Adam, Christ, and the Law
in Romans 5–8

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In this essay, a tribute to two scholars of the Catholic tradition who in complementary ways have made an unparalleled contribution to Pauline studies, I should like to pose a question that has long accompanied my own study of Paul’s Letter to Rome. Why does the Mosaic Law remain a major preoccupation in the flow of the letter—in chaps. 5 and 6, but above all, in chap. 7—when one might reasonably conclude that going the way of the law has been sufficiently excluded by the close of chap. 4? In the days when Romans was considered something of a systematic treatise, rather than an exposition of the Gospel directed from and to a particular situation, the question hardly arose. Having established justification by faith in the opening chapters, Paul was considered to be now addressing a series of theological topics in stately sequence: grace, sin, baptism, sanctification, the law, the Spirit, and so forth. Something of this attitude lingers in the still common view that Paul, in Rom 7:7–25, is mounting an “apology for the law.”

1. I posed a similar question in an earlier article, “The Problem of τοῦσκιο and the Relationship with Judaism in Romans,” CBQ 62/2 (2000) 294–309, but here I propose to take the issue in a rather different direction and with a closer focus upon Rom 5:12–21 and 7:7–25.
3. So especially James D. G. Dunn, Romans 1–8 (WBC 38A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1988) 376; Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 157–58. Fitzmyer (Romans, 463) notes this view and lists older interpreters who have held it; but he does not appear to endorse it, pointing out that Paul’s major concern in Rom 7:7–25 is to depict human beings under the domination of sin and the law’s role, despite its own intrinsic goodness (v. 12); see also Ernst Käsemann, Commentary on Romans (Grand Rapids, MI: 
indeed raise the issue about the law’s identification with sin in Rom 7:7 and asserts its intrinsic holiness (7:12), but he does not appear to be considering this issue in a detached and abstract sense. What he maintains at these points is part of a long and sustained contrast between life under the law and life in the Spirit, introduced thematically, first negatively and then positively, in 7:5–6, and then pursued at length across 7:7–8:11.4

Following the scriptural confirmation in Romans 4 that eschatological justification will be on the basis of faith and inclusive rather than exclusive in scope, it is understandable that Paul should pursue the wider exposition of his theme (1:16–17) in terms of the hope of salvation in prospect for the justified (5:1). He has to some extent already prepared the way for this idea by presenting Abraham as a figure of persevering faith (4:20–21), and also of hope. He addresses the issue of hope in the context of the complex eschatological situation in which believers presently find themselves—the situation that James Dunn has aptly termed the “overlap” of the ages.5 Although “right with God” (justified) as attested by the Spirit, and thus in this sense participating in the final age, believers nonetheless remain bodily encased in the conditions of the old (“present”) time, faced with the prospect of physical death, experiencing suffering, and prone to the lingering weakness of the “flesh.” The opening section of Romans 5 (vv. 1–11) addresses this tension admirably. On the basis of a divine love demonstrated by the death of the Son for those who were at the time sinners and “enemies” of God, Paul stirs up an a fortiori (πολλὰς μᾶλλον) logic to assert that the love, which has reached out in such an excess of grace in the harder case (human enmity to God), will most surely not fail to bring the now-reconciled to the fullness of salvation. This same logic, with greater concentration upon the Spirit and with the inclusion of the non-human remainder of the universe in its scope (8:19–22), returns in the latter half of Romans 8 (from v. 14 onward). But why does the law reappear—first in somewhat intrusive asides in 5:13–14 and 5:21, then in two “throwaway” phrases in 6:14–15, to become finally a sustained negative topic in 7:1–8:11 (over against “life in the Spirit”)?

4. See Käsemann, Commentary on Romans, 210; Brendan Byrne, Romans (SacPag 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) 213, 226, 234–41; and “Problem of ὅποιος,” 304–6.
5. Dunn, Theology of Paul, 464.
In a revised and expanded edition of a study of Paul from a sociological perspective that appeared in 1986, Francis Watson would see Paul’s continuing preoccupation with the law as an attempt to nudge believers of Jewish origin away from adherence to the law so as to forge, along with believers of Gentile origin, a distinct Christian identity centered upon God’s act of saving grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus. While finding a great deal of Watson’s discussion of Romans 7 highly illuminating, I am less persuaded that Paul’s treatment of the law at this point is designed to achieve that particular aim. My own study of Romans over the years has led me to believe that the letter was written more to ensure a welcome for Paul in Rome than to substantially alter attitudes that believers of various backgrounds might hold toward each other.

To be more precise, to smooth the way for his visit en route to Spain, in particular to counter any false impressions the Romans might have about him, Paul wrote the letter to set the record straight concerning (1) his understanding and proclamation of the Gospel and (2) his attitude to that bulk of his people (Israel) that had not accepted it and to the Law of Moses that regulated Israel’s life. Paul is particularly concerned to counter the kind of charge cited and dismissed in Rom 3:8: “And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), ‘Let us do evil so that good may come?’” What likely gave rise to this slander was Paul’s heavy emphasis on God’s grace, promoting in those who opposed him an entrenched conviction that setting up Gentile communities without the straightjacket provided by the law was simply a recipe for a moral “free-for-all,” utterly opposed to the obedience required by the Gospel. The law becomes once again a key topic in the letter because its audience contains—at least in Paul’s mind—a significant number of people who cannot conceive of a righteous life in terms other than a life “under the law.”

What is not in dispute between Paul and his audience is the accepted axiom, within the apocalyptic framework of discourse presupposed in the letter, that “life” (= eternal life) depends upon righteousness (see 8:10c: ζωὴ διὰ δικαιοσύνην). Paul’s task, in Romans 5–8, is to ground this hope for

8. 1 Enoch 1.1–9; 5.6–7 (Greek); 39.4–8; 58.2–3; 62.13–16; 91.12–13; 94–104; Pss. Sol.
believers in the continuing possibility of living rightly, despite—Paul will eventually say, because of—living apart from the law. More specifically, he will demonstrate that righteous living is possible because the Spirit has replaced the law as the determining element of believers’ way of life.

