

HERITAGE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

THE “I” OF ROMANS 7:14–25

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INTRODUCTION

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Rom 7:14–25 ESV)¹

When Paul says “I” in Rom 7:14–25, is he speaking as himself, that is, as a mature Christian and representative of Christians in general? Can Christians legitimately speak the words of “I” in Rom 7:14–25, or would doing so be an affront to the reality of their new life in Christ? These are not idle questions since the conclusions that one reaches will impact how one understands anthropology, sanctification, and the extent to which a Christian’s salvation is already complete.² If “I” in Rom 7:7–25 is understood as “I, Paul,” then Paul speaks first of his past self in 7:7–12 and then of his present self, as a representative mature Christian, in 7:14–25, with 7:13 serving as a transition verse. Such an understanding of the text is what will be argued for in this paper. The

¹ All biblical quotations in this paper come from the ESV.

² James D. G. Dunn, “Romans 7:14-25 in the Theology of Paul,” in *Essays on Apostolic Themes: Studies in Honor of Howard M. Ervin*, ed. Paul Elbert (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 49.

thesis of this paper is that in Rom 7:14–25, the “I” who speaks is Paul speaking of his present state as a mature Christian and in a way that is representative of Christians in general.

First, the history of interpretation of Rom 7 will be surveyed with special attention given to the Restoration Movement. After the historical survey, the idea of Rom 7:7–25 being a speech-in-character will be assessed. Next, the challenge that Rom 7:25 presents to views other than the Christian Paul view will be highlighted. A positive argument for the Christian Paul view of Rom 7:14–25 will then be set forth. The text of Rom 7:1–8:1 will be analyzed and specific reasons in support of the Christian Paul view of 7:14–25 will be highlighted. After presenting a positive argument, common objections to the Christian Paul view will be addressed. Finally, some of the pastoral implications of identifying “I” in Rom 7:14–25 as Christian Paul will be considered. The audience of Romans is assumed to be a mixture of Jew and Gentile – debates concerning the audience of Romans, whether it is mixed or exclusively Gentile, will not be entered into in this paper.

Options for Identifying “I” in Romans 7:14–25

Over the centuries, there have been a number of different proposals for identifying the “I” of Rom 7. To complicate matters, some commentators have argued for hybrid solutions, making a clear categorization of views difficult.³ Also, while most commentators believe that the “I” of 7:14–25 has the same identity as the “I” of 7:7–12, some see a change in identity between the two sections. The argument of this paper is that the identity of the “I” remains Paul throughout

³ E.g., Douglas Moo argues that the “I” is properly understood as Israel, but also contains an autobiographical element: Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 452. Likewise, J. Christiaan Beker argues that Rom 7 is primarily a Christian perspective of Jewish life, but that an autobiographical element must be admitted if the chapter is to be intelligible: J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 241.

Rom 7, referring first to his past experience and then to his present experience. Despite the complexities, it is possible to give a general outline of the popular options for identifying the “I” in 7:14–25. It is perhaps easiest to divide the views into two broad categories – autobiographical and non-autobiographical – and then to list the sub-categories:⁴

1. Autobiographical

1.1. Christian Paul (i.e., Paul speaking representatively as a mature Christian)⁵

1.2. Pre-Christian Paul⁶

1.3. Paul as a Weak and Immature Christian⁷

1.4. Mediating Positions⁸

⁴ This categorization, with some modification, is taken from Stephen Voorwinde, “Romans 7 – A History of Interpretation,” *Vox Reformanda* (2018): 74–94.

⁵ E.g., Augustine in his later years: Augustine, “A Treatise against Two Letters of the Pelagians” 1.13–24, in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (NPNF¹ 5:381–385); Martin Luther, *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, LCC 15 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1961), 200; John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Francis Sibson, ed. Timothy George (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2022), 162–164; C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975; repr. 1990), 1.342–347; Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 49–70; Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949), 285; Jack Cottrell, *Romans*, 2 vols, College Press NIV Commentary Series (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998), 1.441–445.

⁶ E.g., William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1896), 185–186; Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 444–445; David L. Roper, *Romans 1–7: A Doctrinal Study*, Truth for Today Commentary (Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 2013), 433; Stephen J. Chester, “The Retrospective View of Romans 7: Paul’s Past in Present Perspective,” in *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: 3 Views of Romans 7*, ed. Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 57–110; Frank Thielman, *Romans*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 369; Joseph R. Dodson and Mattie Mae Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives: Reframing Romans 7 for the Christian Life* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2024), 30; Robert H. Gundry, “The Moral Frustration of Paul Before His Conversion,” in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F.F. Bruce on his 70th Birthday*, eds. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), 228.

⁷ E.g., John F. Hart, “Paul as Weak in Faith in Romans 7:7–25,” *BSac* 170 (2013): 317–343; R.C. Bell, *Studies in Romans* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation, 1957), 64–70. Cf. Grant Osborne, “The Flesh Without the Spirit: Romans 7 and Christian Experience,” in Wilder, *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin*, 6–56.

⁸ E.g., Mark A. Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14–25,” *NovT* 34 (1992): 313–333; Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 396–398. Will N. Timmins, for all points and purposes, lands within the “Christian Paul” view, but wishes to separate himself from that view, insisting that Rom 7:14–25 expresses a *Christian’s* experience, but not a *Christian* experience: Will N. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity: A Study of the ‘I’ in its Literary Context*, SNTSMS 170 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017; repr. 2019), 205.

2. Non-Autobiographical

2.1. Generic “I” (i.e., the universal “everyman”)⁹

2.2. A man at the edge of conversion to Christianity¹⁰

2.3. Adam and those still “in Adam”¹¹

2.4. Eve¹²

2.5. Israel¹³

2.6. An “akratic” Gentile (i.e., a Gentile trying and failing to live by Torah)¹⁴

2.7. Man striving under law¹⁵

⁹ E.g., Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 531–532; Paul W. Meyer, “The Worm at the Core of the Apple: Exegetical Reflections on Romans 7,” in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul & John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, eds. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly R. Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 62–84.

¹⁰ E.g., Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 7:1–8:4, The Law: Its Functions and Limits* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973; repr. 1995), 254–257.

¹¹ E.g., Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 179, 188–189.

¹² E.g., Nicholas A. Elder, “‘Wretch I Am!’: Eve’s Tragic Speech-in-Character in Romans 7:7–25,” *JBL* 137 (2018): 743–763; Austin Busch, “The Figure of Eve in Romans 7:5–25,” *BibInt* 12 (2004): 1–36.

¹³ E.g., Douglas J. Moo, “Israel and Paul in Romans 7:7–12,” *NTS* 32 (1986): 122–135; N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in vol. 10 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 552; Daniel Napier, “Paul’s Analysis of Sin and Torah in Romans 7:7–25,” *ResQ* 44 (2002): 20–22; J. V. Fesko, *Romans, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 182–184; Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 321.

¹⁴ See especially the works of Stanley K. Stowers: “Romans 7.7–25 as a Speech-in-Character (προσωποποιία),” in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 198–202; “Apostrophe, Προσωποποιία and Paul’s Rhetorical Education,” in *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, eds. John T. Fitzgerald, Thomas H. Olbricht, and L. Michael White, *NovTSup* 110 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), 366–367; *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 260–273.

¹⁵ E.g., Isaiah Boone Grubbs, *Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: An Exegetical and Analytical Commentary*, (Bowling Green, KY: Gospel Armory, 2024; originally 1913), 89–91; Werner Georg Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament According to Its Major Witnesses: Jesus–Paul–John*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville; New York: Abingdon, 1973), 177; Rudolf Bultmann, “Romans 7 and the Anthropology of Paul,” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Living Age Books, 1960), 147–157; Jan Lambrecht, “Man Before and Without Christ: Rom 7 and Pauline Anthropology,” *LS* 5 (1974): 30–33.

As mentioned above, it is impossible to create a strict taxonomy for identifications of the “I” in Rom 7. Some interpreters fit neatly into a single category, while others promote elements of multiple categories or even complicate matters further by introducing new elements into the debate.

Regarding the Pre-Christian Paul view, there are two alternative positions. One position is to identify Rom 7:7–25 as the words of Paul the Pharisee; in other words, what Paul was actually thinking and feeling before he became a Christian. It is primarily this version of the Pre-Christian Paul view that came under attack by Werner Kümmel, Krister Stendahl, and E. P. Sanders in the 20th century. The alternative Pre-Christian Paul position is to understand 7:7–25 as pre-Christian Paul, but in Christian-hindsight. On this view, 7:7–25 is Paul’s Christian analysis of his actual condition before his conversion. Today, this latter view is usually what is in mind when “I” is identified as Pre-Christian Paul; however, commentators past and present are not always careful to distinguish whether they believe 7:7–25 reflects Paul the Pharisee’s *actual* thoughts or the thoughts of Paul the Christian reflecting back on his previous state.

HISTORICAL SURVEY

Rather than an exhaustive survey of the history of interpretation, the following will be a survey of historical trends within various historical groups.¹⁶ This will allow the broad strokes of the history of interpretation to be understood and will also highlight how otherwise identifiable

¹⁶ For an excellent survey of the interpretation of Rom 7, see Voorwinde, “Romans 7,” 74–94. An interesting historical survey and analysis of the interplay between the interpretation of Rom 7 and the interpreter’s view of conversion can be found in Stephen J. Chester, “Romans 7 and Conversion in the Protestant Tradition,” *Ex Auditu* 25 (2009): 135–171. An historical survey from a pro-Origen perspective can be found in Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 67–84. Finally, for a thorough yet accessible historical survey of the interpretation of Romans in general, see Stephen Westerholm, *Romans: Text, Readers, and the History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

groups are remarkably diverse in their interpretation of Rom 7. The patristic period, reformation period, the New Perspective on Paul, and Paul within Judaism will first be surveyed. Special attention will then be given to the history of interpretation of Rom 7 within the Restoration Movement.

Patristic Period

Generally speaking, the Greek fathers preferred to avoid identifying Paul with “I” in Rom 7:14–25 while the Latin fathers were more likely to identify “I” as Paul; however, this generality is not without exception. Among Greek commentators, Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254) argued that, beginning in Rom 7:14, Paul makes use of *personae* in order to represent the moral ascent of one struggling with natural law, converting to Christianity, and striving towards perfection.¹⁷ For Origen, Paul’s “apostolic dignity” prohibits identifying him with the description of Rom 7:14–25.¹⁸ Similar to Origen, John Chrysostom (347–407) identifies Paul as “giving us a sketch now of man, as comporting himself in the Law, and before the Law.”¹⁹ According to Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 375–444), Paul is exploring the depravity of human nature – especially of those apart from Christ – and in doing so “masterfully dons the character of one who is still sick with love of the flesh.”²⁰ Like Origen, Cyril also makes clear that he believes Paul is above such descriptions as

¹⁷ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Books 6-10*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, FC 104 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 36–44.

¹⁸ Origen, *Romans*, 36.

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, “Homily XIII” in *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (NPNF¹ 11.427).

²⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentaries on Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Hebrews*, trans. David R. Maxwell, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 57.

are found in 7:14–25.²¹ The outlier among the Greeks is Methodius of Olympus (d. 311), who does identify Paul as speaking autobiographically in 7:14–25; however, he limits the “doing what I do not want” to evil thoughts, not actions.²²

Among the early Latin commentators, Tertullian (ca. 155–ca. 220), in his tract *On Modesty*, argues that when Paul says no good dwells in his flesh, he is referring to his life before Christ, for those in Christ are freed from such “infirmity of the flesh.”²³ Ambrosiaster (4th century), anticipating later arguments in favor of the Christian Paul view, believes Paul is speaking of himself in 7:14–25 in light of the fact that he has been regenerated by Christ yet remains bound to his Adamic body until the resurrection.²⁴ Jerome (ca. 347–420), likewise, identifies Paul as speaking autobiographically in 7:14–25 of his Christian experience.²⁵ Pelagius (ca. 354–ca. 418), unsurprisingly, does not apply 7:14–25 to Christian Paul, but takes Paul to be speaking in the voice of one “who accepts the law and is in the habit of living carnally.”²⁶

Finally, Augustine (354–430) is (in)famous for changing his view on the identity of the “I” in Rom 7.²⁷ Originally, he identified Paul as speaking of his life before Christ, but later

²¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Romans*, 57.

²² Methodius of Olympus, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* 2.1-3 (ANF 6.370–372).

²³ Tertullian, *On Modesty* 17 (ANF 4.93).

²⁴ Ambrosiaster, *Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians*, trans. Gerald L. Bray, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 59–61.

²⁵ Jerome, “The Letters of St. Jerome,” 133.1–2, 8–9 (NPNF¹ 6.272–273, 277–278); Jerome, *Jerome’s Apology for Himself Against the Books of Rufinus* 1.25 (NPNF¹ 3.496).

²⁶ Pelagius, *Pelagius’s Commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Theodore De Bruyn, (Oxford: Clarendon; Oxford University Press, 1993), 103.

²⁷ For Augustine’s own account of this change, see his *Retractions* 1.22.1, trans. Mary Inez Bogan, FC 60 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 97. Cf. Marleen Verschoren, ““I Do the Evil That I Do Not Will”: Augustine and Julian on Romans 7:5-25 during the Second Pelagian Controversy (418-430),” *Augustiniana* 54 (2004): 223–242; Christopher T. Bounds, “Augustine’s Interpretation of Romans 7:14–25: His *Ordo Salutis* and His Consistent Belief in a Christian’s Victory over Sin,” in *The Continuing Relevance of Wesleyan Theology: Essays in Honor of Lawrence W. Wood*, ed. Nathan Crawford (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 15–27.

became convinced that Paul was speaking in 7:14–25 of his life as a Christian; nevertheless, like Methodius before him, Augustine limits Paul’s struggle to evil thoughts, not actions.²⁸

Augustine’s reversal came in the context of the 5th century Pelagian controversy, and for this reason his change of mind is sometimes dismissed as being based on polemics rather than exegesis.²⁹ In Augustine’s defense, it is possible that the Pelagian controversy was the impetus for further clarification of thought and exegesis; that he changed his mind in the midst of a polemically charged environment, but not at the expense of exegesis. It seems that the most charitable reading of Augustine would be to take him at his word when he says that his change of mind was the result of reflection after reading “certain commentators on the Sacred Scriptures whose authority moved me.”³⁰

Excursus: Should Early Interpreters Sway Our Opinion?

The fact that there is a clear bias among the earliest Greek commentators against identifying “I” as Christian Paul does at first blush appear to be problematic for such an identification – after all, perhaps they, being closer in time, space, and culture to Paul, saw something that we do not. This preference of the early commentators, while it should be taken into consideration, does not make the Christian Paul view untenable for two reasons. First, while there is a preference against the Christian Paul view, it is not without exception in the written record.³¹ And second, it is possible that the early commentators, with their high view of both Paul and sanctification (even

²⁸ Augustine, “A Treatise against Two Letters of the Pelagians” 1.18–24 (*NPNF*¹ 5.383–385).

²⁹ E.g., Voorwinde, “Romans 7,” 77–78; Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle*, 70–73; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 21–22.

³⁰ Augustine, *The Retractions* 1.22.1, 97.

³¹ As Chester notes in “Romans 7 and Conversion,” 170, “it is simply not possible to discover pre-Augustinian purity in the interpretation of Rom 7.”

perfection), may have had an ulterior motive for avoiding the Christian Paul view; namely, to protect “Saint” Paul’s character.³² For these two reasons, and especially because there is a possible ulterior motive, the early Greek bias against the Christian Paul view does not prove decisive.

Reformation Period

While Protestants and Roman Catholics divided neatly over many issues, the identity of the “I” was not one of them. Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466–1536), rejected the idea that Paul is speaking of his life as a Christian, suggesting instead that “Paul assumes the persona of the whole human race: as a pagan, he is outside the Law; as a Jew he is carnal under the Law; and as spiritual he has been freed through grace.”³³ Thomas Cajetan (ca.1468–ca.1534) and some other prominent Roman Catholics, on the other hand, believe Paul is speaking of his personal experience in his struggle towards perfection.³⁴ Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) each concluded that when Paul says “I” in Rom 7:14–25, he is speaking of himself as a representative Christian who continues to fight against sin.³⁵ This view was predominant among those immediately following Luther and Calvin, but with the Remonstrants came a significant party within Protestantism who rejected such an interpretation. Most prominently, Jacob (“James”) Arminius (1560–1609) presented a thorough defense of his position – that Paul speaks with the

³² Lauri Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” in *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible: Essays from the 1998 Florence Conference*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Dennis Stamps, JSNTSup 195 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 423–425. Cf. Origen, *Romans*, 36.

³³ Desiderius Erasmus, *Annotations on Romans*, Collected Works of Erasmus 56, trans. John B. Payne, Albert Rabil Jr., Robert D. Sider, and Warren S. Smith Jr. (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 197.

³⁴ David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 112–113.

³⁵ Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 200–216; Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 162–164.

persona of a man under the law, not as a Christian – in his *Dissertation on the True and Genuine Sense of the Seventh Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans*.³⁶ The debate over the identity of “I” continued, but it was not until the 20th century that the next major advance in the debate occurred.

20th Century: Werner G. Kümmel

Due to his influence on contemporary discussions of Rom 7, Werner G. Kümmel stands as a category to himself. Kümmel, in his 1929 monograph *Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus*, argued for a rhetorical use of “I” that does not necessarily include the speaker (i.e., Paul).³⁷ This idea is recognized as clearing the way for modern arguments in favor of a rhetorical, or fictive “I” (e.g., “I” as Adam, Israel, humanity in general, etc.) which have become highly influential.³⁸ Despite serving as the fount from which much of the modern discussion of Rom 7 springs, Kümmel’s own solution to the question of the “I” (i.e., that “I” is non-Christian humanity in general, and not Paul) is generally not followed without significant modification.

³⁶ James Arminius, “Dissertation on the True and Genuine Sense of the Seventh Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans,” in vol. 2 of *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. by James Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 2.471–683.

³⁷ Werner Georg Kümmel, *Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus*, UNT 17 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1929). Unfortunately, this monograph has not been translated into English; however, cf. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament*, 177. For analysis of Kümmel’s position, see Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 420–433; Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14-25,” 313–315.

³⁸ As Will N. Timmins rightly points out, Stowers’ speech-in-character thesis should be traced back to Kümmel, not to Origen as Stowers claims: Will N. Timmins, “Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character: A Critical Evaluation of Stower’s Hypothesis,” *ZNW* 107 (2016): 114n89.

