (b) in both letters Paul notes that the Law became an instrument of death to the “I” (Romans 7.9; Galatians 2.19); and (c) in each of the two passages Paul shifts between the first person singular and plural. But even in his portrayal of man under the Law, Paul cannot divorce himself entirely from his Christian perspective. This at least in part accounts for the apparent inconsistencies and/or contradictions which interpreters find in Romans 7 and in other places where Paul delineates this struggle.¹⁰

(6) Whether or not Paul is speaking in the first instance of himself, it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that he intends to include others (whether Christians or non-Christians) together with himself in the description of the “I”. Therefore, *Die Gute Nachricht*’s choice of “wir Menschen” (we human beings) for 7.7, followed by “wir” (“we”) and “uns” (“us”) (the contextual equivalent of a first person inclusive form) throughout the remainder of the chapter, would appear to suit best the demands of the context.

⁷ W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism. Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), 21-22, says of “the evil impulse”: “It seems, moreover, that it was especially, though not exclusively, connected with sexual sins, sexual passion or lust; it was the force that led men particularly to unchastity and idolatry”.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, 168.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 171, note 4.

¹⁰ Michel, *op. cit.*, p. 171 notes the parallel between the Pauline “I” and that of the petitioner in the Qumran *Book of Hymns*, who frequently describes his present in a manner similar to that of fallen man (see 1.21ff; 3.23ff; 4.29-30). Of special significance is the observation that the petitioner in the hymns is “Spirit filled” and is frequently the Teacher of Righteousness himself.

There remains only the matter of the role of verse 25 in the overall argument of the chapter. Since there is no textual evidence either for its deletion or for the placement of 25b between verses 23 and 24, the *only* valid solution is to allow the verse to stand where it is. In fact verse 25 performs a double function: 25a ("Thanks to God who accomplishes this through Jesus Christ") is an abbreviated response to the problem raised in 7.7-24, while 25b ("With my mind I serve the Law of God, but with my body I serve the 'law' of sin") contains a brief restatement of the problem in anticipation of the full reply which follows in chapter 8.¹¹ Thus in the translation of verse 25 it must be kept in mind that Paul's primary concern throughout the chapter is to delineate the place of the Law in the divine purpose, not to describe the psychological struggle of the believer or of the unbeliever. Viewed from this perspective verse 25 functions both to remind the readers that what the Law could not do (25b), the power of God was able to accomplish through Jesus Christ (25a).

¹¹ Ernest Best, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967).

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SOME COMMENTS ABOUT STYLE AND MEANING: 1 CORINTHIANS 9.15 AND 7.10

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Most Bible translators today recognize that the author's meaning has priority over the author's style. Nida and Taber set forth this concept quite clearly over a decade ago.¹ Obviously the translator will sometimes depart from an author's style when he or she considers it necessary in order to safeguard the meaning.

Rhetorical questions, for example, may mislead the reader; and they may therefore be translated more adequately as a statement.² I remember reading Romans 8.31-32 in the KJV as a child ("What shall we say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all . . ."), and thinking that it was God who would be against us. The GNB makes clear the answer to Paul's rhetorical question by translating 8.32a as "Certainly not God, who . . ."

I certainly agree that meaning has priority over style. But the more I study the New Testament writings in Greek and compare modern translations in several languages, the more I wonder if we have not sometimes gone too far in making the receptor language so stylistically smooth for the sake of readability then we actually ignore certain nuances which help us perceive a writer's emotions or thinking. This is nothing new. Scribes very early began polishing the style of the New Testament writings, improving harsh grammatical

¹ *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 13-14.

² *Ibid.*, 30.