My intention, from here on, is to examine this issue more closely, especially in regard to Paul’s sudden introduction of the figure of Adam in 5:12–21, and the relationship between Adam’s situation under “the commandment” and life “under the law” as depicted in Romans 7. My contention will be that Paul’s argument hinges on an antithesis in which an intrinsic link between sin and (eternal) death on the negative side is matched—more than matched—by an equally intrinsic link between righteousness and (eternal) life on the positive side. Paul introduces the figure of Adam because, through reference to the protopatriarch, he can address the situation of humanity as such, which is also the scope of God’s saving design for humanity in Christ. The Mosaic Law, which might have been thought to exempt one particular people (Israel) from the condition set in train by Adam, paradoxically worked in precisely the opposite way. It placed that people most intently in Adam’s situation in order that one representative member of that people, Messiah Jesus, might replay successfully the role of Adam and, through his obedience, bring about righteousness and destiny to (eternal) life, not only for Israel, but for humanity as a whole. Christ does so not in place of other human beings (substitution) nor as their representative; rather, as instrument of divine grace, he enables them through the Spirit to live out the righteousness that leads to life. I propose to pursue this theme through Romans 5–8, paying particular attention to those areas where Adam and the law feature more prominently.

Adam and Christ: Instrumental Figures in Romans 5:12–21

The reiterated statements comparing/contrasting Adam and Christ in 5:12–21 feature a variant of the phrase, “through ... one man,” no less

than thirteen times⁹ — a rhetorical effect building up a very strong sense of the instrumentality of “the one” for “the many.” Even though Paul will be at pains to stress the likeness of Adam and Christ in at least two key respects (esp. in vv. 15–17), he nonetheless appears to rest the efficacy of Christ’s saving work for “the many” (imparting the righteousness leading to life) upon the parallel “efficacy” of Adam’s “work,” albeit in the totally opposite direction (causing the slavery to sin that leads to death). What the comparison/contrast between Adam and Christ brings out is this sense of the efficacy of “one” for “the many.”

Paul has already introduced a strong sense of this instrumentality in the preceding section (5:1–11). In 5:6, he sets in train reiterated statements of Christ’s sacrificial death as the irrefutable demonstration of God’s love for those who were “ungodly” (v. 6), “sinners” (v. 8), “enemies” (v. 10). In v. 7, he pauses to formulate a reflection on the “difficulty” of dying for another person.¹⁰ He concedes that one might be prepared to die for a good person (v. 7b); yet, what demonstrates God’s love for us is that Christ died for us while we were sinners (v. 8). If Christ’s death has brought us reconciliation with God at such cost, how “much more” confident can we be that, through his “life” (resurrection), we shall be “saved” (from the wrath; vv. 9–10). The second sequence (5:12–21) builds on the former (hence the initial διὰ τοιοῦτο) in the sense that there is a progression along a scale of eschatological “events”—from the (more negative) moment of “salvation” (from the wrath) to the prospect of sharing Christ’s eternal life, of “reigning in life” (v. 17; see v. 21). If the motifs of reconciliation and salvation have dominated vv. 5:1–11, it is the duality of death and (eternal) life that will dominate vv. 5:12–21.

The transition to the prospect of life explains the introduction of the “Adam/Christ” schema. Paul is an antithetical thinker. It is highly characteristic of his mode of argument to preface a positive affirmation with a formulation, and firm rebuttal of, the opposing negative,¹¹ or to preface the description of a positive state of affairs with an account of the corresponding negative.¹² Thus, in the context of affirming the prospect of eter-

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⁹. Verse 12 (1x), 15 (2x), 16 (2x), 17 (3x), 18 (2x), 19 (2x).

¹⁰. On the Hellenistic background to the notion of giving one’s life for worthy causes, see Robert Jewett, Romans: A Commentary (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007) 360.


nal life held out for believers through the saving instrumentality of the “one man” Christ, it is natural for Paul to reach for, and employ, the well-known antithetical motif of the first man, Adam, as instrumental in the onset of death. He has made this move already in 1 Corinthians (2:21–22). What characterizes, however, the appeal to the Adam tradition in Romans is a more profound exploration of the causality behind the respective effects of bringing death and life. Beneath the “death/life” antithesis in each case is the more fundamental antithesis of “sin” and “righteousness,” which is running prominently throughout Romans in a way that is not the case in 1 Corinthians. Hence, Paul presents Adam as the bringer of death to the human race on the basis of having given rise to the reign of sin; he is the antitype of Christ who is the bringer of (eternal) life on the basis of communicating righteousness as the gift of God’s grace.

It is neither possible nor necessary to enter here into the multiple exegetical issues attending the opening formulation of the “Adam” side of the “Adam/Christ” schema in Rom 5:12, particularly those bearing upon the final clause (v. 12d) and its introductory phrase ἐπ’ ὃς. I would continue to maintain that the introductory phrase must be understood as a contract form of ἐπὶ τοῦτον ὄντα, with the sense of formulating emphatically the grounds or basis upon which the state of affairs just mentioned has come about: what Adam introduced into the (human) world was the “reign” of “Sin,” pictured here (and at least as far as 8:15) as an enslaving power

13. The view that Adam was responsible for the onset of death is reasonably widespread in post-biblical Jewish literature. Far less attested is the sense of his responsibility for the prevalence of sin. See Robin Scroggs, The Last Adam: A Study in Pauline Anthropology (Philadelphia: Fortress; Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) 15–31; and more recently and comprehensively, John R. Levison, Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism: From Sirach to 2 Baruch (JSSup 7; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988) 2.