New Perspective on Paul

Among advocates of the New Perspective on Paul (henceforth, NPP), there is no unanimity on identifying the “I” of Rom 7.³⁹ The representative figures of the NPP to be considered below are Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright.

Krister Stendahl

According to Krister Stendahl, Rom 7 is not at all about Paul’s “cloven ego or predicament” – whether Christian or not – but is exclusively Paul’s argument that the law is good.⁴⁰ Stendahl emphasizes that Paul is not being introspective in Rom 7 and that the “introspective reading” of the text is a product of later Western culture. According to Stendahl, it is only because of the influence of Augustine and Luther and the fact that Paul wrote his argument in Rom 7 “so well” that his words in Rom 7 came to be perceived as “a most penetrating insight into the nature of man and into the nature of sin.”⁴¹ Regarding Stendahl’s oft-repeated charge against Luther – that Luther projected his own experience onto Paul and thus ran into exegetical error – it is worth noting that such charges against Luther seem to fail under scrutiny.⁴² While Stendahl’s article has proven highly influential, his exact interpretation of Rom 7 has generally not been followed.

³⁹ James D. G. Dunn provides a good overview of the NPP in “The New Perspective: Whence, What, and Whither?” in *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–97.

⁴⁰ Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215. For a critique of Stendahl’s analysis, see John M. Espy, “Paul’s ‘Robust Conscience’ Re-Examined,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 161–188.

⁴¹ Stendahl, “Introspective Conscience,” 200, 213. Cf. Bruce Morrison and John Woodhouse, “The Coherence of Romans 7:1-8:8,” *RTR* 47 (1988): 8.

⁴² Stephen J. Chester, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of Martin Luther: The Impact of Luther’s *Anfechtungen* on His Interpretation of Paul,” *BibInt* 14 (2006): 508–536.

E. P. Sanders

E. P. Sanders approaches Rom 7 with the idea that Paul is expressing his solution to the dilemma of Christianity's relationship to the Mosaic law.⁴³ Sanders believes that Paul is self-contradictory due in part to his mental momentum which moves in one direction until a dilemma / contradiction in his thinking becomes apparent, at which point he doubles back and makes clarifications (which in turn lead to more contradiction and dilemma).⁴⁴ The supposed dilemma for which Paul is developing a solution in Rom 7 is his dual convictions of the goodness of the law and of the ultimate failure of the law to produce righteousness.⁴⁵ Like Stendahl, Sanders puts the Mosaic law at the center of Rom 7, but unlike Stendahl, Sanders does believe that Paul is also addressing "the *universal* human condition apart from Christ."⁴⁶ In Rom 7:7–25, Paul emphasizes that humans are fleshly and, because they are subjected to the law of sin while they strive to follow the law of God, are unable to achieve righteousness under the law and apart from Christ. It is the sending of the Son and the coming of the Spirit, as expressed in Rom 8, that proves to be the solution: those with the Spirit are now enabled to fulfill the law.⁴⁷

James D. G. Dunn

James D. G. Dunn, while promoting (and even giving the name to) the NPP, nevertheless follows in the steps of Luther and Calvin when it comes to Rom 7:14–25. Dunn does, however, believe that Paul is speaking primarily as Adam in 7:7–12 before speaking as his own Christian self in

⁴³ E. P. Sanders, "Romans 7 and the Purpose of the Law," *PIBA* 7 (1983): 44–59.

⁴⁴ Sanders, "Romans 7," 52.

⁴⁵ Sanders, "Romans 7," 49.

⁴⁶ Sanders, "Romans 7," 48.

⁴⁷ Sanders, "Romans 7," 50.

7:14–25.⁴⁸ For Dunn, the key to understanding this passage is the “dialectic” of living in the tension of now-and-not-yet.⁴⁹ The Christian has in fact been set free from the domain of sin in the *now*, and yet has *not yet* been freed from the weakened fleshly state that he continues to inhabit until his resurrection. It is this tension of spiritual renewal awaiting bodily renewal that leads to Paul’s, and every Christian’s, continual struggle against sin as expressed in Rom 7:14–25.

N. T. Wright

Finally, N. T. Wright acknowledges the same tension of the “I” as noted by Dunn, but then goes on to identify the “I” as Israel receiving the law at Sinai and continuing to try to fulfill it.⁵⁰ He is careful to note, however, that Paul the Pharisee would have been included in this Israelite “I”. He also clarifies that the description of “I” in Rom 7 is from Paul’s Christian perspective, not from the perspective of Israel.⁵¹

Paul within Judaism

A relatively new movement within scholarship is the Paul within Judaism school (henceforth, PWJ) – at times also referred to as the Radical (New) Perspective on Paul. Like the NPP, proponents of PWJ hold diverse views on many aspects of Pauline studies; however, the unifying ideas of PWJ include: 1) Paul always remained a Torah-observant Jew, 2) Christian Jews were

⁴⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 374, 381, 412. For Dunn’s most focused treatment of Rom 7, see Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 49–70. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 472–477.

⁴⁹ Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 58–64; Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 474–477.

⁵⁰ Wright, “Romans,” 551–552.

⁵¹ Wright, “Romans,” 552.

expected to continue observing Torah while Christian Gentiles were forbidden to Judaize by observing Torah, and 3) Paul's letters were written *exclusively* to Gentiles.⁵² Crucial for the study of Rom 7 is the insistence by PWJ advocates that Paul is writing exclusively to a Gentile audience. Such constraints have brought forth some novel approaches to the identity of the "I" of Rom 7. One suggestion, popularized by Stanley K. Stowers, is that the "I" is a Gentile (perhaps the same person as "the interlocutor" of Rom 2) expressing his frustrating inability to observe Torah.⁵³ Such an individual is sometimes given the title "akratic Gentile," alluding to the Greco-Roman idea of *akrasia*, the desiring to do good yet lacking the ability to carry it out.⁵⁴

Another suggestion, made by Mark D. Nanos, identifies the "I" of Rom 7 as Paul describing his struggle of discriminating against Gentiles.⁵⁵ The "coveting" of which Paul speaks is his jealous, prideful guarding of the Jewish distinctives of circumcision and Torah which Paul was only able to overcome after his recognition that, in Christ, Jews and Gentiles are now (separate, but) equal.⁵⁶ Evident in both of these suggestions is a creativity necessitated by the constraints of PWJ.

⁵² For an introduction to PWJ, see especially Mark D. Nanos, "Introduction," and Magnus Zetterholm, "Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions," in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 1–29, 31–51. See also Paula Fredriksen, "What Does It Mean to See Paul 'within Judaism'?" *JBL* 141 (2022): 359–380. For a very inciteful analysis, see Philip la Grange Du Toit, "The Radical New Perspective on Paul, Messianic Judaism and Their Connection to Christian Zionism," *HTS Theological Studies* 73 (2017): 1–8. For interaction with and critique of PWJ as it relates to Romans, see Stephen Westerholm, *Romans: Text, Readers, and the History of Interpretation*, 46–75.

⁵³ Stowers, "Speech-in-Character," 198–202; Stowers, "Apostrophe," 366–367; Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 273. Cf. Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017), 123–124. Tentatively supported by Michael F. Bird, *Romans. The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 233.

⁵⁴ Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 260–264. However, applying the idea of *akrasia* to the "I" of Rom 7 may be a category error according to Ronald V. Huggins, "Alleged Classical Parallels to Paul's 'What I Want to Do I Do Not Do, but What I Hate, That I Do' (Rom 7:15)," *WTJ* 54 (1992): 155–161.

⁵⁵ Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 360–361.

⁵⁶ Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans*, 360–361.

The Restoration Movement

Like other groups, the Restoration Movement is far from unified when it comes to identifying the “I” of Rom 7. The closest thing to agreement is that “I” in Rom 7:14–25 is not Paul as a mature Christian.⁵⁷ The most prominent position found in the literature surveyed is that “I” is pre-Christian Paul. Another popular view identifies “I” as man striving for righteousness under law (whether natural or Mosaic). Table 1 lists the interpretations found within Restoration Movement publications. Some of the more prominent and/or interesting positions within the history of the Restoration Movement will be considered in additional detail below.

⁵⁷ Of the twenty-six sources surveyed, only seven identified “I” as Paul as a mature Christian. Personally, this is very surprising. Having been raised within churches of Christ, I have only ever heard the “I” of Rom 7 referenced as Paul speaking of himself as a representative Christian.

Table 1: Survey of Interpretations of “I” in Rom 7 within the Restoration Movement

Name	Original Publication Date	View of “I”
Stone, Barton W.	1833	Israel (7:7-13); Jew/Unconverted Man (7:14-24); conversion experience (7:25)
Mathis, James	1845	Israel
Branham, A.G.	1850	Pre-Christian Paul
Campbell, Alexander	1851	Christian Paul
Lard, Moses	1875	Christian Paul
Johnson, B.W.	1889	Pre-Christian Paul
Grubbs, Isaiah B.	1913	Man striving under law and/or with grace out of view
McGarvey, J.W. & Pendleton, Philip Y.	1916	Christian Paul
Lipscomb, David	1943	Pre-Christian Paul
Whiteside, Robertson L.	1945	Pre-Christian Paul
Bell, R.C.	1957	Christian Paul, but relying on own strength; in the process of sanctification through Rom 7–8
Moser, K.C.	1958	Pre-Christian Paul
DeWalt, Don	1959	Christian Paul, but especially when looking to his own strength and not to Christ
Bales, James D.	1969	Christian Paul
Batey, Richard A.	1969	Christian Paul
McGuiggan, Jim	1974	Pre-Christian Paul
Allen, Jimmy	1976	Man striving under law
Smelser, Jeff	1983	Man striving under law
Coffman, James B.	1984	Pre-Christian Paul
Reese, Gareth	1987	Pre-Christian Paul
Hamilton, Clinton D.	1998	Pre-Christian Paul
Cottrell, Jack	1998	Christian Paul
Rogers, Richard	2002	Man striving under law
Roper, David L.	2013	Pre-Christian Paul
Pollard, Paul	2018	Christian Paul
Walters, James	2022	Man striving under law

Sources: Barton W. Stone, “Rom. 7 Chap.,” *The Christian Messenger* 7 (1833): 129–132; James M. Mathis, “Answer to ‘A Calvinist’ of Bedford, and James Hopkins, of Paris, and Notes on Rom. 7th & 8th Chaps. &c.,” *The Christian Record* 3 (1845): 88–94 (repr. Charleston, AR: Cobb Publishing 2022), 90–94; A.G. Branham, “Paraphrase of the 7th and part of the 8th Chapters to the Romans,” *Christian Magazine* 3 (1850): 228–230; Alexander Campbell, “Family Culture: Conversations at the Carlton House – No. XII,” “Family Culture: Conversations at the Carlton House – No. XIII,” “Family Culture: Conversations at the Carlton House – No. XIV,” *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (1851): 38–46, 97–103, 142–147 (repr. Joplin, MO: College Press, 1987); Moses E. Lard, *A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to Romans* (Delight, AK: Gospel Light; originally 1875), 236; B.W. Johnson, *The Epistles and Revelation*, vol. 2 of *The People’s New Testament* (St. Louis, MO: Christian Publishing Company, 1889), 32; Grubbs, *Romans*, 89–91; J.W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light; originally 1916), 354; David Lipscomb, *Romans*, vol. 1 of *A Commentary*

on the New Testament Epistles, ed. J.W. Shepherd, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1943), 136; Robertson L. Whiteside, *A New Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Saints at Rome*, 4th ed. (Denton, TX: Miss Inys Whiteside, 1955), 155; Bell, *Romans*, 64–70; K.C. Moser, *The Gist of Romans: An Exposition of the Principal Doctrines of the Epistle to the Romans*, rev. ed. (Delight, AK: Gospel Light, 1958), 77–86; Don DeWalt, *Romans Realized*, Bible Study Textbook Series (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1959), 110–111; James D. Bales, *Romans* (Shreveport, LA: Gussie Lambert, 1969; repr. Charleston, AR: Cobb Publishing, 2024), 45–48; Richard A. Batey, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, The Living Word Commentary (Austin, TX: R.B. Sweet, 1969), 92–104; Jim McGuiggan, *The Book of Romans*, Let the Bible Speak Study Series (West Monroe, LA: William C. Johnson, 1974), 77–80; Jimmy Allen, *Survey of Romans*, 2nd rev. ed. (Searcy, AR: Jimmy Allen, 1976), 72–73; Jeff Smelser, “An Analysis of Romans 7:7-25,” *Guardian of Truth* 27 (1983): 586, 598–601; James Burton Coffman, *Romans* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1984), 245–260; Gareth L. Reese, *Romans: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Moberly, MO: Scripture Exposition Books, 1987), 307, 320–328; Clinton D. Hamilton, *The Book of Romans*, Truth Commentaries (Athens, AL: Truth Publications, 1998; repr. 2018), 419, 433; Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.441–445; Richard Rogers, *Paid in Full: A Commentary on Romans*, (Lubbock, TX: Sunset Institute Press, 2002), 112–113; Roper, *Romans 1–7*, 433; Paul Pollard, *Romans: An Exegetical Study*, Truth for Today Commentary (Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 2018), 240–241; James Walters, “Romans,” in *Letters to the Early Churches: Romans to Revelation*, vol. 5 of *The Transforming Word*, rev. ed., ed. Mark W. Hamilton (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2022), 68.

Barton W. Stone: Israel and Conversion

Barton W. Stone (1772–1844) is an interesting outlier and presents a unique understanding of the “I” in Rom 7. Stone presents his view of Rom 7 in an 1833 publication of *The Christian Messenger* and makes it clear that “I” is by no means Paul as a Christian.⁵⁸ On Stone’s view, the “I” shifts between three different figures: Israel (7:7–13), Jews under the law and, by expansion, all unconverted people (7:14–24), and finally one undergoing conversion to Christ (7:25).⁵⁹ Also noteworthy is Stone’s handling of 7:25. As it is usually translated, 7:25 is awkward for the idea that a conversion to Christ is in view since the thanksgiving to God is followed by a reiteration of the tension in the life of “I”. Stone’s solution is to translate the final clause as a question instead of as a statement and then to supply the (supposedly) implied answer. The text would then read: “So then, do I with the mind serve the law of God, and with the flesh the law of sin? — No, my flesh — every member I yield to the service of God.”⁶⁰ This translation, however forced, was not

⁵⁸ Barton W. Stone, “Rom. 7 Chap.,” *The Christian Messenger* 7 (1833): 129–132.

⁵⁹ Stone, “Rom. 7 Chap.,” 131–132.

⁶⁰ Stone, “Rom. 7 Chap.,” 132.

unique to Stone, but was also advocated for in the popular translation and commentary of James MacKnight (1721–1800).⁶¹

Another Restoration Movement writer, James M. Mathis (1808–1892), writing in 1845 in *The Christian Record*, also argues that the “I” is Israel.⁶² However, unlike Stone, Mathis identifies the “I” as Israel throughout Rom 7 and does not propose a conversion experience. Instead, Mathis deals with the awkwardness of 7:25 by having Paul at this point “turn away” from the picture of Israel he has created, look to Christ, and, following MacKnight’s translation, have Paul ask whether he should at all serve sin, answering with a resounding “By no means.”⁶³

Alexander Campbell: Christian Paul

In a series of three skits in *The Millennial Harbinger* of 1851, written in the form of a family devotional conversation, Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) treats the topic of Rom 7 in some depth.⁶⁴ His conclusion concerning the “I” of Rom 7:14–25 is that Paul is expressing himself autobiographically and as a representative of Christians in general.⁶⁵ Campbell rejects the idea of Christian perfectionism and affirms the Christian’s lifelong struggle against sin.⁶⁶ After noting the potential parallel with Euripides’s *Medea* (which is quite interesting in light of modern

⁶¹ James MacKnight, *A New Literal Translation from the Original Greek, of all the Apostolic Epistles with Commentary, and Notes, Philological, Critical, Explanatory, and Practical* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1816; originally 1795), 1:291.

⁶² James M. Mathis, “Answer to “A Calvinist” of Bedford, and James Hopkins, of Paris, and Notes on Rom. 7th & 8th Chaps. &c.,” *The Christian Record* 3 (1845; repr. Charleston, AR: Cobb Publishing 2022), 91.

⁶³ Mathis, “Answer,” 93–94.

⁶⁴ Alexander Campbell, “Family Culture: Conversations at the Carlton House – No. XII,” “Family Culture: Conversations at the Carlton House – No. XIII,” “Family Culture: Conversations at the Carlton House – No. XIV,” *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (1851; repr. Joplin, MO: College Press, 1987): 38–46, 97–103, 142–147.

⁶⁵ Campbell, “Family Culture – No. XII,” *MH* 3 (1851): 45–46.

⁶⁶ Campbell, “Family Culture – No. XIII,” *MH* 3 (1851): 102–103.

discussions of such parallels), Campbell observes that the primary difference between Christians and pagans is not so much the desire or effort to do what is perceived to be right, but for whom that struggle is waged: for the Christian, it all centers on the desire to please the Lord Jesus.⁶⁷

In more traditional commentary style, J.W. McGarvey (1829–1911) and Moses E. Lard (1818–1880) also argue for the identification of “I” as Christian Paul.⁶⁸ More recently, Jack Cottrell (1938–2022) provides the most substantive argument among writers within the Restoration Movement for identifying the “I” as Christian Paul.⁶⁹

Isaiah Boone Grubbs: Man Striving under Law

Isaiah Boone Grubbs (1833–1912) is the first on record within the Restoration Movement to offer what is proposed as a “third-way” between viewing the “I” of Rom 7:14–25 as either a Christian or non-Christian. For Grubbs, “I” is not necessarily a Christian or non-Christian, but is any individual who is living his life under law and/or with grace out of view.⁷⁰ Grubbs agrees that a Christian continues to struggle against sin all his life, but reminds the reader that the Christian is set free from the condemnation of the law by the grace given through Christ.⁷¹ So, while neither Paul nor any Christian truly fits the description of 7:14–25 and is by no means in truth “wretched,” they could hypothetically consider themselves as such *if and only if* they do not

⁶⁷ Campbell, “Family Culture – No. XIV,” *MH* 3 (1851): 143–144, 146.

⁶⁸ J.W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans*, (Delight, AR: Gospel Light; originally 1916), 354; Moses E. Lard, *A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to Romans*, (Delight, AK: Gospel Light; originally 1875), 236.

⁶⁹ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.441–445.

⁷⁰ Grubbs, *Romans*, 90–91.

