The Most Pertinent Interpretation of the "I" in

Romans 7 in Regards to:

Revised Version

Paul-Romans 7-Jewish Evangelism

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Introduction

The selection of this subject arose from a Christmas present. I was the recipient of John Stott's latest exegetical study, a 400+ page commentary on St. Paul's epistle to the Romans. This gift was received with much delight. Naturally, I immediately turned to chapters 9-10-11 in search of possible confirmation in writing of what he had shared at Lausanne II in Manila. At that time he expressed his delight in The Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People (1989). He spoke once again his regret that the original Lausanne Covenant (1974) lacked all reference to Israel, the Jewish people and Jewish evangelization. In this commentary Stott explicitly opposes to the "Two Covenant Theory" and plainly states that the Apostle Paul would have regarded the nonevangelization of the Jewish people "as anti-Semitic" (1994:304,305).

Actually, what particularly gripped me in my early perusal of this commentary was Stott's discussion of Romans 7. You know how easy it is for us to project ourselves into Paul's experience and discussion of the weakness of the Law (vs 14-25). We quickly decide that Paul's frequent us of "I" and "me" in this section is solely autobiographical. This gives us the freedom to believe that he universalizes his own spiritual struggles so that we too can identify with his sense of powerlessness and failure. We can agree with him that despite our desire to do what the Law demands, there are occasions when we - like the great apostle - are totally unable to escape the bitterness of personal defeat. All this because of our sinful nature.

But Stott expresses a caution. Identifying the "I" is no simple matter. Down through the centuries scholars have struggled over this. His caution pressed me to review my longheld understanding of chapter 7. Surprisingly, through Stott's stimulus I came up with a possible new motivation for and missiological dimension of Jewish evangelization. Hence, I have written this paper to share with you my findings, tentative though some of them may be.

But first a warning. I do not approach Romans with the presupposition that regards Paul as a 1st century systematic theologian, as many scholars seem prone to do. No! Paul was a missionary - first and last! When he wrote letters his role was that of a "task theologian" - something far different. His NT writings arose out of disciplined reflection both theological and missiological - on the specific problems that confronted him in the course of his missionary service. No where is this difference more apparent than in Romans, his greatest epistle. Hence, before we can tackle Romans 7, we must review the problems he faced in Corinth during the winter 57/58 A.D.

Paul's Four Problems

Imagine yourself with Paul in Corinth studying a map of the Mediterranean and its surrounding countries. Locate Jerusalem, Antioch, Illyricum, Rome and Spain. What does he mean when he turns to you and says: "I must also see Rome" (Acts 19:21)? He will tell you that during his third missionary journey this imperative became increasingly insistent. Unless we understand why, we will fail to appreciate his selection of themes for his letter to the Christians in Rome. Many studies of this letter make Paul a theologian who wished to give them a full statement of his understanding of the gospel, then invariably admit the epistle does not cover every aspect of it. In contrast, Theodor Zahn contends the epistle only makes sense in the light of a crucial juncture in Paul's missionary career (1909, Vol. 1:357,434-437).

Hence we must inquire into the problems that weighed heavily on his mind at this time. His first problem arose out of the inevitable uncertainties inherent in changing the locale of his missionary service. After much prayer and deliberation he had come to the conclusion that his ministry in the eastern Mediterranean was finished (15:23). From Jerusalem to Illyricum in the upper Adriatic (present-day Bosnia?) he had "fully preached the gospel of Christ" (15:19). Some Jews and many gentiles had been won to obedience by "word and deed" (15:18). Churches had been planted, and the expansion of the Christian movement throughout the countryside was now safely in their hands. But was it of the Lord that at this time he and his companions explore the possibility of initiating new work in the western Mediterranean? Indeed, they were already projecting a trip to Spain (15:24,28). In those days the great Iberian peninsula represented unrelieved spiritual darkness. Its Jewish, Roman and indigenous peoples were totally without any knowledge of the gospel. Why not go there? In was inevitable that a venturesome person like Paul would have been drawn to the west, despite all the imponderables this decision entailed. And yet, we can well believe that he needed confirmation from the Lord that this new move was in harmony with his will.

Central to the uncertainties involved in a mission to Spain was its remoteness. This fact gave Paul a real sense of pause. Spain was too far removed from Antioch, the base from which his earlier missionary journeys had been launched. This created his <u>second</u> problem: **a new missionary base was needed** to provide Paul's missionary band with qualified personnel, a sustained flow of funds and a strong base of prayer support. All these were essential to the success of any new and venturesome undertaking. Furthermore, to be truly effective this new base should be located in the midst of the western Mediterranean.

When we began to discuss with Paul this need, an attractive solution almost immediately surfaced. As we looked at the map, he almost immediately called us to reflect on the significance of the church located in Rome. There it was, the only point of light in the midst of the spiritual darkness of the western Mediterranean. But Paul hastened to add that although he had been hearing about the vigor of this church for some years, he had had no previous contact with it. Its significance was apparent to all of us: a strong and strategic Christian presence at the very heart of the Roman empire. What an ideal mission base-indeed, a Second Antioch! Although uniquely situated--almost at the gateway to the western Mediterranean--it posed a very real problem to Paul--his third problem. He was virtually a stranger to the church in Rome. It had been founded without his cooperation or that of his missionary associates. Though he knew some of its members (16:3-15), to the church as a whole he was probably unknown. And Paul didn't even know if it was "mission-minded." In an off-hand fashion he seemed to say: "These urban churches can be so busy with unfinished tasks confronting them on every side that they can be quite indifferent to getting excited about a challenge both foreign and remote."