14. With great respect, particularly in the present context, I have to align myself with those who have not been convinced by Joseph Fitzmyer’s (Romans, 413–17) understanding of the phrase in a consecutive sense. Though based upon an impressive array of linguistic usage and, at first sight, seeming to offer a better connection to what immediately follows—the assertion of the universal prevalence of sin in v. 13—the consecutive interpretation runs counter to the overall thrust of the thought, both with respect to the passage as a whole and the preceding clauses (v. 12a–c), to the effect that sin is a cause rather than a consequence of death. Whatever we may say about v. 13, it is the clear implication of v. 14 that death’s universal prevalence is a consequence of sin.

15. The ἐπ’ ὃς then responds to the ὄντα, standing in the initial position of stress at the beginning of v. 12d. Verse 12a and 12b, thus, assert the connection between sin and the onset of death in a general way; verses 12cd describe how this connection has prevailed in the concrete sinning of all; see Byrne, Romans, 183.
that has come to hold all of Adam’s descendants in its fatal grip. What v. 12d adds to the preceding clauses is the sense that mortality became the lot of all human beings because all, through the reign of Sin, ratified the “original” sin of their ancestor Adam. Paul emphasizes the intrinsic link between sinning and death “in Adam” because he intends it to highlight, by comparison/contrast, the corresponding and equally intrinsic link, on the positive side, between righteousness and (eternal) life that comes about for human beings “in Christ.”

But there is a problem. The absence of the law in the period between Adam and Moses (who received it on behalf of Israel at Mount Sinai) could seem to threaten the intimate nexus between human sinning and the onset of death as its punishment in the sense just formulated, that is, as a legacy from Adam. The issue stems from a widely accepted principle that it is the law that converts sin, understood in the general sense of wrongdoing, into deliberate rebellion against the express will of the Creator (“transgression”) and so creates “wrath” (4:15), the divine intent to punish. Before formulating the “Christ” side of the schema (as a complement to the negative description in 5:12), Paul breaks off to confront this issue in an aside (5:13–14), thus reintroducing the law into this section of Romans. In v. 13a, he insists that sin was in the world during this period, concedes, in v. 13b, the difficulty stemming from the principle, but then sweeps it aside (v. 14ab) by pointing to the universal prevalence (“reign”) of Death in the period in question even over those who did not sin after the likeness of Adam’s “transgression” (παράβασις). The (observable) universal prevalence of death proves the universal prevalence of sin (vv. 12, 13a) as its cause.

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17. Many interpreters sense an “excess of causality” here: death comes to individuals as a legacy of the sin of Adam and also as a consequence of their own sinning, the universality of which Paul has already emphasized in the letter (1:18–3:20 [esp. 3:9]; 5:13); see Fitzmyer, Romans, 406–7. While doubtless aware of the tension, Paul, operating within a metaphorical drama, was probably untroubled by it. Adam sold the human race into a slavery to sin, from which humans are powerless to escape, whose edicts they must “obey” while being unable to escape responsibility. See further my article, “The Type of the One to Come” (Rom 5:14): Fate and Responsibility in Romans 5:12–21,” Australian Biblical Review 36 (1988) 19–30.

18. This clause (5:13b) must then be understood in a concessive sense; see Byrne, Romans, 183.
Despite the fact that the issue being addressed stems from the absence of the law in the period in question, Paul characterizes the sinning at this time not as "not being under law" or something similar, but as "unlike the transgression of Adam" (v. 14b). The implication would seem to be that the law, when it came upon the scene, reintroduced the possibility of sinning according to the likeness of Adam. This did not substantially alter the nexus between sin and human mortality already in play, but it did intensify and make explicit the damage to divine-human relations brought about by sin. As Paul had already noted, when distancing the law from the dispensation of grace reaching from Abraham to his "progeny" (believers), "the law works wrath" (4:15). It is likely that at this point Paul’s thought is already operating with a double concept of death. There is a physical mortality already prevalent in the human world because of sin (5:14). What the law will add is the threat that, without salvation from the "wrath" (5:9; see 1:18; 2:8; Gal 1:4; 1 Thess 1:9–10), physical mortality will become death in the fullest sense of eternal separation from God and deprivation of the "eternal" life that God has always willed to bestow upon human beings (see Wis 2:23–24).  

Following this explanatory aside (Rom 5:13–14b) Paul prepares the way for the complete formulation of the "Adam/Christ" schema by qualifying Adam, in a concluding clause (v. 14c), as the "type of the one to come" (τύπος τοῦ μέλλοντος). At first sight, in view of what has just been said concerning those who did not sin according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, it is tempting to see Adam as a "type" of those who would indeed sin under law: that is, in a situation parallel to his of having received a specific command (prohibition). In favor of this conclusion one might point to the fact that τύπος normally indicates a positive correspondence between the antecedent and what it "typifies." It is far more likely, however, that Paul is already introducing Christ and intending to be very specific concerning the way in which Adam is and is not a type of Christ as "the one to come." There is indeed a positive correspondence between the two

19. It is generally conceded that a concept of death beyond mere physical mortality is operative in this passage; see Fitzmyer, Romans, 412, 417–18 (citing Augustine); Dieter Zeller, Der Brief an die Römer (Regensburg Neues Testament; Regensburg: Pustet, 1985) 127.

figures in that each is an instrumental figure of universal significance, an individual whose pattern of behavior had effects upon all. In every other respect, however, as Paul will go on to point out, they are totally unlike. The “unlikeness” does not, however, cancel the fundamental point he has been making: the effect of “one” upon the “many.”