⁷¹ Grubbs, *Romans*, 90, 96.

keep God's grace in view.⁷² It seems that the best way to summarize Grubbs's point is that a non-Christian is in actuality "wretched" and fits the description of Rom 7:14–25, while a Christian is neither of those things in reality, but might consider himself as such if he loses sight of God's grace. Grubbs's view, with some modification, is supported by several individuals in the Restoration Movement including notable figures Jimmy Allen and Richard Rogers.⁷³

R.C. Bell: Sanctification

R.C. Bell (1877–1964) presents a unique synthesis of the Christian Paul and conversion views. Bell explains that Rom 7 is not about justification, but about sanctification.⁷⁴ Further, Bell argues that Rom 7–8 presents a picture of a man converting to Christianity and then growing towards full spiritual-maturity.⁷⁵ He suggests that Rom 7–8 may be following a pattern set out in 1 Cor 2–3 where Paul speaks of natural man (i.e., non-Christian), spiritual-carnal man (i.e., immature Christian), and spiritual-mature man (i.e., mature Christian). Following this proposed scheme, Rom 7:7–13 corresponds to the natural man, 7:14–25 to the spiritual-carnal man, and 8:1–17 to the spiritual-mature man.⁷⁶ For Bell, Paul is writing from the perspective of the spiritual-mature man of Rom 8, and is speaking throughout Rom 7:7–25 autobiographically / representatively of his conversion and sanctification experience. While Bell largely stands alone in the Restoration

⁷² Grubbs, *Romans*, 91, 96.

⁷³ Jimmy Allen, *Survey of Romans*, 2nd rev. ed. (Searcy, AR: Jimmy Allen, 1976), 72–73; Richard Rogers, *Paid in Full: A Commentary on Romans*, (Lubbock, TX: Sunset Institute Press, 2002), 112–113.

⁷⁴ Bell, *Studies in Romans*, 65.

⁷⁵ Bell, *Studies in Romans*, 64.

⁷⁶ Bell, *Studies in Romans*, 64.

Movement, his view is remarkably reminiscent of Origen's who likewise saw progressive sanctification in Rom 7–8.⁷⁷

James Burton Coffman: Pre-Christian Paul

James Burton Coffman (1905–2006), while by no means the first within the Restoration Movement to argue for understanding the “I” of Rom 7 as pre-Christian Paul, is perhaps the most vehement defender of this view in the Restoration Movement.⁷⁸ Against identifying “I” as Christian Paul, Coffman argues that Rom 6:11 takes precedence, reference to the Holy Spirit is lacking in Rom 7, and the “now” of Rom 8:1 is what brings the reader into Paul's present.⁷⁹ Coffman concedes that Christians struggle against sin and that Paul may even have had such struggle in the back of his mind when he wrote Rom 7; nevertheless, for Coffman, applying the words of Rom 7:14–25 to Christians “is as near an approach to blasphemy as may be found in modern writings” and is a source of great harm to the Church.⁸⁰ More recently, and much more moderately, the pre-Christian Paul position has been defended by David L. Roper.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Origen, *Romans*, 36–44.

⁷⁸ James Burton Coffman, *Romans* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1984), 245–260. Notable advocates prior to Coffman include B.W. Johnson, *The Epistles and Revelation*, vol. 2 of *The People's New Testament* (St. Louis, MO: Christian Publishing Company, 1889), 32; David Lipscomb, *Romans*, vol. 1 of *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles*, ed. J.W. Shepherd, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1943), 136; and Robertson L. Whiteside, *A New Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Saints at Rome*, 4th ed. (Denton, TX: Miss Inys Whiteside, 1955), 155.

⁷⁹ Coffman, *Romans*, 245–246.

⁸⁰ Coffman, *Romans*, 254, 260.

⁸¹ David L. Roper, *Romans 1–7: A Doctrinal Study*, Truth for Today Commentary (Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 2013), 433.

IS THE “I” OF ROMANS 7 A “SPEECH-IN-CHARACTER”?

Introduction to Speech-in-Character as it Relates to Romans 7

The *prima facie* reading of Rom 7 is to understand “I” as “I, Paul.” In order for this reading to be rejected in favor of identifying “I” as a person or entity other than Paul, it must be shown that such an identification would have been obvious to Paul’s original readers and auditors. After all, Paul is not writing to biblical scholars or deliberately trying to hide his point; he is writing to individuals of varying educational levels in order to persuade and encourage them. Paul does not give any special introduction to the “I” of Rom 7, so he must have assumed that his audience would be able to understand who “I” referred to. For “I” to mean other than “I, Paul,” it must be shown that there was some commonly understood rhetorical technique or abundantly clear contextual indication that would allow Paul’s original audience to recognize the non-Paul identity of “I”. Today, the most commonly appealed to rhetorical technique in this regard is the “speech-in-character.”

The idea of Paul speaking in the person of another is not new, but in the 20th century Stanley K. Stowers gave fresh life to the idea and has proven to be highly influential.⁸²

⁸² Stowers, “Speech-in-Character,” 180–202; Stowers, “Apostrophe,” 351–369; Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 260–273. Although reaching different conclusions as to the identity of “I”, many commentators support the general thesis of Rom 7 as a speech-in-character: Jewett, *Romans*, 442–445; Witherington III and Hyatt, *Romans*, 179–181; Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 625–626; Kruse, *Romans*, 299–300; Bird, *Romans*, 233; James Walters, “Romans,” in *Letters to the Early Churches: Romans to Revelation*, vol. 5 of *The Transforming Word*, rev. ed., ed. Mark W. Hamilton (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2022), 68; A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 227–231; Thielman, *Romans*, 369; Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle*, 123–124; Napier, “Paul’s Analysis of Sin and Torah,” 17–18; Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 227–245; Michael J. Gorman, *Romans: A Theological & Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 183, 186; Osborne, “The Flesh Without the Spirit,” 47. For what I would consider to be conclusive arguments against viewing Rom 7 as a speech-in-character, see Timmins, “Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character,” 94–115; Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 420–440; Bryan R. Dyer, ““I Do Not Understand What I Do”: A Challenge to Understanding Romans 7 as *Prosopopoeia*,” in *Paul and Ancient Rhetoric: Theory and Practice in the Hellenistic Context*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 186–205.

According to Stowers, Paul is using a common rhetorical technique in Rom 7 called *προσωποποιία*, which he translates as *speech-in-character*.⁸³ Stowers defines speech-in-character as, “a rhetorical and literary technique in which the speaker or writer produces speech that represents not himself or herself but another person or type of character.”⁸⁴ In other words, a speech-in-character is essentially a play script in which the author (or orator) completely assumes the character of another and begins to write / speak in that character’s voice. As outlined above, under the “non-autobiographical” options for “I” in Rom 7, some suggestions for the character speaking in Rom 7 are Adam, Eve, and a gentile trying to live according to the Mosaic law (i.e., an “akratic-gentile”). Some commentators combine the Pre-Christian view with the idea of speech-in-character so that Paul is writing a speech-in-character of himself in his pre-Christian state.⁸⁵ The important point for the debate over the identity of “I” is that if it is established that Paul is not making use of a rhetorical device such as speech-in-character, then the probability of Paul speaking in the voice of another greatly diminishes and the likelihood that he is referring to himself increases.

⁸³ Lauri Thurén in “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 429n43, questions the translation “speech-in-character” rather than “personification.” The term speech-in-character will be used in this paper since that, rightly or wrongly, has become the standard phrase.

⁸⁴ Stowers, “Speech-in-Character,” 180.

⁸⁵ Jewett, *Romans*, 444–445; R. Longenecker, *Romans*, 626. Such a combination seems to confuse matters since it goes against Stowers’s definition of speech-in-character as speaking in the voice of another and *not* of the author.

Assessment of “I” as a Speech-in-Character

No Introduction of a New Character

Crucial to the argument that Rom 7 presents a speech-in-character is the proposal that ancient rules of rhetoric allowed for speech-in-character to begin suddenly and with no introduction.⁸⁶ This is a crucial link in the argument for those advocating speech-in-character, for in Rom 7 there is no introduction of a new character, nor is there any explicit indication that Paul is switching from his authorial voice to a speech-in-character. Very detrimental to Stowers’s theory is that practically all examples of speech-in-character from ancient texts include some form of introduction.⁸⁷ As Lauri Thurén points out, unless examples of speech-in-character comparable to Rom 7 can be produced, the theory remains too hypothetical to be sustained, and unfortunately for Stowers’s thesis, such examples have yet to be produced.⁸⁸

Stowers appeals to the rhetorician Quintilian to argue that no introduction for speech-in-character was necessary and that ancient readers / auditors would have been ready at any moment for a sudden and unannounced shift in voice.⁸⁹ However, what Quintilian seems to have actually meant – and what the examples from ancient sources actually show – is only that it was

⁸⁶ Stowers, “Speech-in-Character,” 187–188; Witherington III and Hyatt, *Romans*, 179.

⁸⁷ Dyer, “I Do Not Understand What I Do,” 188; Timmins, “Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character,” 97–100. Stowers argues that ancient readers/hearers were simply better attuned to speech-in-character than we moderns: Stowers, “Apostrophe,” 356. First, I seriously doubt that we are really so fundamentally different – neither ancients nor moderns are mind readers and so we will all need a clear reference as to who is speaking. Also, if we are really so different, then why am I, as a modern, able so easily to identify the speaker and context of all of the ancient examples of speech-in-character that Stowers provides? Not one is ambiguous. If Rom 7 is the only example of a truly ambiguous speech-in-character, then either Paul did a very poor job of it, or it is in fact not a speech-in-character: Timmins, “Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character,” 108.

⁸⁸ Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 428. I would add that it is not enough to appeal to the theorizing of ancient rhetoricians; rather, actual examples of speech-in-character in action must be provided. Stowers understands this and says something along the same lines in Stowers, “Apostrophe,” 36; however, his argument as a whole relies disproportionately on the theoretical discussions of rhetoricians, and the actual examples he does produce are far from comparable to Rom 7.

⁸⁹ Stowers, “Speech-in-Character,” 187; Stowers, “Apostrophe,” 353–357.

acceptable to begin a speech-in-character without *definite* introduction, not without *any* introduction.⁹⁰ Quintilian's example of an "unintroduced" speech-in-character which Stowers appeals to is *The Aeneid* 2.29. In that passage, Aeneas is recounting the fall of Troy which he witnessed, and in the course of his story he speaks as if he were present there again:

"We poured out through the open gates, delighted
To tour the Greek camp on the empty shore.
Achilles' tent was here, there the Dolopians.
The fleet moored there, here was the battleground.
Some ogled the huge horse, gift of the virgin
Minerva for our ruin."⁹¹

The statement that is considered the unannounced switch to speech-in-character is "Achilles' tent was here, there the Dolopians" (2.29). It is true that the speaker of this statement is not *definitely* introduced (e.g., "And that's when Bob the Trojan said..."), but there is no question as to what is going on because 1) the storyteller, Aeneas, was introduced at line two, 2) Aeneas makes clear that he is now going to recount his memory of the fall of Troy (lines 3–13), and 3) he then speaks as if he were present, witnessing the scene in his mind's eye and describing it to those listening to him.

The other example of "unintroduced" speech-in-character that Stowers emphasizes is from Longinus's discussion of *The Iliad* 15.346–349.⁹² However, like the passage from *The Aeneid*, there is no ambiguity as to the speaker or context in this passage of *The Iliad*. In fact, the speaker, Hector, is introduced immediately before the "speech-in-character" and then the reader

⁹⁰ Timmins, "Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character," 15.

⁹¹ Vergil, *The Aeneid* 2.27–31, trans. Sarah Ruden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 25.

⁹² Stowers, "Apostrophe," 355.

is informed immediately after the speech: “So he [i.e., Hector] spoke.”⁹³ So, the “unintroduced” speech-in-character is actually bracketed by two clear markers for who is speaking.

In both of the prime examples of “unintroduced” speech-in-character, the context makes supremely obvious who is speaking and what is going on. If these are examples of “unintroduced” speech-in-character, then Rom 7 does not fit such a category. Unlike the examples that Stowers and others provide, the supposed speech-in-character of Rom 7 is completely unannounced, does not identify a non-Paul speaker either definitely or contextually, and both of these problems are compounded by the additional unannounced and unidentified “authorial interjection” in 7:25 which will be discussed later.⁹⁴

Medea

Appeal is also made to Medea’s soliloquy in Euripides’s *Medea* and to similar “medean sayings” in ancient literature in which a tragic character mourns inability to perform what they know to be the correct action.⁹⁵ The “original” medean saying is from *Medea* 1077–1080 and reads, “I’m overwhelmed by pain. I realize what evil things I am about to do, but it’s my anger dominates my resolution – anger, the cause of all the greatest troubles of humanity.”⁹⁶ The argument goes that Paul is deliberately making use of such a saying in Rom 7:14–25. While there are superficial similarities between such sayings and Rom 7:14–25, appeals to medean sayings in support of

⁹³ Homer, *The Iliad* 15.352, trans. Peter Green (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 283.

⁹⁴ Advocates of identifying the “I” as Adam, Eve, Israel, etc. may argue that the context does provide the identity of the speaker; however, the very fact that there are so many suggestions as to the identity of the “I” based on context would seem to prove that the context does not clearly identify a speaker other than Paul. Cf. Dyer, “I Do Not Understand What I Do,” 193–194, 200.

⁹⁵ Stowers, “Speech-in-Character,” 198–200; Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 260–264; R. Longenecker, *Romans*, 624–625.

⁹⁶ Euripides, *Medea* 1077–1080, trans. Oliver Taplin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 50.

speech-in-character not only fail to convince, but actually work against the idea of Rom 7 being a speech-in-character.

First, Ronald Huggins has pointed out that many of the alleged parallels between classical texts and Rom 7 do not actually share the same category.⁹⁷ In the case of *Medea* and similar sayings, he notes that these are examples of a moral struggle over “a single fateful act rather than a general quality of life” such as is being described in Rom 7.⁹⁸

Second, the speaker and situation of the medean sayings are perfectly clear to the reader, whether ancient or modern: in *Medea*, when Medea says “I”, she refers to herself. So, granting for the sake of argument that Paul is making deliberate reference to medean sayings, he would naturally be understood as putting those words onto his own lips so that, when Paul says “I”, he means “I, Paul,” just as when Medea said “I”, she meant “I, Medea.”

Finally, again granting that appeal to a pagan source is being made, Paul is very capable of using pagan sources while making them his own. Paul uses pagan sources as tools to make *his* point and is not beholden to the original point of the pagan poet (cf. Acts 17:27–28, 1 Cor 15:33, Titus 1:12).

Origen to the Rescue?

Stowers relies heavily on Origen as proof of someone close to the original readers who picked up on the speech-in-character of Paul “as a basic reflex” due to his understanding of Greek and ancient literary practices.⁹⁹ Origen does argue that Paul is making use of *personae* in Rom 7 in

⁹⁷ Huggins, “Alleged Classical Parallels,” 153–161.

⁹⁸ Huggins, “Alleged Classical Parallels,” 156, 161.

⁹⁹ Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 264; Stowers, “Speech-in-Character,” 194–197.

order to express a conversion and sanctification experience; however, appeal to Origen, is not as helpful for the cause of speech-in-character as some seem to think.¹⁰⁰

First, modern proponents of speech-in-character argue that it begins at Rom 7:7 due to “obvious” linguistic markers.¹⁰¹ Origen, on the other hand identifies Paul’s use of *personae* as beginning at 7:14.¹⁰² Not only that, but Origen tells us why he identifies the use of *personae* at this point: not due to rhetorical theory or parallels with other classical texts, but in order to 1) prevent Paul from contradicting himself and 2) to protect the character and reputation of Paul.¹⁰³

Second, despite being so much more in-tune with the culture of Paul’s day, Origen never appeals to rhetoricians or classical texts when he proposes Paul’s use of *personae* in Rom 7.¹⁰⁴ In fact, he suggests that in this instance Scripture has “imperceptibly” changed the *persona* of the speaker.¹⁰⁵ This is important, for the claim of those who argue for speech-in-character is that such a device would be expected and obvious to the original readers. Origen, however, while assuming the use of *personae* to be necessary in order to protect Paul’s character, concedes that the change is *imperceptible*, not expected or obvious.

Finally, it seems to go without recognition that Origen feels the need to defend his appeal to *personae* in Rom 7.¹⁰⁶ Why, if such a rhetorical technique in Rom 7 was obvious, would Origen feel the need to defend such a view? Further, Origen does not appeal to rhetoricians or

¹⁰⁰ Timmins, “Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character,” 110–115; Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 423–425.

¹⁰¹ Witherington III and Hyatt, *Romans*, 186.

¹⁰² Origen, *Romans*, 36.

¹⁰³ Origen, *Romans*, 36; Timmins, “Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character,” 111–112.

¹⁰⁴ Timmins, “Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character,” 111–112.

¹⁰⁵ Origen, *Romans*, 37; Timmins, “Romans 7 and Speech-in-Character,” 112.

¹⁰⁶ Origen, *Romans*, 42–43.

classical texts for his defense, nor does he appeal to previous Christian interpreters; rather, he appeals to David's Psalms and Daniel's prayer as examples of the use of *personae* in Scripture.¹⁰⁷ That Origen knows he is having to stretch in order to make his defense is indicated by the fact that he points to David's Psalms, but then immediately concedes that it could legitimately be said that David spoke of himself.¹⁰⁸ Regarding the prayer in Dan 9, Daniel speaks representatively on behalf of Israel (not as a speech-in-character) and does so in the plural ("we," "us"), not in the singular ("I," "me"). Since Origen felt compelled to defend his use of *personae* and the best defense he could muster is so weak, then it is likely that:

- 1) Origen is not representative of the standard Christian reading of his day or earlier,
- 2) Rom 7 does not present an established and easily identified rhetorical device to identify the "I" as other than Paul, and
- 3) Origen has an ulterior motive for identifying the "I" as someone other than Paul

Most likely, what we see in Origen's appeal to *personae* in Rom 7 is not an indication that he saw some literary or rhetorical device that we do not see today, but an expression of Origen's ingenuity to avoid what he perceived to be a biblical contradiction and a threat to Paul's character.¹⁰⁹

Contrasting Romans 2, 3, and 7

Romans 7 also stands in stark contrast to Rom 2:1–5 and 2:17–24, in which Paul makes use of related rhetorical techniques. In Rom 2:1–5, Paul clearly marks out that he is introducing a new

¹⁰⁷ Origen, *Romans*, 42–43.

¹⁰⁸ Origen, *Romans*, 42. Origen is right to see connections between Rom 7:14–25 and the Psalms; however, that connection strengthens rather than weakens the idea that Paul refers to himself.