Postponing further (till v. 18) the perfect formulation of the balanced schema, Paul hastens to indicate the unlikeness (vv. 15–17). This move not only wards off any false suggestion of likeness; it also “stokes up” the logic, the πολλῷ μᾶλλον logic, that (as already in 5:6–10) will be the engine of the schema’s central affirmation when fully deployed: the overwhelming superiority of the influence stemming from Christ and the hope of eternal life for “the many” flowing from it. Verse 15ab formulates the unlikeness in an introductory thematic way. In English, it is better to change the order of the clauses to bring out the sense: “The [operation of the] χάρις [is/was not] like the operation of the παράπτωμα.” Though previously referring to Adam’s sin as a transgression (παράβασις), Paul now employs the word παράπτωμα. While not having essentially the same sense of infringement of a positive command as παράβασις, it is likely that παράπτωμα does serve for the latter here—and several times later in the passage (vv. 15b, 16, 17, 18, 20)—in order to set up a repeated pattern of words ending in -μα. Most notably, it stands in contrastive parallel with the reference to Christ’s act as χάρις, that is, as a concrete instantiation of the grace of God. Paul then explains the unlikeness, first of all (v. 15c), in terms of what each act, respectively, involved: whereas Adam was simply a human being whose sinning had fatal consequences for all, behind the act of Christ (χάρις) lay the overflowing power and generosity (χάρις) of the Creator. The second mode of unlikeness (vv. 16–17) looks more to consequences: where Adam’s condemnation (κρίμα) led to a verdict of condemnation hanging (κατάκριμα) over all, Christ’s gracious act—in the context of multiple human transgression (ἐκ πολλῶν παραπτωμάτων)—opened up the way to acquittal (δικαίωμα). The ultimate consequence (v. 17) is the prospect of the “reign” of Death being more than matched by the “reigning in (eternal) life” of those who receive the “overflow” of grace and of the gift of righteousness through the agency of the one (man), Jesus Christ.

Having stirred up the “much more” logic in terms of unlikeness, Paul

21. I add the phrase “the operation of,” to bring out the Greek sense of οὖν ὡς ... ὡς καὶ.
is now able to formulate the schema in its full sense to affirm the hope of eternal life in the following verses (vv. 18, 19). What remains presupposed throughout is the intimate connection between sin and death (in respect to both Adam and all “the many” who ratified his sin) on the one hand (the negative case), and between righteousness and (eternal) life (in respect to both Christ and all who acquire the state of righteousness through him as a gracious gift) on the other. The fact that righteousness is a gift does not mean that we should exclude from it here a reference to actual human behavior, albeit graced behavior. The hope of eternal life stems from the fact that the malign influence of Adam’s disobedience upon human beings, leading to their sin (v. 12d), has been more than matched by the self-sacrificing obedience of Christ (Rom 15:3; Phil 2:8; Gal 2:20) “into” which human beings can be drawn, through faith, in a transformation (righteousness) that will lead to life.22 The triumphant conclusion can then be drawn that, as sin reigned in death, “so grace will reign through righteousness unto eternal life, through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 5:21).

Before drawing this conclusion, Paul formulates another statement concerning the coming of the law: “The law came in (παρέσικληθεν) to multiply the trespass” (παράπτωμα). In this startlingly negative statement, the ἵνα indicates divine purpose.23 The law intensified sin by adding to sin more generally conceived the qualification of transgressing a commandment explicitly given by God to indicate the divine will. Confronting its recipients with specific prohibitions in the context of the covenant relationship, the law placed Israel in the same situation as Adam. Paul will expand upon this process later on (7:7–13). For the present, he picks up again the thought of the coming of the law, which is still remembered from its use earlier in the passage (5:13–14), in order to draw it into the intensification of the sense of divine grace operative in the Christ event, which is the true goal of the affirmation. The “multiplication” of sin occasioned by the law only served to give even greater scope for the operation of divine grace. Literally (v. 20b), “where sin increased (ἐπερεύθεται), grace hyperabounded” (ἐπερευθήθη).

The “where” standing first in the sentence seems to indicate that Israel is

22. See Murphy-O’Connor (Critical Life, 330): “[T]he criterion of authentic humanity is the self-sacrificing love revealed in Jesus who ‘did not please himself’ (Rom. 15:3) but suffered on behalf of all human beings (8:17), to the point of dying for the godless (5:6).”

the locus of this divinely intended intensification of sin, which is more than matched and indeed overcome by the “hyper-expression” of God’s grace. Paul’s highly cryptic formulation seems to regard the obedience of Christ (Rom 5:19), in Israel and “under the law” (see Gal 4:4), as the concrete expression (χάρισμα [Rom 5:15]) of divine grace sufficient to overcome all the hostility to God expressed by human sin, including that intensified by being rendered (through the law) “transgression.” Paul does not shrink from seeing the victory of grace he had experienced at such personal depth himself (Gal 1:15–16; see 1 Cor 15:8–10 [with its threefold reference to God’s grace in v. 10]) as taking place on a wider scale within the bosom of his own people.

Romans 6: A New Obedience

Paul has strongly asserted the superiority of grace and its effects over sin and its effects. He has affirmed, on that basis, the possibility of living out the righteousness upon which the hope of (eternal) life depends. In the following section (6:1–8:13), a more exhortatory tone emerges as he insists upon the necessity for believers of living out the gift of righteousness that has come their way; only so will the hope of eternal life flowing from righteousness not be put in jeopardy in the “overlap” era, which now prevails. Paul has to walk something of a tightrope here. On the one hand, stressing the overwhelming power of divine grace, in its contest with sin, could lead to a false suggestion, which he formulates and then vigorously rebuts: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound” (6:1–2a)? While formulated primarily for rhetorical effect to launch the next stage of the argument, the false suggestion without a doubt reflects the kind of criticism Paul’s emphasis upon grace attracted, in line with what he earlier records, as “blasphemous slander” (3:8). On the other hand, with the law ranged entirely on the “Adam/Sin” side of the schema, there can be no question of having recourse to it as a moral regulator in the new era of grace. In pursuit of his argument for hope of eternal life on the basis of

24. See ibid., 530; and Watson, Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles, 277.
25. The motif of divine reconciliation (Rom 5:11, 10–11) continues to run beneath the surface; see also 1 Cor 5:19: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning their transgressions (τοπαντράκα) against them and putting in us the word of reconciliation” (see also 5:21).
righteousness, Paul’s task was to show how, apart from the law (see 3:21) and indeed precisely because they are now apart from the law (see 6:14–15), believers have a basis for righteous living reflective of the obedience of Christ rather than the disobedience of Adam.26

In this section (chap. 6), Paul rebuts the notion of continuing to live under the dominion of Sin. First (6:1–14), he indicates that, in their baptismal “death” with Christ, believers have passed from their old Adamic existence (see v. 6: ὁ παλαιὸς ἡμῶν ἁθροισμὸς συνεστάσεως) under the dominion of Sin to a “living to God” modeled upon Christ’s own “living to God” (vv. 10–11). Their bodily life is now—or ought to be—entirely at the service of “righteousness” (v. 13). Then, as a kind of bridge to a quasi-parallel sequence (6:15–23), he writes two negative and seemingly gratuitous “throwaway” statements about the law (vv. 14–15): For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

Verse 14 implies that removal from the law, far from being a problem, is in fact the solution! Verse 15 more or less repeats the introductory false suggestion with which the first sequence began (6:1), but addresses more explicitly the contention that life not lived under the law, but under grace, could lead to the rule of sin. Paul would seem to be targeting a particular point of view current in Rome that could not conceive of a righteous existence without the regulation of the law and would therefore be strongly unfavorable to his promotion of the law-free Gospel. The exhortation now (6:15–23) revolves around something intimately associated with the law, namely, the topos of “obedience.” The new existence in Christ is not without obedience. The old, death-dealing “obedience” to Sin (which the law was powerless to remedy and, in fact, fostered) has been replaced by an “obedience to righteousness” that leads to holiness (ἅγιοςμός) and ultimately, as again God’s gracious gift (χάρις), to eternal life (v. 23).27

The “necessity” to follow the disobedience of Adam (5:12d, 19a) has been replaced by a capacity and necessity to allow the obedience of Christ (5:19b) to well up within and transform one’s moral life.

27. Parallel to the negative causal sequence (“sin”—“uncleanness”—“[eternal] death”), Paul has here introduced “holiness” as a middle term denoting moral transformation, resulting in the sequence: “righteousness”—“holiness”—“[eternal] life”; see further Byrne, Romans, 204–5.
Still targeting a lingering attachment to the law, Paul now (7:1–6) addresses himself quite explicitly to “brothers (and sisters), who know the law” (v. 2). While one naturally thinks here of believers of Jewish background, equally likely in view are believers of Gentile background who have retained, or have been persuaded to adopt, adherence to the Jewish law. In vv. 2–3, Paul devises a complex image from marriage law in order to make the point (v. 4) that through their (baptismal) union with the “body of Christ” believers have been “put to death” as far as the law is concerned, being rendered free thereby to be betrothed anew—this time, to the one who has been raised from the dead, Christ, in order that “we might be fruitful for God.” Extending the marital image, this last expression refers to the pattern of righteous living that believers can and must exhibit as a consequence of their union with Christ. The switch to the first person plural at the end of the long sentence making up v. 4 may have an inclusive intention, preparing the way for the further highly negative statement about the workings of the law that follows (v. 5). That statement describing the negative working of the law is more palatable and less accusatory if Paul includes himself—and one may suppose all believers of Jewish background—in its scope. Be that as it may, the two statements making up vv. 5 and 6 anticipate in a thematic and programmatic way the two descriptions of life “under the law” and “life in the Spirit” that are now to follow in 7:7–25 and 8:1–11 respectively.

The first of these statements (7:5) marks the climax of a series of negative things Paul has been saying about the effects of the law in the course of the letter. It features some of the most curious expressions to be found in a Pauline letter. The phrase, “when we were in the flesh,” presumably refers to the old pre-baptismal existence when “we” were not simply “in the flesh” in a purely physical sense (such as will always be the case in present human life), but in the strictly Pauline sense of being at the mercy of its alienating power. More difficult to account for are “the passions of sins (τὰ

29. See further Byrne, Romans, 275.
30. See Gal 2:15–16, where Paul appears to be rehearsing, in more general terms, the Jewish-Christian “conversion experience” as a continuance of his cited remonstration to Cephas following the incident at Antioch in regard to table fellowship (2:11–14); see Frank J. Matera, Galatians (SacPag 9; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 97–98.
31. See further Byrne, Romans, 273.
παθήματα τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν) stirred up in our members by the law” and rendering us “fruitful to Death.” Παθήματα normally has the sense of “sufferings” (e.g., in 8:18). Here, the sense must be more subjective—emotions or feelings—and, as the qualifying phrase makes clear, with a predominantly negative tone: hence “(sinful) passions.” But how are we to understand the attached, and uncharacteristic, genitive plural τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν? Rather than thinking of Sin as the underlying tyrannical power producing the passions, Paul seems to have in mind specific instances of sinning produced by the “passions” that the law has stirred up in our members.32 To understand this negative process brought about by the law, it seems we have to wait for the description shortly to be given in 7:7–13, to which, as noted above, this cryptic statement is a thematic introduction.

The highly negative statement, in 7:5, of a situation that ought to belong entirely to the past, as far as believers are concerned, is matched by a positive thematic statement of what pertains to the “now” (v. 6)—though not before a final reference to the past from which we have been set free: “we have been removed from the law, having died to that in which we were held bound” (v. 6b). The language of this final relative clause suggests captivity33 and is reminiscent of Paul’s remarks about the law in Gal 3:23–25:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

While the exact force of the reference to the law as παιδαγωγός here is disputed, and while “disciplinarian” (NRSV) may indeed be too mild,34 the text expresses a divine intention to employ the law to lock those who receive it (in the first place, Israel) into an imprisonment in which they would be conscious of their sin, as revealed in Scripture (Gal 3:22). The ultimate intent is to induce those so “imprisoned” to throw themselves in faith upon the one who “justifies the ungodly” (Rom 4:5), bringing them thereby under the scope of the promise graciously bestowed upon Abraham “and his offspring” (σπέρμα), that is, in first instance, Christ (Gal

32. That is, “sin-producing” rather than “sin-produced” passions; see ibid., 215.
34. Matera (Galatians, 136) reviews various suggestions, himself opting for “disciplinarian.”
3:16) and then those who through faith and baptism live “in” Christ as “offspring of Abraham, heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:26–29; Rom 4:16, 18). The final phrases in Rom 7:6, contrasting “serving” (δουλεύειν) in “newness of Spirit” with the (former) “oldness of letter” (παλαιότητι γράμματος), represent a terse formulation of what Paul writes more expansively in 2 Cor 3:5–8:35

Our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?