¹⁰⁹ Thurén, "Romans 7 Derhetorized," 425n24.

character – “O man, every one of you who judges” – and then sustains in a very clear way his address to this character by the repetition of the singular “you” and “O man.”¹¹⁰ Likewise, in 2:17–24, instead of creating a back-and-forth discussion with a first-person speech-in-character, Paul continues to specify clearly that he is speaking authorially to an imagined individual. Contrast this with Rom 7, in which Paul has supposedly started a speech-in-character at 7:7 with no indication to the audience, then (unannounced) interjects authorially into the speech-in-character at 7:25a, and then switches character again for one final comment by “I” at 7:25b. It must be asked: why does Paul make clear who is talking in 2:1–5 and 2:17–24, making no recourse to speech-in-character, but then goes on to create an extremely ambiguous speech-in-character in Rom 7 with the addition of an unannounced authorial interjection in 7:25? The contrast, again, points to Rom 7 not being a speech-in-character.

Paul also writes in the first-person singular in Rom 3:5–8, but is careful to distance himself from what is said by phrases such as “I speak in a human way” (3:5) and “as some people slanderously charge us with saying” (3:8). Paul knows that if he writes “I” it will be read as “I, Paul” unless there is clear indication to the contrary; therefore, in 3:5–8 he explicitly differentiates himself from “I” and makes clear that he is speaking rhetorically, not actually providing his own opinions. Why is it that in Rom 3 Paul knows that he must clearly and explicitly differentiate himself from “I”, but in Rom 7 Paul supposedly uses “I” with no clarifying remarks while expecting his readers to recognize that “I” does not mean himself? Paul’s careful markers and clarifications in Rom 2–3 and lack of such in Rom 7 are a significant problem for the speech-in-character thesis.

¹¹⁰ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 45–46.

Conclusion: Romans 7 is Not a Speech-in-Character

The *prima facie* reading of “I” in Rom 7 is that Paul is speaking of himself. In order for “I” to refer to someone or something other than Paul, it must be shown that Rom 7 reflects a literary or rhetorical device commonly used in Paul’s day that would indicate to Paul’s original audience that by “I” Paul was not referring to himself, but was speaking with the voice of another. Speech-in-Character is the most popular proposal for such a device, but arguments in its favor fail to convince. So, lacking a way to clearly and unambiguously indicate that Paul was not referring to himself, the proposals that “I” is Adam, Eve, Israel, a gentile, or anyone other than Paul would seem to fall as well. It could be said that Paul speaks of himself and simultaneously *alludes* to Israel or Adam or someone else, but “I” must still be Paul unless it can be shown that there is some marker obvious to the original readers that “I” was functioning outside of its standard semantic domain.¹¹¹ No such rhetorical device has yet been put forward and adequately defended; therefore, when Paul writes “I” in Rom 7, the reader should understand him to be referring to himself.

THE PROBLEM OF ROMANS 7:25

The Problem Explained

That Rom 7:25 is a significant problem for views that do not identify “I” as Christian Paul is evidenced by the sheer multitude of attempts to explain it.¹¹² C.E.B. Cranfield notes that 7:25 is “an embarrassment” for those who do not identify “I” as Christian Paul in 7:14–25, while J.I.

¹¹¹ Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 427–428.

¹¹² For a survey of proposed explanations of 7:25, see Jewett, *Romans*, 456–458. However, as discussed below, Jewett’s own interpretation is not convincing.

Packer describes 7:25b as “a shattering anticlimax” if it is assumed that “I” is pre-Christian Paul.¹¹³ Perhaps the strongest assessment of the problem comes from James D. G. Dunn who asserts that 7:25b “is the stone on which the majority interpretations of Rom 7:14-25 break and fall.”¹¹⁴ While his claim is bold, it is hard to argue against Dunn: Rom 7:25 presents a challenge to all views other than the Christian Paul view that seems to be insurmountable.

Why is it that Rom 7:25 presents such a challenge? First, simply reflect on the text of Rom 7:24-25:

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ^{25a} Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ^{25b} So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

On the Christian Paul view, the text makes perfect sense: Paul is expressing his frustration at sin in his life, his hope in redemption through Christ, and summarizing his point that, as a Christian, he faces an ongoing struggle between his willing and doing. For other identifications of “I”, the conclusion of Rom 7 becomes very awkward due to 7:25a obviously being spoken by a Christian – a fact not debated by commentators – followed by 7:25b which doubles back and doubles down on the idea of a life in tension. This creates a strange break in the flow of thought such that non-Christian “I” speaks 7:14–24, Christian Paul speaks 7:25a, then non-Christian “I” concludes with 7:25b before Christian Paul resumes his authorial discourse at 8:1. What is to be made of this?

¹¹³ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.345; J.I. Packer, “The “Wretched Man” Revisited,” in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, eds. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 79.

¹¹⁴ Dunn, “Romans 7:14-25,” 56.

Attempts to Get Around 7:25

Adjust the Text

If a biblical text does not agree with what you want it to say, the easiest solution is to adjust the text to fit the “correct” interpretation by taking an “exegetical scalpel” to the text.¹¹⁵ This can be done by simply excising the problematic text or by rearranging the text. Both of these solutions have been proposed by otherwise sane interpreters, despite the fact that *there is not a single piece of textual or historical evidence to support such claims*, as they themselves admit. Such an attitude sets the interpreter over the text rather than vice versa.

One option for adjusting the text to fit the interpreter’s opinion is to insist that 7:25b is not original and simply remove it. This is the approach taken by Ernst Käsemann who believes that 7:25b is a very early gloss that some well-meaning, but erring scribe added to the text and which subsequently made its way into every single existing manuscript.¹¹⁶ He readily acknowledges that he is in the “precarious” position of going “against the whole textual tradition” merely in order to maintain his interpretation.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, Käsemann believes that the costs (i.e., the collapse of his understanding of Paul and the NT) are too high to accept 7:25b as original.¹¹⁸

Another route taken by some interpreters is to rearrange the text so that 7:25b is placed between 7:23 and 7:24, making the text read:

¹¹⁵ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 167–168.

¹¹⁶ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980; repr. 1990), 211–212.

¹¹⁷ Käsemann, *Romans*, 211.

¹¹⁸ Käsemann, *Romans*, 211–212.

^{25b} So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

^{25a} Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

A prime example of such an approach is C.H. Dodd who, like Käsemann, acknowledges that there is no textual or historical evidence for such rearranging. Despite making such a concession, Dodd still “cannot avoid trusting [his] judgment” against all manuscript evidence.¹¹⁹ He suggests that 7:25b may have started as a marginal gloss that was later (but still early enough to affect every subsequent manuscript) added to the text.¹²⁰ He also suggests that the original amanuensis may have accidentally written the text in the wrong order while Paul dictated.¹²¹ More recently, Robert Jewett has argued along similar lines. He believes that Paul himself added a marginal note to his final copy which he intended to go between 7:23 and 7:24, but that the note was placed in the wrong location by a subsequent scribe.¹²²

Not only does such adjusting of the text for the sake of a favored interpretation smack of hubris, it also highlights the problem presented by 7:25 and the lengths some are willing to go to in order to preserve their interpretations. As Douglass Moo rightly points out, we need to determine what the text *actually* says, not what it *ought* to say.¹²³

Paul’s Authorial Interjection

Another attempt to resolve 7:25 is to argue that 7:25a is an authorial interjection into “I”’s speech. In this case, the “script” could be written as:

¹¹⁹ C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Collins, 1959), 132.

¹²⁰ Dodd, *Romans*, 132.

¹²¹ Dodd, *Romans*, 132.

¹²² Jewett, *Romans*, 458, 473.

¹²³ Moo, *Romans*, 489n865.

- “I”: ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
 Paul: ^{25a} Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!
 “I”: ^{25b} So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.
 Paul: ^{8:1ff} There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...

While this is a clever proposal, such an understanding of the text is not obvious at all and can only be perceived (or forced, rather) if one reads the text with the prior assumption that “I” is not Christian Paul.¹²⁴ There is no indication in the text that there is a change of speakers. It is a mistake to read Romans as if Paul were a playwright, but this seems to be what many interpreters wish to do.

One common proposal is that this authorial interjection is an emotional outburst by Paul. Sometimes this emotional outburst is presented as an “anticipatory interjection” where Paul simply cannot refrain from hinting at what is to come in chapter 8.¹²⁵ In other words, Paul has essentially “gotten ahead of himself” and must backtrack in order to summarize and conclude in 7:25b before actually moving on.¹²⁶ Jim McGuiggan captures this idea quite colorfully when he asserts that Paul simply “cannot wait until “verse 26” to answer the cry, pitiful cry, for help. He must let out some half-answer as to the solution.”¹²⁷ Ben Witherington III also reflects the idea of Paul having an emotional outburst when he proposes that Paul’s interjection of “Thanks be to God” is necessary in order to not throw his audience into despair.¹²⁸ One significant problem

¹²⁴ Hyun-Gwang Kim, “The Holy Spirit in Romans 8 and the ‘I’ in 7:14-25,” *Korean Evangelical New Testament Studies* 23 (2024): 49.

¹²⁵ Hae-Kyung Chang, “The Christian Life in a Dialectical Tension?: Romans 7:7-25 Reconsidered,” *NovT* 49 (2007): 272; Thielman, *Romans*, 364; Moo, *Romans*, 490; Wright, “Romans,” 571; Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14-25,” 326; Lambrecht, “Man before and without Christ,” 21–22; R. Longenecker, *Romans*, 635.

¹²⁶ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Rhetoric at the Boundaries: The Art and Theology of New Testament Chain-Link Transitions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 90.

¹²⁷ Jim McGuiggan, *The Book of Romans*, Let the Bible Speak Study Series (West Monroe, LA: William C. Johnson, 1974), 80.

¹²⁸ Witherington III and Hyatt, *Romans*, 204.

with such proposals is that Paul goes on to give complete “relief” to his audience in chapter 8, a mere one verse later.¹²⁹ Since Paul knows that he is about to move on to brighter passages, it seems unlikely that he would think it necessary to interject and break the flow of thought in 7:25.

Those who propose that Rom 7:7–25 is a speech-in-character likewise see Paul as bursting into the monologue (that, mind you, he himself is giving in a different persona) in order to give the speaker support or hope. One all-too-clever idea is that Paul is enacting a speech-in-character of Eve and that Paul plays the part of the “chorus,” giving Eve intercessory aid in the vein of a Greco-Roman play.¹³⁰ Again, Paul is neither a playwright nor a dramatic actor. The idea that 7:25b is an authorial interjection is not obvious from the text and creates more difficulties than it resolves.

Chain-Link Interlock

A related, but more technical proposal is that of Bruce Longenecker who believes that Romans 7:25–8:1 is a deliberate, well-structured example of a “chain-link interlock.”¹³¹ The idea is that Paul followed standard rhetorical practice in order to flow smoothly from one topic into a different topic.¹³² On this view, 7:25 is merely a transitional verse such that 7:25a anticipates chapter 8 while 7:25b looks retrospectively at chapter 7.¹³³ Based on his chain-link interlock

¹²⁹ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 159.

¹³⁰ Elder, “Wretch I Am,” 762.

¹³¹ B. Longenecker, *Rhetoric*, 88–93. Cf. Justin D. King, “Rhetorical Chain-Link Construction and the Relationship between Romans 7.1–6 and 7.7–8.39: Additional Evidence for Assessing the Argument of Romans 7–8 and the Identity of the Infamous ‘I,’” *JSNT* 39 (2017): 258–278; Moo, *Romans*, 490; Witherington III and Hyatt, *Romans*, 195–196; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 87–88.

¹³² B. Longenecker, *Rhetoric*, 18, 91.

¹³³ B. Longenecker, *Rhetoric*, 91.

theory, B. Longenecker concludes that the speaker of 7:25a is the speaker in chapter 8, and is not the same as the speaker in 7:7–24, 25b.¹³⁴

The first problem with such a theory is that whether or not Paul is using a chain-link construction does not address the question of who “I” is – a chain-link construction would work just as well with “I” being Paul or “I” being someone else. This is why Will N. Timmins argues that the chain-link interlock theory of 7:25 is essentially a re-statement of the question, not a solution.¹³⁵

Second, since the purpose of chain-link interlocks was to create smooth transitions, it seems problematic that, according to B. Longenecker, instead of creating a smooth transition, Rom 7:25 actually has “the effect of standing out prominently and starkly within the text.”¹³⁶ He goes on to argue that Paul created this stark transition deliberately in order to grab the audience’s attention and get them to reflect; however, if Rom 7:25 does not match the standard feature of chain-link interlock (i.e., smooth transition), then there is reason to believe that B. Longenecker is seeing something in the structure of Rom 7:25 that is not actually there. This problem is compounded by the fact that the evidence for and unambiguous examples of chain-link interlocks “is not extensive.”¹³⁷

¹³⁴ B. Longenecker, *Rhetoric*, 93.

¹³⁵ Will N. Timmins, “Romans 7 and the Resurrection of Lament in Christ: The Wretched “I” and His Biblical Doppelgänger,” *NovT* 61 (2019): 404.

¹³⁶ B. Longenecker, *Rhetoric*, 47.

¹³⁷ B. Longenecker, *Rhetoric*, 15.

Finally, it is noteworthy that neither Origen nor Ambrosiaster note any such textual structure in their commentaries on Rom 7:25.¹³⁸ If the commentators in both Greek and Latin, who should be familiar with the concept of chain-link interlocks, do not identify such as occurring in Rom 7:25, then it becomes increasingly unlikely that such a construction is actually there.

“I of My Own Power”

Another proposal is that αὐτὸς ἐγὼ in 7:25b should be translated as “I of myself” or “I on my own power” (i.e., apart from the help of the Spirit).¹³⁹ The appeal of this view for its advocates is that if αὐτὸς ἐγὼ means “I of my own power,” then it can more logically be applied to someone other than Paul as a mature Christian, who would be relying on the Holy Spirit rather than on himself. This idea, however, should be rejected for several reasons. First, it still suffers from the awkwardness of the positive interjection of 7:25a discussed above, so it is not really an improvement in that regard. Second, interpreting αὐτὸς ἐγὼ in such a way “lays a weight of theological meaning on αὐτός that it can hardly bear.”¹⁴⁰ Translating αὐτὸς ἐγὼ as “I of myself” is to build a relatively unorthodox interpretation upon a single word which cannot be shown to have such a significance elsewhere. This leads to the third reason to reject such a view: all other

¹³⁸ Origen does identify an authorial interjection by Paul in 7:25, but he does so for reasons different than B. Longenecker’s proposal. It is also worth noting that while Origen identifies Paul as interjecting in 7:25, he still sees Paul as assuming a persona in the process of conversion / sanctification in chapter 8 (see Origen, *Romans*, 41–45). A chain-link interlock, on the other hand, requires the interjection of 7:25a to be spoken by the same person as is speaking in chapter 8 (see B. Longenecker, *Rhetoric*, 91–92).

¹³⁹ Bell, *Studies in Romans*, 65; R. Longenecker, *Romans*, 636; John A.T. Robinson, *Wrestling with Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 90–91.

¹⁴⁰ Packer, “Wretched Man Revisited,” 79. Cf. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 397–398; Nygren, *Romans*, 295.

occurrences of αὐτὸς ἐγώ in Paul's writing simply refer to Paul himself.¹⁴¹ Thus, the proposal to translate αὐτὸς ἐγώ as "I of myself" seems to be a case of prior conclusions driving exegesis.

“Do I, then, Serve the Law of Sin? By No Means!”

Finally, some have attempted to turn 7:25b into a question rather than a statement so that the text reads:

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ^{25a} Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ^{25b} So then, do I serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh serve the law of sin? [By no means!]

Such a proposal does not appear to have any current defenders, but was held by some in the past such as James MacKnight, Barton W. Stone, James M. Mathis, and more recently by Werner Keuck.¹⁴² The first problem is that if 7:25b is turned into a question, a theoretically implied answer must be provided: “By no means!”¹⁴³ The fact that Paul does not provide such an answer, especially when he has been in the habit of doing so throughout Romans, is a glaring fault of this proposal. Also, according to Robert Jewett, there are grammatical rules that prevent ἅπα οὖν from being translated as a question.¹⁴⁴ Finally, Anders Nygren is correct to identify such a proposal as an abstraction based on what the interpreter thinks the Christian life *should* look like, rather than a reflection on the actual text and what Christian life *actually* looks like.¹⁴⁵ These

¹⁴¹ Robert Banks, “Romans 7:25a: An Eschatological Thanksgiving?” *ABR* 26 (1978): 41.

¹⁴² MacKnight, *New Literal Translation*, 1:291; Stone, “Rom. 7 Chap.,” *CM* 7: 132; Mathis, “Answer,” 93–94; Werner Keuck, “Dienst des Geistes und des Fleisches: Zur Auslegungsgeschichte und Auslegung von Rm 7,25b,” *TQ* 141 (1961): 279.

¹⁴³ Jewett, *Romans*, 457.

¹⁴⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 457.

¹⁴⁵ Nygren, *Romans*, 295.

three problems together make the probability of 7:25b being properly translated as a question highly unlikely.

Conclusion to The Problem of 7:25

What is to be made of this dizzying array of attempts to make sense of Rom 7:25 while rejecting the Christian Paul view of “I”? First, the fact that those who reject the Christian Paul view go to such a variety of alternatives points to the Christian Paul view actually being the correct one. If Paul did not intend for “I” to be read as “I, Paul,” one would expect the correct alternative reading to be much more obvious than it evidently is. And second, the extreme measures some are willing to go to (e.g., excising or rearranging 7:25 with no manuscript support) highlights the reasonableness of reading 7:14–25 as Paul speaking of himself as a representative Christian with 7:25b being the concluding summary statement.

POSITIVE ARGUMENT FOR “I” OF ROMANS 7:14–25 AS CHRISTIAN PAUL

Having concluded that speech-in-character is not a viable option and that the problems associated with Rom 7:25 make alternate views highly unlikely, a positive argument will now be put forward for interpreting the “I” of Rom 7 as Christian Paul speaking of his past (7:7–12) and then of his present (7:14–25). To do this, the structure and purpose of Rom 5–8 will first be considered. Focus will then turn to a reading of Rom 7 from a Christian Paul perspective. After working through the text of Rom 7, several reasons for preferring the proposed interpretation will be put forward.