These parallels, ultimately drawing upon Jer 31:33 in combination with Ezek 36:26,36 indicate the thought behind the briefer allusions in Rom 7:5–6: the law has simply functioned—and will continue to function for those who seek to go its way—as an instrument of condemnation. It imprisons them in sin, a sin that it has itself in some way provoked.

Romans 7:7–8:13: From Life under the Law to Life under the Spirit

Romans 7:7–13

This last point—the law’s provocation (7:5) or “multiplication” (5:20a) of sin (see 3:20)—is something that Paul can no longer postpone addressing. He does so in the remainder of Romans 7, a sequence sparked off, as in 6:1, by a false suggestion (“Is the law, then, sin?”) that he immediately rebuts. Then follows the first person singular (“I”) sequence that has been the focus of so much attention from Augustine onward. The sequence serves to disentangle the law from any intrinsic linkage with sin, while powerfully depicting the provocation to sin that its presence entails. Up

35. See Watson, Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles, 291.
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until v. 11—and perhaps as far as v. 13—the “I” offers a quasi-historical narrative, describing the encounter with “the commandment” (ἐντολή) as something that occurred in the past. By v. 14, the “I” is speaking in the present. If, as many interpreters recognize, we are meant to hear in the opening section the voice of Adam describing the experience of encounter with the commandment as told in Genesis 3, then I propose that we are meant to interpret the switch to the present tense in Rom 7:14 as a universalizing and “contemporizing” of the experience in respect to anyone confronted with the Mosaic law.

Both these assertions require further discussion. Grounds for holding that Paul intended his audience to hear Rom 7:7–13 in the light of Adam’s story can be set out as follows:

1. Though the issue presented concerns the law, from the outset, the reference is to one specific commandment (ἐντολή) such as Adam received (Gen 2:16–17).

2. The specific commandment/prohibition is expressed by Paul as a truncated form of the tenth commandment (“Thou shalt not covet/desire” [Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21]), echoing the “desirability” of the (forbidden) fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:6).

3. With Sin (personified) cast in the role of the serpent of the Genesis story, there is a virtual quotation of Gen 3:13 LXX with reference to Sin’s employing the commandment in a deceptive way (see 2 Cor 11:3).

4. The reference to the “I” living “once (ποτέ) apart from the law” strains the Genesis narrative a little since, in Gen 2:16–17, the prohibition follows directly upon the Lord’s putting “the man” in the garden of Eden. However, there is an earlier reference to Adam being put in the garden (vv. 7–8), immediately after his being formed from the dust of the earth. This would allow Paul to speak of Adam’s living for a time “apart from the law” (commandment).

5. The “knowledge” of sin that the “I” experiences when the commandment awakens “desire,” and the sense of mortality (“I died”); Rom


38. See Watson, Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles, 183.
7:10) stemming from it, would seem to be a clear reference to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the fatal consequences of eating of its fruit (Gen 2:17).

While these considerations argue for the “Adamic” tone of the passage as a whole, there are also grounds for not taking this reference too exclusively. The fact that the law continues to be mentioned interchangeably with “the commandment” (see Rom 7:9–10, 12) and also that the commandment is itself couched in terms of a (truncated) prohibition stemming from the Decalogue promulgated by Moses at Sinai suggests that we should not rule out a reference to the experience of Israel under the law. It is not a matter of choosing between an “Adam” and a “Sinai” interpretation. Paul is describing the encounter with law, experienced primarily by Israel, in terms of the Adam story in Genesis 2–3. The law has served to place Israel—and all who seek to go the way of the law—into the situation of Adam, with all its fatal consequences. The law claimed to offer life (see Rom 7:14: ὁ νόμος πνευματικὸς ἔστιν; see Deut 30:11–14), just as the commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree aimed to preserve life, warning Adam of the fatal consequences of so doing. However, the lurking (though “dormant”; see Rom 7:8: χρῶς ... νόμου ἀμαρτία νεκρό) power of Sin in human flesh sprang to life at the onset of the law and began its work of deception, resulting in the essentially “holy and just and righteous” law/commandment (Rom 7:12) becoming at once both an instrument and a sentence of condemnation (see 2 Cor 3:6–7).

As remarked above, interpreters have felt some tension between what Paul says here and the earlier aside in Rom 5:13–14 to the effect that sin was in the world, with fatal consequences (v. 14b), in the time between Adam and Moses, when sinning “under the law” did not apply. Yet, here (Rom 7:9–11) death is associated with the onset of the law. Without putting too fine a point on the matter, it is possible to understand Paul as reading the Genesis story in the sense that Adam’s transgression resulted in mortality (that is, physical death) becoming the lot both of himself and all his sin-

39. For those who interpret the passage with reference to the experience of Israel both before and after receiving the law at Sinai, see Moo, Romans, 426 n. 8. Moo himself, contesting the Adamic interpretation, combines Israel with autobiographical interpretation in the sense that Paul here speaks in solidarity with his people Israel (ibid. 433).