Structure and Purpose of Romans 5–8

It is assumed here that Rom 5–8 form a single unit within the book of Romans, albeit still in continuity with what comes before.¹⁴⁶ In Rom 5, Paul wraps up the previous four chapters and moves on to emphasize that, despite all mankind falling under the condemnation of sin, in Jesus Christ there is the “free gift of righteousness” (Rom 5:17) available to anyone. Paul goes so far as to say that the law was given “to increase the trespass” and that the grace of God is so powerful that as “sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (5:20). Such bold and shocking claims can lead to many questions, and Paul takes the initiative to address some of these possible concerns in chapters 6–7.¹⁴⁷ This is a crucial aspect of the structure of these chapters: chapters 6 and 7 serve to expound on and clarify chapter 5, especially 5:12–21, before moving into chapter 8.¹⁴⁸ Chapters 6 and 7 are neither an unnecessary digression, nor are they a strictly linear progression; rather, they are a “strategic digression” that progresses Paul’s argument while simultaneously clarifying his statements in 5:12–21.¹⁴⁹ Chapters 6 and 7 can perhaps be thought of as the scenic route between chapters 5 and 8. After the clarification and logical progression of chapters 6–7, chapter 8 presses the ultimate conclusion of the significance of Rom 5: in Christ there is no fear of condemnation and all hope of glorification. Paying close attention to Paul’s key phrase *μὴ γένοιτο* (“By no means”), the structure of Rom 5–8 can be outlined as follows:

¹⁴⁶ Nygren, *Romans*, 287; John D. Harvey, *Romans*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 5, 126. Some, however, set Romans 6–8 as a distinct unit, e.g., Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.369. Whether one places chapter 5 primarily with chapters 1–4 or 6–8 is ultimately not critical for this discussion. For a discussion of whether Rom 5 should be grouped with 1–4 or 6–8 see Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed. BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 30, 253–257. Debate on this topic probably stems from Rom 5 being a transitional chapter which both concludes chs. 1–4 and sets the stage for chs. 6–8.

¹⁴⁷ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 325.

¹⁴⁸ Dan Wu, “The Place of Romans 7 in the Argument of Romans: (Yet) Another Look,” *Chm* 124 (2010): 346; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 325.

¹⁴⁹ Kim, “Holy Spirit,” 57. Cf. Meyer, “Worm at the Core,” 71; Chang, “Christian Life,” 279.

5:1–21, We are reconciled to God through Christ as a free gift; the law caused sin to increase, yet grace superabounded

6:1–14, In that case, should we continue to sin so grace might abound? By no means! ... sin has no dominion since you are not under law, but under grace

6:15–7:6, In that case, should we continue to sin because we are not under law, but under grace? By no means! ... we are released from the law yet we still serve God, only now in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of the written code

7:7–12, In that case, is the law sin? By no means! ... The law is holy, but sin twisted the law to its own purposes

7:13–25, In that case, did what is good cause death? By no means! ... Sin, taking advantage of human weakness (an ongoing condition), caused death

8:1–39, Despite sin's ongoing influence, because we are in Christ, there is no condemnation, only the hope of glory

The outline above could be expanded, especially for chapters 5 and 8, but it accurately portrays the flow of logic. The questions in chapters 6–7 are natural expansions of 5:12–21, and the answer to each question leads into the next question. It should also be noted that chapter 7, no less than chapter 6, acts as a continuation of the flow of logic and an expansion of chapter 5's conclusion. To set chapter 7 apart as diametrically opposed to the other chapters in this unit of Rom 5–8 is arbitrary at best.

Contra many commentators, 6:15–7:6 should be seen as one unit, not two (i.e., 6:15–23 and 7:1–6).¹⁵⁰ This is shown to be correct by paying attention to the key phrase *μὴ γένοιτο* and to the fact that 7:6 is the conclusion to the question posed in 6:15: are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace (6:15)? No, because, although we are freed from “the old way of the written code,” yet we are bound to serve “in the new way of the Spirit” (7:6).

Do Not Divide What Has Been Joined Together

As will be discussed further below, one of the reasons that many commentators refuse to identify the “I” in Rom 7 as Christian Paul is because they set chapter 7 against 6 and 8 instead of allowing the three to inform one another. On the contrary, all three chapters must be read together as part of a single unit and be allowed to inform one another.¹⁵¹ Those opposed to identifying “I” as Christian Paul are correct in identifying different emphases in the chapters, but they miss crucial similarities. One of the overarching structural patterns in Rom 6–8 is the already-but-not-yet paradigm.¹⁵² The Christian is freed from sin (6:2, 6–7, 18, 22), yet he must continue to wage war against sin (6:11–13, 19). The Christian is no longer in Adam, but in Christ (5:14–19), yet the flesh, tied as it is to the fallen, Adamic world, continues to prevent him from attaining perfection (7:13–25). The Christian has already died (6:3–8) and is to no longer walk

¹⁵⁰ Rightly, Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.407; Witherington III and Hyatt, *Romans*, 167; Porter, *Romans*, 138. Coming close, Schreiner sees 7:1–6 as closely related to 6:15–23, but still distinct: Schreiner, *Romans*, 343–344. Those treating 7:1–6 as a distinct unit include Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.331; Dunn, *Romans*, 357–358; Moo, *Romans*, 436.

¹⁵¹ Karl Deenick, “Who Is the ‘I’ in Romans 7:14–25?” *RTR* 69 (2010): 127; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 335, 412; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 66.

¹⁵² Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 301–302; Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 49–70; Nygren, *Romans*, 295–296; Susan Eastman, “Double Participation and the Responsible Self in Romans 5–8,” in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 93, 103; Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Struggle between Old and New Natures in the Converted Man,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 5 (1962): 42–50.

according to the flesh (8:4–11), yet he will still face physical death and continues to long for the redemption of the body that occurs only at the resurrection (8:18–25). Failing to appreciate this already-but-not-yet theme throughout the chapters will produce a tension in the text that can seem insurmountable unless one chapter (i.e., Rom 7) is set against the others. Dunn is likely correct in his assessment that the primary question separating those identifying “I” as Christian Paul from those identifying “I” as pre-Christian Paul is how seriously to take the “not-yet” side of the “eschatological tension.”¹⁵³

Not Primarily a Defense of the Law

Paying attention to the structure of Rom 5–8 reveals that Paul’s primary emphasis is not a defense of the law, but the work of Christ and the implications of that work for humanity.¹⁵⁴ In Rom 7 specifically, Paul focuses on how sin influences and seeks to pervert what is inherently righteous: God’s law and God’s people.¹⁵⁵ Against the idea that Rom 7 is primarily a defense of the law, Timmins correctly points out that the holiness of the law is more assumed than defended in this passage.¹⁵⁶ The real focus of 7:7–25 is not the law, but personified sin and its past and ongoing influence.¹⁵⁷ The law is holy, so why does it cause sin to increase? Because sin

¹⁵³ Dunn, *Theology*, 475–476.

¹⁵⁴ Wu, “The Place of Romans 7,” 344–345; Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14–25,” 324; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 94. Contra those who emphasize Rom 7 as primarily a defense of the law such as Stendahl, “Introspective Conscience,” 211–212. Most commentators who emphasize Rom 7 as an apology for the law nevertheless admit some amount of anthropological focus: Sanders, “Romans 7,” 44–59; Morrison and Woodhouse, “Coherence,” 8–16. Schreiner is correct to note that it is a both/and not either/or. Paul focuses on anthropology, but includes a defense of the law in the discussion: Schreiner, *Romans*, 355.

¹⁵⁵ Simon Gathercole, “Sin in God’s Economy: Agencies in Romans 1 and 7,” in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, eds. John M.G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 169; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 94.

¹⁵⁶ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 94.

¹⁵⁷ Gathercole, “Sin in God’s Economy,” 169.

commandeers it. The Christian is made righteous and is free from sin's dominion, so why do Christian's universally fail to attain perfection? Because sin continues to commandeer their yet-unredeemed bodies.¹⁵⁸

A Christian Paul Reading of 7:1–8:1

Below is an explication of Rom 7 with specific focus on providing a defense of the Christian Paul view of "I" drawn from the text itself.

Romans 7:1–6

Romans 7:1–6 is the continuation and conclusion of the subunit begun in 6:15. Paul's address to "those who know the law" in 7:1 is not a narrowing of his intended audience to Jews only; rather, he is simply acknowledging that his audience does in fact know the (presumably Mosaic) law.¹⁵⁹ That Paul assumes his entire audience is familiar with Mosaic law is obvious from the fact that he quotes from the Old Testament throughout the book of Romans. The vocative address to the ἀδελφοί ("brothers") is simply Paul increasing the level of intimacy of his address and does not indicate a change of audience.¹⁶⁰ The previous time such an address was used was in 1:13 and

¹⁵⁸ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.372–378, who is also the source of the phrase "yet-unredeemed bodies." Cf. Hoekema, "Struggle," 42–50; William W. Combs, "Does the Believer Have One Nature or Two," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 2 (1997): 81–103. Many wish to avoid the phrase "dualism" (e.g., Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 82; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 394; Nygren, *Romans*, 293), but it seems that "anthropological dualism" is an apt phrase for what the Bible describes. Man is both body and spirit, and while the body cannot live without the spirit, apparently the spirit can live apart from the body in an unnatural state. Likewise, the spirit of the Christian is already redeemed, but the body is yet to be redeemed. Without veering into Greek philosophy, it seems reasonable to speak of a dualism within the Christian that will be resolved once the body is redeemed at the resurrection.

¹⁵⁹ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 359; Schreiner, *Romans*, 344; Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.422; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.333.

¹⁶⁰ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 99–100.

referred to the entire audience of the letter, so the same audience constituting the “brothers” should be assumed in both 1:13 and 7:1.¹⁶¹

In 7:1–4, Paul emphasizes the point that death necessarily creates a change in a relationship, be it a relationship between individuals or between individuals and law.¹⁶² He highlights this fact with an illustration of a wife’s changed status upon the death of her husband (7:2–3). His ultimate point is that, because Christ has died and we have died with Him, our relationship to the law has fundamentally changed.

7:5–6 as an Outline?

Romans 7:5–6 is often taken as establishing an outline such that 7:5 corresponds to 7:7–25 and 7:6 corresponds to 8:1–39.¹⁶³ Such a construction of the text is often used to argue that 7:7–25 corresponds to the pre-Christian state, while the Christian state is only picked up in 8:1.¹⁶⁴ It is doubtful that such a structure was intended by Paul. For one, it can just as well be argued that 7:5 corresponds to 7:7–12 and 7:6 to 7:13–25.¹⁶⁵ Since 7:7–12 and 7:13–25 are the two subsequent sections that Paul himself marks out, it would in fact make better sense to suggest that the “outline” of 7:5–6 would correspond to them. Also, as shown above, the structure of Rom 5–8 is such that chapters 6 and 7 progress via a cycle of:

- 1) A rhetorical question based off the previous assertion / answer

¹⁶¹ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 99–100.

¹⁶² Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.335; Nygren, *Romans*, 270; Schreiner, *Romans*, 346.

¹⁶³ Lambrecht, “Man before and without Christ,” 21; Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14–25,” 319. Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 444–447; Witherington III and Hyatt, *Romans*, 176–177.

¹⁶⁴ However, Dunn also sees a correspondence between 7:5 to 7:7–25 and 7:6 to 8:1ff, yet defends the Christian Paul view of 7:14–25: Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 358.

¹⁶⁵ Nygren, *Romans*, 276.

2) Strong denial of the rhetorical question (i.e., *μὴ γένοιτο*)

3) An answer to the rhetorical question

It would be strange for Paul to continue this cyclic progression while simultaneously (and subtly) introducing a new literary structure. The fact that Paul wrote this text first and foremost to be read out loud makes the likelihood of such a subtle structural shift within an established literary structure even more improbable. More likely, 7:5–6 should be read simply as the conclusion to 6:15–7:6, which in turn leads into the question / denial / answer of 7:7–12, which in turn leads into the same of 7:13–25.¹⁶⁶

Romans 7:7–12

The reader is introduced to “I” at this point in Rom 7. The reading adopted here is that when Paul writes “I” he is referring to himself, and that the aorist in 7:7–12 indicates Paul’s past.¹⁶⁷

Precisely what Paul is referring to when he describes “I” going from life to death as the law goes from death to life is debated.¹⁶⁸ It seems most likely that Paul is referring to a time in his life when, upon reaching a certain age of maturity, he moved from what could be called an “age of

¹⁶⁶ Romans 7:5–6 is a transition, not a proposition: Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 171.

¹⁶⁷ While a strong advocate of the Christian Paul view of 7:14–25, Dunn believes that Paul is emphasizing Adam so that “I” = Adam in 7:7–12 (Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 379–380, 404); cf. Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:348–353.

¹⁶⁸ If “I” is Adam or Eve, then The Fall is in view: Witherington III and Hyatt, *Romans*, 188–189. If “I” is Israel, then the giving of the law at Sinai: Wright, “Romans,” 551–552; Moo, “Israel and Paul,” 122–135. Some suggest Paul has in mind his bar mitzvah: Schreiner, *Romans*, 361; Gundry, “Moral Frustration,” 232. Others, that Paul has in mind a period between his baptism and a temporary lapse back into law keeping: Hart, “Paul as Weak in Faith,” 331–332. Or, between baptism and recognizing the ongoing need of the obedience of faith: Ann L. Jervis, “‘The Commandment Which Is for Life’ (Romans 7.10): Sin’s Use of the Obedience of Faith,” *JSNT* 27 (2004): 208–209. Still others, that Paul is describing the period between his recognition of the true nature of the law and his conversion to Christianity, sometimes specified as the three days of blindness after the Damascus Road incident: Douglas J.W. Milne, “Romans 7:7–12, Paul’s Pre-Conversion Experience,” *RTR* 43 (1984): 9–17; Porter, *Romans*, 147; Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, ConC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2013), 549–550.

innocence” into an “age of accountability.”¹⁶⁹ If such categories are accepted as legitimate, then such a view would make sense of being “alive” and “apart from the law” and then “dying” when the law “came alive” within a matured conscience.

Paul, Adam, and Eve

An interesting feature of 7:7–12 is the apparent allusion to the Fall narrative of Gen 3. There is a movement from life to death, sin twists the law like the serpent twists God’s rule, there is desire/coveting on the part of both “I” and Eve, and “I” is deceived just as Eve was deceived.¹⁷⁰ Some see these similarities and wish to identify “I” as Adam,¹⁷¹ while others, a bit more consistent with the actual parallels, identify “I” as Eve.¹⁷² Identifying “I” as either Adam or Eve suffers from the problems inherent to speech-in-character described above. Also, neither Adam nor Eve is named in the text, unlike other Pauline texts which feature them (e.g., Rom 5:12–21; 2 Cor 11:3).¹⁷³ Further, the law that Paul names – “do not covet” – is from the Mosaic law and is therefore not a direct allusion to Gen 3. Also, in Rom 7 the law acts as a revealer of already-present sin, which is contradictory to the Fall narrative. For these and other reasons, “I” should not be identified as Adam or Eve.¹⁷⁴ Having said that, it cannot be denied that there is language in 7:7–12 that is allusive to Gen 3. Paul is likely speaking of himself, but in a typical / representative manner. As a representative man, his own experience reflects that of Adam and

¹⁶⁹ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.432, 436. Cf. Dodd, *Romans*, 128.

¹⁷⁰ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 119–125; Elder, “Wretch I Am,” 743–763.

¹⁷¹ E.g., Witherington III and Hyatt, 179, 188–189.

¹⁷² Elder, “Wretch I Am,” 743–763; Busch, “The Figure of Eve,” 1–36.

¹⁷³ Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 544.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 357–359.

Eve in Gen 3, and so he uses language that would bring those events to his audience's mind.¹⁷⁵ However, this should not be confused with Paul speaking under the persona of "man in general;" rather, "I" means "I, Paul," even if Paul also speaks as a representative of others. In his past, Paul was "in Adam" and his experience reflects the universal experience of all "in Adam" (7:7–12). In the same way, Paul's present experience as one "in Christ" reflects the universal experience of all "in Christ" (7:14–25). This conclusion is supported by the fact that Paul draws connections to Gen 3 only allusively, rather than explicitly. Paul intends to allude to Gen 3, not to rewrite Gen 3 as a playscript with himself cast in the lead role.

7:7–12

Romans 7:7–12 begins by asking if the law itself is sin (7:7). Paul strongly denies such a claim, pointing out that the law is not itself sin, but it does reveal sin (7:7). When Paul says that he would not have known sin apart from the law, he is referring to the full recognition of the nature of sin as a transgression of God's law.¹⁷⁶ While the law does reveal sin, Paul also notes that sin has hijacked the law so that the law, used by sin, actually incites Paul to more sin (7:8).¹⁷⁷

Paul specifically uses the tenth commandment, "do not covet," to illustrate his point (7:7). Paul does not argue that he did not covet before he knew the law; rather, the command revealed to him that he did in fact covet and that such coveting was a transgression of God's will (7:8). Several commentators have noted Paul's specific use of the tenth commandment. Some

¹⁷⁵ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 127; Schreiner, *Romans*, 354.

¹⁷⁶ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.348. Some commentators wish to press the distinction between *γινώσκω* and *οἶδα* so that *γινώσκω* corresponds more to experiential knowledge while *οἶδα* corresponds more to intellectual knowledge: Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 378. Schreiner is probably correct to warn against pressing the distinctions and to instead see the two as synonymous: Schreiner, *Romans*, 364.

¹⁷⁷ Klyne Snodgrass, "Spheres of Influence: A Possible Solution to the Problem of Paul and the Law," *JSNT* 10 (1988): 99.

argue that the Jewish culture of Paul's day viewed the tenth commandment as all-encompassing, containing within itself all of the other commandments.¹⁷⁸ While this may be true, it is also probable that the tenth commandment is used to make Paul's point because it is internal and emphasizes the fact that the law can command, but cannot empower to perform.¹⁷⁹ So, by using the tenth commandment as his example, Paul speaks as himself from his own experience, but also maximizes his ability to speak representatively and to drive home his point.

In 7:8–10, Paul describes his transition from life to death and the corresponding transition of sin from death to life.¹⁸⁰ “I” was once alive apart from the law, but with the law came sin and so, death (7:9). Romans 7:9 is the first use of the first-person singular “I” in Rom 7 and so introduces us to the entity whose identity is the subject of this paper. Most commentators take *ἀμαρτία ἀνέζησεν* (“sin revived / came to life”) as “sin came to life” so that sin is present all along, hiding in the shadows, but does not “pounce upon” its victim until the light of the law shines upon it.¹⁸¹ Some interpreters, however, wish to press the literal meaning of *ἀνέζησεν* so that the emphasis is on the revival of sin, suggesting that 7:7–12 refers to a period during Paul's life as a Christian.¹⁸² While there is an argument to be made along such lines, viewing 7:7–12 as part of Paul's Christian life doesn't quite seem to fit the context of the passage.

It is more appropriate to see the transition from life to death as corresponding to the transition from innocence to accountability. There was a period in Paul's life that he can describe

¹⁷⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 367; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 108; John A. Ziesler, “The Role of the Tenth Commandment in Romans 7,” *JSNT* 10 (1988): 47. As Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.434 notes, this idea would seem to be supported by James 1:14–15.

¹⁷⁹ Ziesler, “Tenth Commandment,” 47–49; Schreiner, *Romans*, 367; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.349.

¹⁸⁰ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 109.

¹⁸¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 365; Harvey, *Romans*, 175; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.352.

¹⁸² Hart, “Paul as Weak in Faith,” 331–332; Porter, *Romans*, 147; Jervis, “Commandment,” 208–209.

as being both “alive” and free from the law. This period is most likely what is referred to as the “age of innocence” in one’s youth. At some point in his life, Paul comprehended the significance of the law, at which point he came to know (i.e., recognize) the nature of his own sin. At this time, Paul experienced spiritual death subjectively in that he recognized both his sin and the objective spiritual death that sin brings.¹⁸³ The law, far from enabling Paul to overcome sin, was actually used by sin to incite within him the desire to sin. Even though sin took advantage of the law, the law continued to reveal the extent and nature of sin to Paul. Sin’s wickedness was increasingly revealed as it proved capable of even commandeering the law; nevertheless, the law remained holy in that it was from God and continued to reveal the true nature of sin. Thus, the problem is sin, not the law *per se*.

Excursus: Autobiographical “I” and the “Philippians 3” Objection

Before moving on to 7:13–25, the “Philippians 3” objection to an autobiographical understanding of 7:7–12 must be addressed. Some wish to cast doubt on 7:7–12 being an autobiographical description of Paul’s life before he became a Christian based on Phil 3:4–7 in which Paul speaks of how well he attained “righteousness under the law.”¹⁸⁴ How could Paul, so the argument goes, refer to himself in such bold and self-righteous terms in Phil 3:4–7 and then in such negative terms in Rom 7:7–12?

There is no reason that Rom 7:7–12 and Phil 3:4–7 can’t both refer to Paul’s pre-Christian life as a Pharisee; the context of the two passages is totally different. In Phil 3:4–7, Paul is arguing against those who boast in their Jewishness and points out that, as far as outward

¹⁸³ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.425; Schreiner, *Romans*, 347–348.

¹⁸⁴ Stendahl, “Introspective Conscience,” 201; Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14–25,” 318; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 71–72.

adherence to the rules of Judaism and the genealogies of the covenant go, he could not be beaten. He speaks (sarcastically) as a boasting Jew to boasting Jews. In Rom 7:7–12, on the other hand, Paul is considering the existence of sin in his life, not his ability to carry out specific regulations or to be born into the right genealogy. The fact that he makes his point in Romans by utilizing a commandment that is specifically internal – “do not covet” – rather than one of the myriad external regulations is indicative of the different context and perspective of the two passages.¹⁸⁵

Romans 7:13–8:1

Having identified sin, and not the law itself, as the reason that the law fails to perfect its adherents, Paul then asks whether the holy law brought death to him. By no means! Rather, just as sin commandeered the law, so sin commandeers the flesh – in both cases it is sin that is the problem. Sin twists the law and sin twists man, specifically “the flesh” of man. Sin’s twisting of the flesh only ceases with the redemption of the body (Rom 8); therefore, even Christians will be under the assault of sin as it takes advantage of their yet-unredeemed bodies. This is why Paul moves into the present tense beginning with 7:14.

Throughout 7:14–25 Paul is speaking as a representative Christian of the ongoing conflict with sin. There is a part of “I” – the “inner man / mind / spirit” – that has already died and been resurrected in righteousness (Rom 6), but there exists another part of “I” – the “body / flesh” –

¹⁸⁵ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 382; Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 54; Schreiner, *Romans*, 363; Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 437.

that yet awaits death and resurrection to righteousness (Rom 8).¹⁸⁶ It is this “salvation begun, but not complete” that creates the circumstances described in 7:14–25.¹⁸⁷

From Past to Present

The transition from past to present tense at 7:14 should be taken at face value and reflects the ongoing “fleshliness” of Christians.¹⁸⁸ There is a natural transition from referring to past events in 7:7–12 to referring to the struggles of present reality in 7:14–25, with 7:13 serving as a transition verse. Romans 8 is a continuation of the description of the Christian’s life, but with an eye on the help of the Spirit and the hope of future glory. Some commentators wish to dismiss the idea that the tense change supports a shift from past time (i.e., pre-Christian Paul) to present time (i.e., Christian Paul) by pointing out that in Koine Greek, the tenses are not strictly tied to time of action.¹⁸⁹ While there is truth to such a statement, it is inadequate to account for the sustained tense change in this case.¹⁹⁰ First, it is worth noting that one of the frequently cited specialists of Koine Greek verbal aspect, Stanley Porter, himself argues that “I” is properly understood as Christian Paul in Rom 7.¹⁹¹ Second, the sustained usage of the present tense points

¹⁸⁶ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.372–378, 444–445. Cf. Hoekema, “Struggle,” 42–50; Combs, “Does the Believer Have One Nature or Two,” 81–103. It is important to note that what Paul describes in Rom 7 is not a divided will, but a division between willing and doing: Nygren, *Romans*, 293.

¹⁸⁷ Dunn, *Theology*, 474–476.

¹⁸⁸ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.344–345; Nygren, *Romans*, 285; Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.443.

¹⁸⁹ Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 89; Chang, “Christian Life,” 271–272; Thielman, *Romans*, 355; Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14–25,” 319, 321; Hart, “Paul as Weak in Faith,” 333–336. The nature of Koine Greek verbs is also acknowledged in Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 156, but he argues that the contextual markers of the passage demand it be understood as present time.

¹⁹⁰ “To shrug off the [tense] shift as a rhetorical device for giving extra vividness ... would be exegetically evasive and grammatically hazardous”: Packer, “Wretched Man Revisited,” 79.

¹⁹¹ Porter, *Romans*, 144–145; however, he does argue that the shift in tense at 7:14 is a logical marker, not a temporal marker. Porter argues that Christian Paul is in view throughout all of 7:7–25.

to the actual present being intended; there is no comparable example of such a usage of the “historical present” in the New Testament.¹⁹² Finally, it is highly suspect that this passage is so uniquely identified as an example of the historical present when the present tense is usually taken at face value as depicting present time.¹⁹³

7:13–25

In 7:13–25, Paul moves from addressing sin’s twisting of the law to sin’s twisting of the flesh. That Paul has begun speaking of himself in the present is indicated in 7:14 by *οἶδαμεν... ἐγὼ δε... εἰμι* (“we know... but I... am”). Such a construction identifies Paul as a fellow participant with his audience through speaking in the first-person plural of shared knowledge.¹⁹⁴ From that present-time context, Paul then launches into a first-person singular speech in which he speaks of himself, yet in a representative manner. Paul says specifically that “we know” the law is *πνευματικός* (“spiritual”), but “I am” *σάρκινός* (“fleshly”). Some English Bibles translate *σάρκινός* as “carnal,” but this can imply excessive negativity that is not inherent to the word.¹⁹⁵ To be *σάρκινός* is to belong to the physical world, to be mortal, fleshly, embodied, human.¹⁹⁶ Such fleshly existence in this fallen world does, however, come with inherent weakness both physical and moral, and that is exactly what Paul is highlighting.¹⁹⁷ The Christian has died and

¹⁹² Packer, “Wretched Man Revisited,” 79; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.344–345; Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 531–532.

¹⁹³ Bjørn Øivind Johansen, “The ‘I’ of Romans 7 and Confessions in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *BN* 170 (2016): 111.

¹⁹⁴ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 103, 106–107.

¹⁹⁵ E.g., KJV, NKJV, ASV, RSV. Cf. the NIV’s questionable translation of *σάρκινός* as “unspiritual.”

¹⁹⁶ Danker et al., “σάρκινος,” BDAG, 914. Cf. Dunn, *Theology*, 55–73.

¹⁹⁷ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 388.

been resurrected in Christ *in one sense*, but he remains physical, mortal, and fleshly until the redemption of his body at Jesus's return. The Christian has been freed from the rule of sin, but sin continues to afflict the Christian because the salvation begun at baptism has not been completed by physical resurrection to glorified bodies. This means that the Christian lives in two epochs – the epoch of Adam and the epoch of Christ – simultaneously.¹⁹⁸

Those opposed to identifying “I” as Christian Paul point especially to the description of “I” as being “sold under sin” (7:14). They point out that Paul has described Christians as being freed from slavery to sin, so how could “I” be a Christian and at the same time be sold under sin?¹⁹⁹ The answer to this difficulty is to acknowledge that the difference for a Christian is that, even though they cannot escape the trials of sin in this lifetime, yet they are not willing participants with sin. In Rom 6, Paul dismisses the idea of a Christian continuing as a willing slave of sin.²⁰⁰ “I” in Rom 7:14–25, however, is not a willing slave of sin; rather, he loves God's law, desires to follow God, hates evil, and serves the law of God with his mind / inner man.²⁰¹ Yet, because of the ongoing fleshliness of “I”, sin does retain some level of influence until “I” is fully redeemed at Christ's return. As Dunn puts it so well, to be “sold under sin” is “not abject, unquestioning servitude, but a slavery under protest, the frustrated impotence of one who has to live “in newness of the Spirit” while still “in the flesh.””²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 388–389. Cf Eastman, “Double Participation,” 93.

¹⁹⁹ Chang, “Christian Life,” 273; Thielman, *Romans*, 370; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 54.

²⁰⁰ Deenick, “Who is the ‘I,’” 126.

²⁰¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans Classic Biblical Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 1.203.

²⁰² Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 389.

In 7:15–16, Paul describes the struggle inherent to living within the two epochs simultaneously, of being both spiritual and yet fleshly. What “I” desires to do, he does not do; what he hates, that he does. Paul does not describe the tension of a divided *will* in these and following verses, but the tension of the will’s desiring vs actual *performance*.²⁰³ This should not, however, be understood as “I” only ever doing evil and never accomplishing good; rather, Paul is using hyperbolic language to express the frustration of never attaining perfection.²⁰⁴ The use of hyperbole will be discussed in more detail below. When “I” says that he does not know (*γινώσκω*) what he does (7:15), he is likely asserting that he does not condone the evil that he does.²⁰⁵ It is also possible that “I” acknowledges that he does not comprehend the extent of human depravity.²⁰⁶

In 7:17–20, Paul identifies the problem that leads “I” to do the wrong that he hates and to fail to attain the perfection that he desires: sin. Sin, in personified fashion, is said to dwell in “I”, and the location of such dwelling is specified as *ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου* (“in my flesh”). Sin’s dwelling place, the location in which “no good dwells,” and therefore the source of weakness, is identified as that part of “I” which has yet to face death and resurrection: the flesh.²⁰⁷ Some, citing Rom 6 and 8, object that Christians are no longer in the flesh and therefore Paul must be speaking in the voice of a non-Christian.²⁰⁸ The fact is, however, that *σὰρξ* (“flesh”) and related words have a

²⁰³ Nygren, *Romans*, 293.

²⁰⁴ Cranfield, *Romans* 1.342; Packer, “Wretched Man Revisited,” 77; Lard, *Romans*, 238–239; McGarvey and Pendleton, *Romans*, 357, 360.

²⁰⁵ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.358–359; Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.447.

²⁰⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 371.

²⁰⁷ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.449; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.361; Dunn, *Romans*, 391.

²⁰⁸ Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 54; Chang, “Christian Life,” 272–274; Stone, “Rom. 7 Chap.,” 132; Origen, *Romans*, 36.

range of meaning. “Flesh” always has a negative connotation in that it implies the frailty and weakness inherent to being mortal, but it does not necessarily imply any more than that.²⁰⁹ Paul can use “in the flesh” to refer to those apart from Christ (e.g., Rom 8:9), but he can also use the same phrase simply to denote mortal existence (e.g., Col 1:24; Phil 1:21–24). Everyone this side of the resurrection is “fleshly” in that they are mortal and continue to struggle against the inherent moral and physical weaknesses of that fact. The Christian will not, however, direct their lives towards the corruption inherent to fleshly mortality; rather, they will direct their lives towards the perfection inherent to glorified immortality.²¹⁰ This is precisely what “I” is described as doing: his desire is God’s perfection, and it is only because of sin taking advantage of his yet-unredeemed body that he fails to attain it.

In 7:21–23, Paul describes the conflicting laws within “I”. There is the “law” – more properly “rule / principle” in this case – that when “I” wants to do good, evil is close at hand (7:21).²¹¹ The “inner man” of “I” delights in God’s law (7:22), but there is “another law,” the “law of sin” (7:23) in the members (i.e., flesh) of “I” that battles against the law of his mind (7:23). There is an “inner man” who delights in God’s law, yet there is some antagonistic law that “I” describes as being *ἐν τοῖς μέλεσίν μου* (“in my members,” i.e., “in my flesh”). Again, we find that it is the yet-unredeemed body – universal to all mankind, including Christians – that is identified as the source of moral conflict. In 7:23, “I” describes this antagonistic law as *αἰχμαλωτίζοντά με* (“making me captive”) to the law of sin in his members. Just as with the description of “I” as being sold under sin in 7:14, what is seen here is not a willing participation,

²⁰⁹ Dunn, *Theology*, 55–73.

²¹⁰ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.465, 474–475; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 428. It is the difference between one who *is* flesh and one who *has* flesh: Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 435.

²¹¹ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.450; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.361–362; Porter, *Romans*, 151.

but warfare, resistance, and captivity.²¹² This is evident by Paul's use of the word *αἰχμαλωτίζω*, which has military undertones and has the specific meaning of taking someone as a prisoner of war.²¹³

In 7:24, "I" cries out in frustration, declaring himself to be "wretched" and asking "who will deliver me from this body of death?" This declaration is sometimes described as a cry of despair, but it is more appropriate to describe it as a cry of frustration, a longing for the completion of salvation that has begun but is not yet complete.²¹⁴ Again, the body of "I", specifically "this body of death" (i.e., the mortal and as yet unredeemed part of "I") is identified as that part of "I" that needs redemption.²¹⁵ This is perfectly congruent with every Christian's experience: even though the Christian has "died" in one sense, there is a further death and resurrection that must occur for the salvation process to be complete.²¹⁶ Some have pointed to the question of "who will deliver me?" as proof that "I" is not a Christian since, having already been delivered, a Christian is not ignorant of his deliverer.²¹⁷ Such an idea ignores the obviously rhetorical nature of the question.²¹⁸ Also, it is correctly noted that, if Paul is not speaking of his own experience, then he is being uncharacteristically theatrical and melodramatic.²¹⁹

²¹² Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 147; Deenick, "Who is the 'I,'" 125, 127, 130; McGarvey and Pendleton, *Romans*, 356.

²¹³ Danker et al., "αἰχμαλωτίζω," BDAG, 31; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 395.

²¹⁴ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.366; Porter, *Romans*, 152–153.

²¹⁵ Jewett, *Romans*, 472 makes the unique suggestion that "this body of death" is Paul's previous persecution of the church.

²¹⁶ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 75–78.

²¹⁷ Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 58; Jewett, *Romans*, 472.

²¹⁸ Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 154; Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.453.

²¹⁹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.345; Nygren, *Romans*, 286.

In 7:25, “I” provides the answer to his rhetorical question. Who will deliver him from this body of death? God, through Jesus Christ. Strictly speaking, 7:25a is simply a thanksgiving – “thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” – and so is not a direct answer to the rhetorical question of 7:24, but it is an implied answer. Among those who believe “I” is pre-Christian Paul, 7:25a is taken as referring to the *past* salvation that occurred at baptism; however, context suggests that “I” is looking forward to the *future* salvation that occurs at Jesus’s return.²²⁰ In this case, the supplied verb would make the thanksgiving read, “Thanks be to God [who will deliver us] through Jesus Christ our Lord.”²²¹ Such an understanding is suggested by the context since it is specifically the *body of death* that is in need of redemption and one of the primary foci of chapter 8 is precisely the future redemption of the body. The flow of logic concludes at 7:25a, but Paul summarizes the state of “I” with the concluding thought of 7:25b: “So, with my mind I serve the law of God, but with my flesh the law of sin.” This sentence encapsulates 7:14–25 in one neat package: “I” is a Christian and therefore serves God with his “mind” or “inner man;” nevertheless, because “I” remains fleshly, he continues to be affected by sin. There is both discontinuity and continuity between a person’s pre-Christian life and Christian life. There is discontinuity because the Christian’s “inner man” has been renewed; yet, there is continuity in that even after conversion, the Christian continues in the same fleshly existence he had before conversion.²²²

²²⁰ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.367–368; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 397; Packer, “Wretched Man Revisited,” 76.

²²¹ Packer, “The “Wretched Man” Revisited,” 76.

²²² Eastman, “Double Participation,” 103; Dunn, *Theology*, 475–476.

8:1

Before closing this section, the transition from 7:25 to 8:1 must be addressed. Those opposed to the Christian Paul view of “I” sometimes point to *ἄρα νῦν* (“therefore now”) in 8:1 as marking the transition from past to present.²²³ The argument is that throughout 7:7–25 Paul spoke of non-Christian existence, but starting at 8:1 he now transitions back into speaking of life as a Christian. This is tied to the idea discussed above that 7:5–6 is the key to the passage’s structure, with 7:6 corresponding to 8:1–39. The *ἄρα νῦν* in 8:1, however, should not be taken as a temporal marker, but as a logical marker (similar to the *νῦν* in 7:17).²²⁴ As indicated by the structure outlined above, 8:1 looks back on everything that has been said in the “strategic digression” of chapters 6 and 7, but especially ties back to 5:12–21.²²⁵ The logic is that, despite our ongoing struggle against sin, we are justified by God’s grace and Jesus’s righteousness; therefore, there is no condemnation for those in Christ.²²⁶ Sin still holds power in the world in which the Christian dwells as a fleshly mortal, but sin does not have power to remove the Christian from the sphere of God’s grace and to place them once again in the sphere of sin and death.²²⁷

²²³ Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 60.

²²⁴ Porter, *Romans*, 156. Regarding 7:17, see Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.360; Schreiner, *Romans*, 372.

²²⁵ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 412, 415; Porter, *Romans*, 155–156.