40. Interpreting this passage in my Romans commentary (p. 218), I placed the emphasis more upon Israel’s experience of the law, albeit seen in an Adamic light. Now I am inclined to stress the Adamic aspect more strongly.
ning descendants (5:12). Paul interprets this onset of physical death as a harbinger or pattern for death in the more radical sense of eternal separation from God, which is the real and abiding outcome of sin provoked and unmasked by the law. Paul’s talk of “life” and “death,” in Rom 7:7–11, plays upon an ambiguity between physical life and eternal life, on the one hand, and physical death and eternal death, on the other. Clearly, the “I” did not die when the commandment came, even though this is what is literally said (v. 10)—just as Adam did not die immediately in the Genesis story. Rather, being expelled from the garden and the access to the tree of life that guaranteed immortality (Gen 2:9), Adam became mortal. Paul makes this experience of Adam a paradigm of the still more fatal consequences of sinning when confronted with the law.

Just as he had posed the (false) inference that the law is identical with sin (Rom 7:7), so Paul, still conscious of the “sin–death” nexus, now (v. 13) allows the suggestion that “this good thing (the law) became for me death.” The same rebuttal follows (μὴ γένορτο), but less convincingly, since Paul has just had the “I” describe how the coming of the “commandment” caused “me” to die (vv. 11–12). As he goes on to explain, however, the “good” law/commandment did not bring about this result of itself. The real agent was Sin that through the good thing was working death for “me.” So, again (see v. 10), the law of itself was ordained to “life” (see v. 14a), but Sin, playing the deceptive role of the serpent, contrived to make what was ordained to life “become death for me” (v. 13a).

The truly startling feature of the sentence making up the latter part of v. 13 is the two-fold indication of purpose (ἵνα ... ὑπάρχει). Since Sin was scarcely intending to “out” itself, the conjunctions and the passive constructions that follow must indicate the intention of God. The deceitful, death-dealing ploy of Sin in regard to the commandment/law was encompassed within a wider divine purpose, ultimately directed to salvation. The commandment was used to unmask sin (ἵνα φανῇ ἁμαρτία) for what it truly was, so that Sin might become, through the commandment (through the transgression of the commandment), “sinful beyond measure” (καθ’ ὑπερβολὴν ἁμαρτωλός). We are standing on the same ground as in 5:20: the role of the law was to convert sin into transgression (παράβασις; παράπτωμα) so that sinners, like Adam, would really become aware of their hostility to God (see 8:7a), would “know” sin (v. 7), have “knowledge of sin” (3:20), would stand exposed to the wrath (4:15; 5:9), to final condemnation (8:1). Because the good and holy law had always to confront a human situation of “flesh” dominated by Sin, Paul regards
the giving of a law “truly capable of producing life” as something that never happened (Gal 3:21). The law that came in (3:20a) factually never had that capability and was allowed by God to play an entirely negative role within the overall divine purpose.41

Romans 7:14–25

As I have noted above, the transition to the present tense in the following section (vv. 14–25), is best explained by a generalizing discussion (see the opening “we know” [οἴδαμεν]) of the encounter with the law that has just been described in Adamic terms. The transition to the present tense has, of course, long raised the issue as to whether the dilemma Paul portrays here is to be understood as applying to present Christian existence or whether it is more properly to be regarded as a glance back from present Christian perspective to the experience under the law before coming to Christian faith. I shall not repeat here the reasons that lead most interpreters, myself included, to adopt the latter view in some form.42 It is crucial for interpretation that this passage (7:14–25) not be read in isolation but together with the following passage, 8:1–39, with which it stands in contrastive parallel.43 Both passages thereby form a “diptych” in which the vivid depiction of life under the law forms the negative foil to life in the Spirit.44 Paul’s main intent is to assert the benefits flowing from this new life. He is explaining to believers in Rome why his missionary and pastoral strategy is so adamantly opposed to bringing converts under the yoke of the law—something that remains a (for him undesirable) pos-

41. It is probably for this reason that Paul, in Gal 3:19, distances the giving of the law from God, inserting two levels of “mediation” (the angels and Moses).
42. See my Romans, 125–26. For a most thorough and critical survey, see Moo, Romans, 443–50.
43. See Küesemann, Commentary on Romans, 210.
44. The contrastive parallel between the two passages emerges above all from the reiterated references to the controlling power—in the negative case, Sin, in the positive, the Spirit—which is said to “dwell” (Greek οἰκεῖον) within those depicted in the two situations. The triple usage of οἰκεῖον in the negative case (7:17, 18, 20) is matched by a triple occurrence of the same expression in the positive (8:9, 10 [αὐτῷ]). The otherwise redundant double reference to the indwelling of the Spirit in 8:14 makes no sense unless Paul clearly wants the reader to see this positive indwelling as a response to the negative indwelling of Sin mentioned again and again in the preceding section. That 8:1–13 responds to 7:14–25 is also signaled by the change of person (“you,” singular) in 8:2 as a reply to the cry of the “wretched I” in the preceding passage (7:4).
sibility not wholly relegated to the past—and why life in the Spirit, free from the yoke of the law, opens up the hope of eternal life, which is the main burden of this major section of the letter as a whole (chaps. 5–8).

Romans 8:1–13

To emphasize the contrastive parallel, and to call attention to a measure of continuity, Paul continues to employ the word νόμος in regard to the Spirit, picking up the divine pledge contained in a combination of Jer 31:33 and Ezek 36:26. The “law,” constituted by the Spirit that gives (eternal) life (Rom 8:2a), has set those “in Christ” free from the “law of Sin and death,” that is, the fatal regime that Sin had set up in their “members” (8:2b). For this reason, the prospect of “condemnation” (κατάκριμα) has been removed for them (8:1).

As is often his way, Paul, in this opening section of chapter 8, first states his conclusion—the removal of condemnation (v. 1)—and then goes on to state the grounds for it (vv. 2–4), which ultimately go back to the divine sending of the Son to enter fully into the sin-situation of humankind and deal with it effectively from within. In the face of the incapacity of the law, God has achieved what the law could not do. The law, remaining “outside” of the human situation, could not address the problem at its root—the infestation of human “flesh” with the dominion of Sin. The Son, making a costly entrance right into that situation, has brought about both “the condemnation” of the real culprit, Sin, and the fulfillment of the δικαιώμα of the law on the part of those who now “walk” not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (v. 4). The remaining sentences (vv. 5–11) enlarge upon the new moral capacity that this divine agency has brought about for believers and the destiny to (eternal) life that follows in its train.