²²⁶ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.456; Kim, “Holy Spirit,” 63.

²²⁷ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 408; Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.456. This is not to say that a Christian cannot apostatize and choose to abandon the sphere of grace and life and to return to the sphere of sin and death. However, the key is that it is the Christian’s *choice* to do so – sin of itself does not have that authority. The key throughout the passages is the intent, the direction of one’s life: cf. Deenick, “Who is the ‘I’,” 126.

Why Identifying “I” as Christian Paul is the Preferred Reading

Having presented a reading of Rom 7 from a Christian Paul view of “I”, the key reasons why such a reading of the text should be preferred will now be presented. These reasons are 1) it is the *prima facie* reading, 2) textual connections across chapters 6–8, 3) coherence with other Scripture, and 4) it comports with universal Christian experience.

The *Prima Facie* Reading

First and foremost, reading “I” as Paul referring to himself in the past tense (7:7–12) and then in the present (7:14–25) is the *prima facie* reading of the text. This is not a debated point and even those who reject such a reading concede that the *prima facie* reading of the text is that when Paul writes “I” he means himself.²²⁸ Since this is the case, the Christian Paul view ought to be given priority and the burden of proof shifted to views that reject the *prima facie* reading.

As discussed above, 7:25 highlights the strength of the *prima facie* reading in which “I” means “I, Paul” in his Christian state. The Christian Paul view is the only view that can account for Rom 7:25 without twisting or straining the text.²²⁹ Romans 7:25 summarizes the state of “I” as one continuing to live with a Spirit-flesh tension – a tension that runs throughout Rom 6–8. The failure of other views to handle 7:25 and the unstrained reading of 7:25 from the Christian Paul perspective is a strong indicator that the *prima facie* reading, i.e., the Christian Paul view, is correct.

²²⁸ Lambrecht, “Man before and without Christ,” 27; Roper, *Romans 1–7*, 431; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 4. It is sometimes pointed out that Kümmel’s argument for a rhetorical “I” was a last resort option, not based on the *prima facie* reading: Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 427–428; Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 547n23. Stendahl and Stowers implicitly acknowledge that “I” as Paul is the *prima facie* reading, but insist that it is so only for us moderns, not for ancient readers: Stendahl, “Introspective Conscience,” 210–215; Stowers, “Speech-in-Character,” 180–202.

²²⁹ Even critics acknowledge this is a significant strength of the Christian Paul view: Morrison and Woodhouse, “Coherence,” 8–9.

Not only is the Christian Paul view the *prima facie* reading, but, as previously pointed out, Paul demonstrates in Romans that he is capable of differentiating himself from what he writes. In Rom 2:1–5, 2:17–24, and 3:5–8, Paul uses rhetorical and literary techniques to prevent his audience from identifying him with what is being spoken. In one instance, he introduces a new character which he clearly addresses, and in the other instance Paul writes “I” but is careful to indicate that “I” is not *actually* representing his own opinion. In Rom 7, on the other hand, Paul gives no comparable indication to let his audience know that “I” is not actually Paul expressing his own thoughts. This again points to the *prima facie* reading being the one intended by Paul: when Paul says “I” in Rom 7, he means “I, Paul.”

Textual Connections Across Chapters 6–8

The second reason to prefer the Christian Paul view is that it coheres with what is said throughout chapters 6–8. The repeated themes of struggle against sin, the physical body, and mind / willing are woven throughout these three chapters and knit them together. The connections across the three chapters are a reminder that all three must be read together and be allowed to inform one another.²³⁰ The composite picture that arises is one of tension: chapter 6 emphasizes the fact of deliverance from the domain of sin and death, chapter 7 emphasizes the ongoing impact of sin on the Christian’s life, and chapter 8 emphasizes the Holy Spirit’s help and the Christian’s hope.²³¹ The three chapters have various emphases, but they interlock with shared themes.

²³⁰ Deenick, “Who is the ‘I,’” 127; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 66.

²³¹ Nygren, *Romans*, 295–296.

Struggle Against Sin

Romans 6 emphasizes the fact that Christians have died with Christ and are no longer slaves of sin and death; however, the reader is also exhorted to fight against sin. In fact, military language is used throughout Rom 6–8 (6:13, 6:23, 7:8, 7:11, 7:23, 8:7, 8:13).²³² Christians are to continually think of themselves as being dead to sin (6:11), are to refuse to allow sin to reign in their mortal bodies (6:12), are not to present their members as weapons for sin to use (6:13), and are to present their members as slaves to righteousness (6:19). All of these exhortations imply that, although in a real sense Christians are no longer under the dominion of sin, yet they must be vigilant and actively fight against the ongoing influence of sin.²³³ Romans 7:14–25 narrows in on the ongoing reality of the Christian’s war against sin and the failure to attain perfection.²³⁴ Nevertheless, if a Christian has their mind focused on God and continues to fight, sin may win some battles, but it will not win the war, which is the emphasis of chapter 8.

The Body

In Rom 8, there is an emphasis on the Spirit’s help in the Christian’s life in the struggle against sin; however, the Spirit’s help does not end the battle against sin, as Rom 8 itself indicates. While the Christian has the Spirit, nevertheless he also continues in a body that is dead because of sin (8:10). This mortal, sin afflicted body – with all of its inherent weakness – continues until it dies and the Christian is given a glorified body at the resurrection when Jesus returns (8:11).²³⁵ This

²³² Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 395.

²³³ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 335; Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 590; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 66–91.

²³⁴ Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 55, 57; Eastman, “Double Participation,” 103.

²³⁵ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.372–378, 449.

idea ties back to Rom 7 in which the physical body is identified as that part of a Christian in which sin dwells and which awaits redemption. Also tying Rom 7 and 8 together are the twin groanings of 7:24 and 8:23, both of which yearn for the final redemption of the body.²³⁶ The “I” in 7:24 does not groan because he does *not* have the Spirit; rather, he groans precisely *because* he has the Spirit and longs for final redemption.²³⁷

Mind / Willing

The key difference in the life of the non-Christian vs that of the Christian is not that one sins and one no longer sins or struggles against the temptation to sin; rather, the key distinction is the direction of the mind.²³⁸ The Christian is a Christian precisely because he has deliberately set his mind towards God through Christ Jesus. In Rom 6, Paul’s emphasis is on the incompatibility of a Christian acting as if he is free to go on sinning simply because he is free from the domain of sin and is now under grace, not law.²³⁹ The emphasis is on the direction of the mind, the attitude of the heart. This emphasis is carried over into Rom 7 in which “I” laments that, despite having his mind directed toward God and sincerely desiring perfection, yet he fails to attain perfection because sin continues to wage war against him. Likewise, in chapter 8, the key difference between one who lives “according to the flesh” and one who lives “according to the Spirit” is the direction of the mind.²⁴⁰ Romans 8:5–7 reads:

²³⁶ Kim, “Holy Spirit,” 64; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 474.

²³⁷ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 474.

²³⁸ Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.465; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 425, 428; Deenick, “Who is the ‘I,’” 122–125.

²³⁹ Deenick, “Who is the ‘I,’” 126.

²⁴⁰ A different word for “mind” is used in Rom 7 and 8, but they are synonyms and should be understood as referring to the same thing: Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 592.

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh **set their minds** on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit **set their minds** on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to **set the mind** on the flesh is death, but to **set the mind** on the Spirit is life and peace.

⁷ For **the mind** that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Note the emphasis on the direction of one's mind. The mind set on the Spirit says that even the smallest sin is not okay, which leads to frustration for the Christian who continues to find himself afflicted by thoughts and actions that are contrary to the Spirit, as seen in Rom 7:14–25. The mind set on the flesh says that, because I am no longer under sin or the law, but under grace, therefore I can go on sinning with impunity – precisely the thought pattern that Paul speaks against in Rom 6. The theme of mind / willing, like that of the body and the ongoing struggle against sin, ties Rom 6–8 into a cohesive whole in which each element informs the others.²⁴¹

Coheres with Other Scripture

A third reason to prefer the Christian Paul view is that such a reading coheres with other passages of Scripture such as 1 Cor 15:53–57, Gal 5:16–17, 1 John 1:5–10, and Ps 119.

1 Corinthians 15:53–57

On the Christian Paul view of Rom 7:14–25, one of the key assertions is that despite being freed from the domain of sin and death, yet sin and death continue to exert an influence on the Christian. This ongoing influence of sin and death finds its location of operation in the corrupted, Adamic body that the Christian continues to indwell. The Christian is only freed completely from the influence of sin and death once the body is redeemed at the resurrection, which is what

²⁴¹ Deenick, “Who is the ‘I,’” 128.

“I” longs for (7:24; cf. 8:23) and is confident will occur (7:25a). This matches perfectly with 1 Cor 15:53–57 which reads:

⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice the shared concerns in both Rom 7–8 and 1 Cor 15 such as the mortality of the body, resurrection, and hope for freedom from the influence of death, sin, and law.²⁴² In both passages, it is only at the resurrection that the Christian attains complete freedom from death, sin, and law: when the resurrection occurs and the Christian is given a glorified body, “*then* shall come to pass” victory over death, sin, and law (1 Cor 15:54). Finally, the closing note of praise in both 1 Cor 15:57 and Rom 7:25a presents a striking parallel. As mentioned earlier, Rom 7:25a is very abbreviated and requires that a verb be supplied to complete the thought. The thanksgiving in 1 Cor 15:57, on the other hand, is more fleshed out. Both passages, however, acknowledge the mortality of the body, the ongoing influence of death, sin, and law upon the Christian, and look forward to the redemption of the body at which time the Christian will be freed from such negative influence.²⁴³

Galatians 5:16–17

The Christian Paul view of Rom 7 also links well with Gal 5:16–17:

²⁴² Banks, “Eschatological Thanksgiving,” 34–42; Thurén, “Romans 7 Derhetorized,” 435; Dunn, *Romans* 1–8, 397, 432.

²⁴³ Banks, “Eschatological Thanksgiving,” 34–42.

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

In Rom 6–8 and Gal 5:16–17, it is acknowledged that there are within the Christian warring influences.²⁴⁴ In the case of Gal 5:16–17 these warring influences are referred to as “the desires of the flesh” and “the desires of the Spirit.” Paul obviously believes that the desires of the flesh continue to provoke the Christian, otherwise he would not have warned Christians against them. Also, notice that the desires of the flesh will prevent the Christian “from doing the things you want to do” (5:17). This aligns with the desires of “I” to do God’s will and “I”’s frustration that sin indwelling his members (i.e., the desires of the flesh) prevent him from attaining perfection.

Some interpreters argue that Gal 5:16–17 actually supports a non-Christian Paul view because it mentions the Spirit.²⁴⁵ First, the Spirit may not be mentioned explicitly in Rom 7, but it is mentioned throughout Rom 8 and Rom 6–8 must be read together as a unified representation of the Christian’s life.²⁴⁶ Second, unless one argues that moral perfection, both in deed and thought, is attainable and has in fact been attained by Christians generally throughout history, then Rom 7 continues to mesh perfectly with Gal 5:16–17.²⁴⁷

1 John 1:5–10

Another passage that aligns with a Christian Paul reading of Rom 7:14–25 is 1 John 1:5–10:

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in

²⁴⁴ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 395; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.346; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 81.

²⁴⁵ Stephen Voorwinde, “Paul’s Emotions in Romans 7: A Key to Understanding?” *VR* (2018): 113; Lambrecht, “Man before and without Christ,” 30; Chang, “Christian Life,” 275–276.

²⁴⁶ Kim, “Holy Spirit,” 72; Deenick, “Who is the ‘I’,” 128.

²⁴⁷ E.g., McGuigan, *Romans*, 77 acknowledges the Christian’s ongoing struggle against sin, even pointing to Gal 5:17 to support such a notion. Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 509.

darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Like Rom 6–8, 1 John 1:5–10 presents something of a paradox. In 1 John, the Christian is to walk in the light, remain in fellowship with God, and is cleansed from all sin; nevertheless, the Christian is to confess his sins and claiming sinlessness is seen as an affront to God. Similarly, in Rom 6–8, the Christian has died with Christ, is to live in accordance with the Spirit, and yet continues to struggle against the influence of sin. In both passages, the eschatological tension of living as Spiritual people in a fleshly world is apparent.

Psalm 119

Finally, Rom 7:14–25 has several remarkable parallels with Ps 119.²⁴⁸ The connection between these two passages is strengthened by the possible allusion to Ps 119:46 in Rom 1:16.²⁴⁹ In both Rom 7:14–25 and Ps 119, the author writes a long monologue in the first person, is focused on the law as God’s revealed will, and desires to fulfill God’s will.²⁵⁰ An additional parallel is the ending of each monologue, both of which are marked by a combination of praise, confession, and lament (Rom 7:24–25; Ps 119:175–176).²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Timmins, “Resurrection of Lament,” 386–408. Cf. Meyer, “Worm at the Core,” 64–65; Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14–25, 322.

²⁴⁹ Barbara Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies, 2008), 896.

²⁵⁰ Timmins, “Resurrection of Lament,” 388–389.

²⁵¹ Timmins, “Resurrection of Lament,” 403.

What is significant about the parallels between Rom 7:14–25 and Ps 119 is that it brings to mind the confessional nature of Psalms in which the author uses “I” to speak of himself, but in a representative way that allows the Psalm to be spoken by others as well.²⁵² This supports the idea that in Rom 7:14–25 Paul is speaking of himself, but in a representative manner.

Understanding 7:14–25 as influenced by confession and lament also makes sense of the hyperbolic language Paul uses in that passage, since it is the nature of confessions and lament to use emotionally charged, hyperbolic language.²⁵³

While not Scripture, the parallels between the Dead Sea Scroll document 1QS11 with the Psalms and Rom 7:14–25 have also been noted, providing additional support to the idea that in Rom 7:14–25, Paul speaks of himself in a representative manner.²⁵⁴

Romans 7:14–25 and Christian Experience

A fourth reason the Christian Paul view of Rom 7:14–25 is preferred is because it aligns with universal Christian experience. It is true that we cannot exegete based off of experience;²⁵⁵ however, how strange is it for an exegete to reject the *prima facie* reading of a text that also aligns with universal human experience? Not only that, but it is interesting that those who object

²⁵² Timmins, “Resurrection of Lament,” 390; Johansen, “Romans 7 and Confessions,” 102, 104, 108; Seifrid, “The Subject of Rom 7:14–25,” 320, 322. Cf. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Shape of the ‘I’: The Psalter, the Gospel, and the Speaker in Romans 7,” in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 77–91; John K. Goodrich, “Sold under Sin: Echoes of Exile in Romans 7.14–25,” *NTS* 59 (2013): 476–495; Channing L. Crisler, “The ‘I’ Who Laments: Echoes of Old Testament Lament in Romans 7:7–25 and the Identity of the Ἐγώ,” *CBQ* 82 (2020): 64–83.

²⁵³ Johansen, “Romans 7 and Confessions,” 104.

²⁵⁴ Johansen, “Romans 7 and Confessions,” 101–118; Lane Burgland, “Eschatological Tension and Existential Angst: ‘Now’ and ‘Not Yet’ in Romans 7:14–25 and 1QS11 (Community Rule, Manual of Discipline),” *CTQ* 61 (1997): 163–176; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 389.

²⁵⁵ Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 103–104. It is worth pointing out, however, that experience, while set to the last position, is still part of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scriptural interpretation: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience.

to the Christian Paul view of Rom 7:14–25 very frequently also reject perfectionism and feel the need to express their opinion that Christians do in fact experience something approximating “I”’s experience in Rom 7:14–25.²⁵⁶ Such concessions not only severely undercut arguments against the Christian Paul view, but point to the reality that Paul is speaking of himself as a representative Christian in Rom 7:14–25. After all, it is either/or: either we argue for perfectionism, or we acknowledge that sin continues to be a struggle for the Christian, a struggle of which Rom 7:14–25 is an excellent expression. As John Murray states so well, “Once we admit that sin persists in the believer, the tension of 7:14–25 is inevitable and it is not the way of truth to ignore it.”²⁵⁷ While experience cannot drive our exegesis, we cannot ignore the fact that universal Christian experience aligns with identifying “I” in Rom 7:14–25 as Christian Paul.

ADDRESSING OBJECTIONS TO THE CHRISTIAN PAUL VIEW

Having worked through Rom 7 from a Christian Paul view and presented the reasons that such a reading is preferred, the most common objections to the Christian Paul view will now be addressed. The primary objections that will be addressed are:

- 1) Contradictions between Rom 7 and 6 & 8
- 2) The Holy Spirit is not mentioned in Rom 7:14–25
- 3) Too strong of language which cannot be applied to a Christian
- 4) Lax morals and/or defeatism
- 5) Introspective reading is a product of later Western civilization, not Paul

²⁵⁶ Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 10, 128; Lambrecht, “Man before and without Christ,” 32; Coffman, *Romans*, 250, 252; McGuiggan, *Romans*, 77; Roper, *Romans 1–7*, 433, 454–457; Thielman, *Romans*, 369; Voorwinde, “Paul’s Emotions,” 122; Jewett, *Romans*, 466; Gorman, *Romans*, 182.

²⁵⁷ Murray, *Romans*, 1.203.

Contradictions between Romans 7 and 6 & 8

One of the most common arguments against identifying the “I” in Rom 7:14–25 as Christian Paul is that it contradicts chapters 6 and 8.²⁵⁸ Examples of the “contradicting” language between chapter 7 and chapters 6 and 8 can be seen in table 2:

Table 2: Proposed contradictions between Paul’s description of “I” and a Christian

“I”	Christian
“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.” (7:14)	<p>“You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” (8:9)</p> <p>“and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness... But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.” (6:18, 22)</p>
“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” (7:15, 19)	“in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (8:4)
“but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members... So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” (7:23, 25b)	“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” (8:2)

Source: Adapted from Chang, “Christian Life,” 273. Cf. Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 92.

²⁵⁸ Origen, *Romans*, 36; Jewett, *Romans*, 442, 466; Chang, “Christian Life,” 272–274; Hart, “Paul as Weak in Faith,” 337; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 53–55; Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 216–217.

Credit where credit is due, this comparison of language across the three chapters is the strongest argument against the Christian Paul view.²⁵⁹ However, it ultimately fails to dethrone the Christian Paul view of Rom 7:14–25.

First, this objection is correct to see the language in tension, but fails to acknowledge the language in common across the three chapters; i.e., the language of struggle, body, and mind / willing as discussed above. If language in tension is seen as significant, then language in common must also be seen as significant.

Second, contradictions between Rom 7 and 6 & 8 only exist if we take all of the language across the chapters in the same ontological sense.²⁶⁰ For example, one proposed contradiction is that Paul speaks of Christians at one time (but no longer) being “in the flesh” (8:9), while “I” says that he is “fleshly” (7:14) and serves sin with his flesh (7:25). If we take all of these phrases as expressing ontological reality so that Paul defines a non-Christian as one ontologically “in the flesh” and then “I” confesses that he is ontologically “fleshly,” then we indeed have a contradiction and cannot identify “I” as Christian Paul. However, “I” is not confessing his *ontological* identity when he speaks of being “fleshly,” but his *anthropological* identity as being one who continues in a fleshly body with its inherent weakness. As Dunn notes, to the degree that we allow an overlap of the ages of Adam and Christ, to that degree we will also allow “I” to speak of himself in both ontologically-Spiritual and anthropologically-fleshly terms.²⁶¹ Or, as Timmins puts it, the Christian’s anthropology has not caught up to his ontology.²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Dunn also believes this is one of the strongest arguments against the Christian Paul view: Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 51–52.

²⁶⁰ Eastman, “Double Participation,” 103; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 90.

²⁶¹ Dunn, *Theology*, 474–476.

²⁶² Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 90.

Third, there is only a contradiction among the three chapters if we take Paul's positive statements (e.g., set free from sin, no longer in the flesh) in an absolute literal sense. In other words, arguing that the language across the chapters creates a contradiction assumes that the Christian has been completely, absolutely removed from sin and flesh and that these things have no influence over the Christian. However, as discussed above, as soon as one admits that Christians continue to struggle against sin, then the tension described explicitly in Rom 7 and implicitly in Rom 6 and 8 becomes inescapable and all three chapters mesh together.²⁶³ Also, taking either the positive or negative statements in an absolute literal sense ignores Paul's use of hyperbole, which will be discussed below.²⁶⁴

Finally, the tension in language emphasized by this objection is actually a very good representation of the tension that exists in the Christian. A Christian is one who is free from sin and death, yet simultaneously influenced by sin and death. Paul's use of absolute language pointing to both the ontological reality of "now" and the anthropological reality of "not yet" balances itself and creates a picture of the reality of living as a Christian in a fallen world.²⁶⁵

The Holy Spirit is not Mentioned in Romans 7:14–25

Another very common objection is that the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in Rom 7, but is mentioned extensively in Rom 8; therefore, Rom 7 must refer to a non-Christian and Rom 8 to a Christian.²⁶⁶ At first blush this seems like a significant argument; however, it quickly crumbles

²⁶³ Murray, *Romans*, 1.203.

²⁶⁴ Thurén, "Romans 7 Derhetorized," 433, 436.

²⁶⁵ Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 396; Thurén, "Romans 7 Derhetorized," 436.

²⁶⁶ Chester, "Romans 7 and Conversion," 169; Chang, "Christian Life," 275; Thielman, *Romans*, 370; Lambrecht, "Man before and without Christ," 30; Hart, "Paul as Weak in Faith," 337; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 43; Rogers, *Paid in Full*, 113; Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 216–217.

under inspection. First, this is an argument from silence and is therefore “inherently inconclusive.”²⁶⁷ There are other possibilities as to why the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in Rom 7 other than the proposal that no mention of the Holy Spirit must imply a non-Christian is in view.²⁶⁸

Second, if Rom 8 is to serve as our standard, then it is doubtful that any passage in the Bible will be sufficiently saturated with the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Spirit is mentioned in Rom 5:5 and then is not mentioned again until 7:6, which means that the vast majority of Rom 5 and all of 6 are devoid of explicit mention of the Holy Spirit. Romans 6 implies that Christians will continue to struggle against sin and makes no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit, yet it is universally acknowledged as referring to the Christian life; Rom 7:14–25 also expresses the struggle against sin and makes no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit, yet is often rejected as referring to the Christian life. Why is the lack of reference to the Holy Spirit emphasized for Rom 7:14–25 but given a pass for Rom 6? This seems like a double-standard.

Third and finally, while it is true that the Holy Spirit is not explicitly mentioned in 7:14–25, it does not follow that the Holy Spirit is therefore absent in the life of “I.”²⁶⁹ For example, Rom 8:31–39 makes no mention of the Spirit, but the reader continues to understand that the Spirit plays a key role.²⁷⁰ Likewise, in 7:14–25, “I” struggles against sin and mourns his lack of perfection, not because he lacks the Spirit, but precisely because he has the Spirit.²⁷¹ Dying with Christ as described in Rom 6 is not the end of the war, but the beginning of the war, and Rom

²⁶⁷ Packer, “The “Wretched Man” Revisited,” 80.

²⁶⁸ Kim, “Holy Spirit,” 72; Deenick, “Who is the ‘I,’” 128.

²⁶⁹ Kim, “Holy Spirit,” 119–130.

²⁷⁰ Kim, “Holy Spirit,” 71.

²⁷¹ Kim, “Holy Spirit,” 47–48; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 474; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.342.

7:14–25 describes the reality of this war which will not be won until Jesus returns.²⁷² Romans 8 is rightly viewed as a burst of hope after a chapter of relative bleakness, but that is exactly the Christian’s experience: struggles of life (both moral and otherwise) tempered by confident hope in our standing before God and hope of eternal life. Chapter 8 does not contradict chapter 7, but rounds out the picture of the Christian life.

Too strong of language which cannot be applied to a Christian

Many object to identifying “I” as Christian Paul because the language used by “I” is too strong and cannot be legitimately applied to a Christian.²⁷³ There is no doubt that Rom 7:14–25 uses strong language which, taken to the absolute, literalistic limit presents a picture of the Christian contrary to the rest of the Bible and, for that matter, universal experience. Certainly, a Christian does not always and only do evil and never any good! Then again, if that is what we are to take Rom 7:14–25 as portraying, would it even apply to the non-Christian?²⁷⁴ After all, even non-Christians portray degrees of morality and do morally good things. This leads to the question of whether or not Paul intends the language in Rom 7:14–25 to be taken in such an extremely literalistic manner.

Important for correctly understanding these verses is not pushing Paul’s language past its intended limits. Lauri Thurén goes so far as to suggest that hyperbole is the key rhetorical feature

²⁷² Deenick, “Who is the ‘I,’” 125, 127, 130; Eastman, “Double Participation,” 103; Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 55; McGarvey and Pendleton, *Romans*, 356.

²⁷³ Thielman, *Romans*, 370; Chang, “Christian Life,” 272–274. See especially Dodson and Motl who absolutize Paul’s language so that he means “I” is “unable to do any good,” “powerless to do any good,” “sins no matter what,” etc.: *Conquerors Not Captives*, 50, 73–74.

²⁷⁴ Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 586n13. Cf. Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 93.

for reading Paul's writings in general.²⁷⁵ Just like when reading other rhetorically driven speeches (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount), room must be made for hyperbole when reading Rom 7:14–25.²⁷⁶ Paul does not intend the reader to think that "I" does only evil all the time and never any good – that is to push the language beyond its intended use and to ignore the larger point. What Paul *does* mean is that "I" is never above temptation, finds himself failing to attain perfection, and that even the best actions can be polluted by impure motive.²⁷⁷ As Packer notes, Paul is painting a picture with his words that expresses what is felt by "I"; artistic expression must be allowed.²⁷⁸ Or, as Moses Lard put it so simply, "Only let his language not be taken too strongly, and it presents no difficulty."²⁷⁹

Lax morals and/or defeatism

Some object to the Christian Paul view because it leads, they claim, to lax morals or to an attitude of defeatism.²⁸⁰ This objection is interesting because it so obviously indicates that pastoral concerns are driving exegesis, which is precisely the charge sometimes levelled against Augustine and Luther.²⁸¹ If one presents Rom 7:14–25 as teaching that Christians will only and always fail and never grow in sanctification, then perhaps such an understanding of the text would lead to lax morals or defeatism. However, correct teaching of Rom 7:14–25 would prevent

²⁷⁵ Thurén, "Romans 7 Derhetorized," 433.

²⁷⁶ Thurén, "Romans 7 Derhetorized," 436–437; Keener, *Romans*, 93.

²⁷⁷ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.342, 361; Packer, "Wretched Man Revisited," 77; Lard, *Romans*, 238–239; Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.450.

²⁷⁸ Packer, "The "Wretched Man" Revisited," 73n5.

²⁷⁹ Lard, *Romans*, 237.

²⁸⁰ Chang, "Christian Life," 258; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 6–7.

²⁸¹ E.g., Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 21–29.

such a problem – a topic to be discussed below. The fact that many defenders of the Christian Paul view of 7:14–25 take the need for sanctification very seriously would seem to belie the notion that the Christian Paul view necessarily leads either to lax morals or defeatism.²⁸²

Introspective reading is a product of later Western civilization, not Paul

Finally, an objection raised by Stendahl which has proved to be influential is that the “introspective reading” of Rom 7:14–25 is the product of Augustine and Luther, not pure exegesis of the text.²⁸³ Stendahl believes that it is only because Paul expressed his theological conundrum about the role of the law in such expressive language that later readers mistakenly saw an introspective element in the text.²⁸⁴

First, to say that Paul presented his argument so well that it led readers to think he was referring to himself is just another way of saying that the Christian Paul view is the *prima facie* reading.²⁸⁵ The intuition evidenced by interpreters throughout history that Paul is expressing *someone’s* introspection is no doubt correct.²⁸⁶ The debate is not over whether Rom 7 expresses introspection; the debate is over *who* is being introspective. Is Paul expressing his own

²⁸² Schreiner, *Romans*, 390; Lard, *Romans*, 238, 240, 244; McGarvey and Pendleton, *Romans*, 357, 360; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 412; Cottrell, *Romans*, 1.474–475. Cf. J.C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2023; originally 1879), xvii–xix, 29; James Fraser, *A Treatise On Sanctification*, rev. ed. (London: Sands & Co., 1898), 254–352.

²⁸³ Stendahl, “Introspective Conscience,” 199–215.

²⁸⁴ Stendahl, “Introspective Conscience,” 213.

²⁸⁵ Of course, Stendahl argues that it is only the natural reading for us moderns, not for the ancients: Stendahl, “Introspective Conscience,” 213. It seems to me that Stendahl’s argument fails because it does not give adequate attention to the greater context of Romans 5–8 and of Romans as a whole, which is clearly concerned with anthropological issues and with expounding the gospel: Wu, “The Place of Romans 7,” 344–346.

²⁸⁶ Chester, “Romans 7 and Conversion,” 171; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 5.

introspection, or is he stepping into the character of another and being introspective on behalf of that character – that is the primary question.

Second, to read Rom 7 as if it were purely a defense of the Mosaic law is to ignore the greater context of Rom 5–8 in which chapter 7 speaks of law, but is more properly seen as part of the continued discussion going back to chapter 5. It further fails to recognize Paul’s stated purpose for writing the letter: strengthening his audience by proclaiming and expounding the gospel.²⁸⁷

Third, why would it be so strange for Paul to speak introspectively when such introspective analysis is so evident throughout the Psalms? It would be perfectly in character for one who wears his heart on his sleeve (as his letters abundantly show) and as one raised on the Hebrew Psalter to speak in an introspective manner in Rom 7.

Conclusion to Objections

As mentioned before, the burden of proof is on those who wish to identify “I” in Rom 7:14–25 as other than Christian Paul. Crucial to overcoming the Christian Paul view is to present an objection that makes identifying “I” as Christian Paul untenable; however, the objections against the Christian Paul view have so far failed to achieve such a goal. Until an insurmountable objection is raised, the *prima facie* reading of Rom 7:14–25 – that “I” means “I, Paul” speaking as a representative Christian – should be accepted as the correct reading.

²⁸⁷ Wu, “The Place of Romans 7,” 344–346.

PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

Before concluding this paper, some of the pastoral implications of identifying “I” in Rom 7:14–25 as Christian Paul will be considered. First, the necessity of balanced teaching. Second, that the expression of struggle in 7:14–25 informs Christians of reality between the epochs. And third, that the finale is Rom 8, not Rom 7.

The Necessity of Balanced Teaching

It is crucial for a teacher of a congregation to present a balanced understanding of Rom 7:14–25. Yes, the “I” is a Christian who struggles against the ongoing influence of sin; however, this is by no means an excuse for continuing in sin.²⁸⁸ As mentioned above, one of the arguments against identifying “I” as Christian Paul is that such teaching will lead to lax morals because, after all, a Christian necessarily continues to do the evil they do not desire.²⁸⁹ While such arguments do not hold, they do pick up on an element of truth; namely, that poor teaching of Rom 7:14–25 has led some individuals to come to improper conclusions about the need for sanctification. In teaching Rom 7:14–25, the entire context of Rom 5–8 must be kept in view, and above all, Rom 7:14–25 must never be construed as giving license for sin or an excuse to forsake sanctification. To excuse sin in one’s life, to shrug one’s shoulders at sin or to reject the necessity of sanctification is not to relate to the “I” of Rom 7:14–25, but is to expose one’s “mind of the flesh” (8:7–8).

²⁸⁸ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.360; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 464–475.

²⁸⁹ Chang, “Christian Life,” 258; Dodson and Motl, *Conquerors Not Captives*, 6–7.

Reality between the Epochs

While Rom 7:14–25 cannot legitimately be construed as giving license for sin, it nevertheless does highlight the reality of the Christian’s ongoing battle against sin. Until Jesus’s return and the resurrection of the dead, Christians continue to live in two epochs: that of Christ and that of Adam.²⁹⁰ Since that is the case, Christians will continue to wage war against sin and sin will likely continue to win some battles in the Christian’s life. Admitting such should not be seen as a “consolation prize” for a Christian struggling with sin, but should be understood simply as an acknowledgment of reality.²⁹¹ Any teaching of Rom 7:14–25 that denies the necessity of sanctification is dangerous and can easily lead to antinomianism. On the other hand, denying that Rom 7:14–25 expresses real Christian struggle is also dangerous and can easily cause Christians to become discouraged over their own struggle, dishonest by denying that they struggle, or prideful in that they believe they have surpassed such struggles.²⁹² This latter danger seems to be implicitly acknowledged by the fact that, as mentioned above, so many interpreters who reject the idea that “I” is Christian Paul feel the need to acknowledge the ongoing struggle against sin that Christians do in fact experience. More correct is the idea that a Christian’s sanctification proceeds as a “cyclical advance,” in which failure to attain perfection leads a Christian to depend more on God and press forward with ever more conviction.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Dunn, *Theology*, 474; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 388–389; Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity*, 82; Eastman, “Double Participation,” 103; Porter, *Romans*, 153.

²⁹¹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.360; Schreiner, *Romans*, 373; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 377; Porter, *Romans*, 152.

²⁹² Dunn, “Romans 7:14–25,” 69; McGarvey and Pendleton, *Romans*, 360.

²⁹³ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, NAC 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 168.

The Finale is Romans 8, not Romans 7

Finally, when teaching from Rom 7:14–25 or when referencing the passage in a counseling situation, it is necessary to keep in mind that Rom 7:14–25 is not the climax of this section of Romans, Rom 8 is. Yes, Christians continue to struggle against the influence of sin, but God does not forsake them; on the contrary, the Holy Spirit indwells them, strengthens them, and prays for them (8:26). The Christian’s struggle against sin is not the end of the story, for the struggle will one day come to an end when Jesus returns and the Christian is given a glorified body (8:18–25). It is unhelpful to deny the ongoing struggle inherent to living between Jesus’s ascension and return; however, it is equally unhelpful to ignore the Christian’s hope of resurrection, glorification, and eternity, free from the struggle against sin. Whenever Rom 7:14–25 is taught, the hope found in Rom 8 must not be left out of the picture.

CONCLUSION

The reading of Rom 7:7–25 that has been defended here is that when Paul writes “I” in Rom 7, he means “I, Paul.” Paul first speaks of his past self in 7:7–12 and then speaks as his present self, as a representative Christian, in 7:14–25. First, the history of interpretation of Rom 7 was surveyed with special attention given to the Restoration Movement. From the historical survey it becomes clear that at least from the time of Origen there has been no agreement as to the identity of the “I” in Rom 7. After the historical survey, the idea of Rom 7:7–25 being a speech-in-character was assessed. While the speech-in-character theory has proven very popular, when scrutinized it becomes clear that Rom 7 is not a speech-in-character. This being the case, the probability of “I” in Rom 7 being non-Pauline (i.e., Adam, Eve, Israel, etc.) becomes very small. Next, the challenge that Rom 7:25 presents to views other than the Christian Paul view was

reviewed. The challenge of Rom 7:25 further points to the identification of “I” as Christian Paul being correct. Having shown that alternative views have significant challenges to overcome to be viable, a positive argument for the Christian Paul view of Rom 7:14–25 was set forth. This was done by working through the text of Rom 7:1–8:1 and highlighting specific reasons why such a reading of the text is to be preferred. After presenting a positive argument, the common objections to the Christian Paul view were weighed and found wanting. Finally, some of the pastoral implications of identifying “I” in Rom 7:14–25 as Christian Paul were addressed.

On such a well-worn subject, what suggestions might be made for further study? First, for those wishing to pursue the possibility of Rom 7 being a speech-in-character, comparable examples must be found within ancient literature. The focus of such discussion has been on the abstract theorizing of ancient rhetoricians; however, examples of speech-in-character that are *actually* comparable to Rom 7 (e.g., truly unIntroduced) have yet to be put forward. Another avenue for further study is to determine if there is truly a correlation between one’s view of sanctification and one’s view of Rom 7:14–25. This would be interesting and useful data for those debating the interpretation of this passage. Finally, for the sake of both scholars and Christians in general, biblical study material from a Christian Paul perspective of Rom 7:14–25 that is in-depth and provides properly balanced teaching is always in need.

While identifying “I” in Rom 7:14–25 as Christian Paul is here confidently asserted, it must be acknowledged that the debate over the identity of “I” has been ongoing for 1800 years and is unlikely to end any time soon. Good Christians and experienced exegetes finding themselves on opposing sides of the debate can still acknowledge each other as Christians. Nevertheless, one’s interpretation of Rom 7 will have significant ramifications for one’s understanding of the Christian life, and it therefore cannot be dismissed as inconsequential. The

position presented in this paper, that “I” in Rom 7:14–25 is Paul speaking as a mature, representative Christian, appears to this writer to be the reading best supported by the biblical text. Christians can properly come alongside “I” and express their continued struggle against sin while also praising God that in Christ Jesus there is hope of full redemption in glorified immortality.

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