What exactly Paul means by “the δικαιώμα of the law” is not entirely clear. In general, it would seem that the term refers to what the law in its entirety sought to command and bring about: namely, righteous living, or “righteousness.” Paul may retain the singular usage in order to preserve an allusion to the ἐντολή of 7:7–11 with its Adamic overtones. Earlier, in 5:18, he had referred to the obedient act of Christ as a δικαιώμα over

45. For the note of continuity in Paul’s multiple use of νόμος in this area of Romans, see Byrne, “Problem of νόμος,” 304–7.
46. For the five senses, in which the term appears in Paul, see my Romans, 78 (on 1:32).
against the παράπτωμα of the other “one man,” Adam. In the present context, he may wish to suggest that those “in Christ” benefit from the “righteous deed” of Christ, in the sense that the obedience of this “one man” is “fulfilled” (πληρωθη) in them with an abundance and totality that overcomes and renders null the fatal “disobedience” that otherwise pertains to them as offspring of Adam (5:12, 19). The on-going obligation is to “walk according to the Spirit” in the sense of living out this obedience that has been, and continues to be, created by the Spirit within them. To seek any other way than that of the Spirit—the way of the “flesh,” the tendencies (φρόνημα [8:6–7]) of which the law exacerbates rather than inhibits—would mean reverting to the “hostility” to God (8:7) from which Christ, at supreme cost, has already delivered believers (5:10), bringing them into the sphere of reconciliation and “peace,” in which they now stand (5:1–2).

In the concluding sentences of this section (8:9–11), Paul celebrates the prospect of eternal life held out for believers on the grounds that the fatal indwelling regime of Sin in their Adamic existence has been replaced by the life-giving indwelling power of the Spirit (see already v. 2). Physical death—the legacy of Adam’s sin communicated to all human beings—remains: the body (σῶμα) is “mortal” (literally “dead,” νεκρόν) because of sin (8:10b; see 3:12), but (possession of) the Spirit means “life because of righteousness” (τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωὴ διὰ δικαιοσύνην; 8:10c). As Paul explains, if the Spirit “dwells” in a person in the way described, creating and preserving the required righteousness, that is, in effect, the on-going obedience of Christ, then “the one who raised (the obedient; see Phil 2:8) Christ from the dead will make alive (ζωοποιήσει) your mortal bodies through the [power of the] Spirit dwelling within” (Rom 8:11). In other words, the resurrection of believers, patterned upon that of Christ, will overcome the physical mortality that is the legacy of Adam. Physical death will no longer be a harbinger of eternal death (wrath) but, in union with Christ, will lead to eternal life, to sharing his glory (8:17, 29).

Conclusion

Faced with the prospect of encountering believers in Rome sympathetic to the law and hence likely, on that account, to be hostile to both himself and his law-free Gospel, Paul has explained at length his clear-cut
rejection of the law as a factor in the life of believers. Just as it has no role in justification (chaps. 1–4), neither has it any part to play in the living-out of justification en route to final salvation (chaps. 5–8). Paul has argued this case by associating the law with the Adam-side of the equation, which he sees set over against the Christ-side in clear antithesis. There can be no middle term, no neutral space for the law to inhabit between these two poles. It is indeed true that, if believers are to be saved for eternal life, they can and must preserve the righteousness graciously conferred upon them by God through faith and baptism. However, to seek to do so through practicing the law would take them back to the slavery of the old Adamic era and its legacy—the destiny to (eternal) death. To drive home this conviction, in preparation for his positive affirmation of life in the Spirit (8:1–13), Paul builds up, across Romans 5–7, an increasingly negative picture of life under the law, which reaches a climax with the desperate cry in 7:24: “Who will deliver me...?” Paul does not proceed in this way simply because it is his rhetorical mode to preface a strong affirmation with an equally strong depiction and rebuttal of the opposing negative. Rather, the redemptive work of Christ, as instrument of divine grace, involved entering the Adamic situation of humankind at a most radical depth. Because Christ came “under the law,” as well as being “born of woman” (Gal 4:4), he was able to relive successfully the obedience required of Adam (Rom 5:19; Phil 2:8) and so create, through the Spirit, a fresh possibility of obedience for humankind as a whole (Rom 8:3–4).

Whether this extremely negative view of the law’s workings (in spite of all protestations concerning its intrinsic holiness: 7:12, 14a; see 3:31), cut any ice in Rome, is unknown to us. Toward the end of the letter (15:14), Paul does concede that he has spoken on some matters “rather boldly,” and this admitted boldness surely included the discussions of the law.47 He has certainly bequeathed to Christianity a neuralgic issue in relation to Judaism, even if he, as I believe, thought that what he was describing simply was the divine fulfillment of the pledge set out in the prophetic writings, notably Jer 31:33 and Ezek 36:26. However, Paul would probably insist that his negative view of the law and of its workings flowed from the vision of

47. The law, of course, reappears later in Romans in connection with the failure of the bulk of Israel to come to faith in the crucified Messiah (9:30–10:13) and is perhaps lurking behind the exhortation to tolerance in food matters (14:1–15:13). It is beyond the scope of this study to pursue this matter into these areas of the letter.
God that he saw emanating from the Christ event—a God who deals with human beings simply, and always, on the basis of grace and who, in pursuit of salvation on that basis, has entered into the depths of human sinfulness in the person of the Son (Rom 8:3; 2 Cor 5:21). If a role had to be found for a law that was, after all, part of the scheme of salvation, then it had to be one that placed it (albeit in a negative way) entirely at the service of grace (5:20).