This posed a <u>fourth</u> problem to Paul. How could he persuade these strangers in Rome to rally to his mission to Spain? They doubtless knew about his apostolic calling, that he was God's special Apostle to the Gentiles. Even so, Paul was quite troubled about how he should go about seeking to persuade them to transform their church into a base from which to launch a mission to Spain, and to the other unreached areas of the western Mediterranean.

Fortunately, Paul's circumstances at this juncture were unique. He was in Corinth staying with hospitable Gaius, and it was the winter of 57/58 A.D.—the time of the year when no ships dared venture out to sea. Apparently, this was the only time we can conjecture that Paul had to take a vacation. What else could he do, having brought to an end his service in the east? When we met and prayed with him, we found that the significance of that solitary and unique Christian community in Rome totally dominated his thought. It could become the key to his future missionary service. But how could it be recruited to fill the important role of a missionary base? After prayer he shared with us the possibility of writing a letter to the Christians in Rome. Naturally, we encouraged him!

It was then, with time on his hands, that Paul began to write. Zahn contends that this letter was deliberately designed to condition the thought of the Christians in Rome to radical missionary outreach and challenge them to become more than just a busy urban church. Never was a letter more carefully planned. Although Paul knew that he could briefly visit Rome some months hence, following a collection tour for the impoverished

Christians in Jerusalem (15:25-33), this letter must prepare the way for that visit. But he must not divulge his dreams and hopes prematurely. Actually, he did not disclose the cooperative nature of his church-mission strategy until he had reached virtually the end of his letter. Note how tactfully, yet explicitly he stated this: "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be sped on my journey there by you once I have enjoyed your company for a little" (15:24). But first we must briefly review what he wrote leading up to this expectation.

Romans: An Overview

Paul's primary theological concern in this letter was to share in a comprehensive fashion the essence of the gospel he preached. He must seek thereby to gain the confidence of the church in Rome. This will also help confirm the legitimacy of his apostleship. His missiological concern was to prepare the church to think globally about missionary service. The more we study this epistle, the more bold we become to contend that Romans represents the classic apostolic approach to the complex task of transforming an active local church into a vigorous "missionary sending" church.

Note how Paul begins his letter (1:1-7). He introduces himself as a slave of Christ, an apostle of God, and a messenger of the gospel. But he downgrades any thought of his uniqueness in these categories. Rather, all Christians ("we," vs 5) are the recipients of "grace" (come and believe!) and "apostleship" (go and tell!). On this basis Paul unabashedly confronts "the saints" in Rome with God's missionary purpose to bring about "obedience to the faith" among "all nations." No Christians are exempt from this mandate. Because all have received grace, all are to be caught up in worldwide involvement with the gospel. One is impressed with the deliberate manner in which Paul placed this universal obligation on the Roman Christians (vs 6).

Since he is a "task theologian," Paul hardly touches many themes. Even his Christology is confined to only three verses. The gospel is a Person, a human being, promised in the Jewish Scriptures (vs 2). He is of royal lineage by virtue of his Davidic descent (vs 3), and is also God's eternal Son: "Jesus Christ our Lord" (vs 4). His bodily resurrection uniquely endorses him as deity: Messiah, Savior and God.

Furthermore, in Romans Paul doesn't contribute to our understanding of the church apart from stating that all Christians "are one body in Christ" (12:5).. What he does stress is that **the gospel is of universal application**: "To the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (vs 16). His missionary concern is paramount. We can think of no Jewish rabbi who would regard himself as a debtor "both to Greeks and barbarians" (vs 14), or who possesses a world-saving message. Nothing speaks more painfully of the tragedy of

rabbinic Judaism today with its inability and unwillingness to face the nations with Isaiah's great word from God: "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (45:22).

Then without hesitation Paul plunges into his development of certain particular themes that will awaken the church in Rome to its missionary responsibility. First, the abounding sin and guilt of the human race--Jews and gentiles (1:18-3:20). The whole world is held accountable. Second, the abounding grace of God to all sinners through the death of Christ (3:21-5:21). This grace "reigns through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:21). Third, the abounding grace of God to all who have come to saving faith (6:1-8:39). This salvation is such that whereas sin is always possible, it is not necessary. By co-crucifixion with Christ and through co-resurrection with him by the Holy Spirit, salvation is present-tense, not just future-tense.

Fourth, the tragedy of Israel, God's intended vehicle for the blessing of the nations--her past failure, her present resistance to the gospel, and her future hope through Christ. Some scholars appear most impatient with Paul for devoting so much of this letter to the Jewish people. But Paul knows something of the demands and temptations of any church that aspires to missionary obedience. The failure of Israel was a salutary warning. Furthermore, the coming glory of Israel is a wonderful stimulus to faith. The missionary task God has given his people will be carried to completion through his grace and constant assistance (11:25-32).

Following Paul's doxology (11:33-36), he becomes very explicit with the Christians in Rome. He calls the members of this vigorous church to surrender themselves anew to God in view of their mission calling. They are to be "Living Sacrifices" (12:1,2), caught up in serving under God's direction and for his glory. He is confident that as individual Christians they will thereby discover for themselves God's will touching their separate roles in the mission of the church—at Rome and in the larger world outside. He writes of their interdependence in Christ's body (vs 3-5), of their spiritual gifts for service in their newly awakened mission-mindedness (vs 6-8), of their duty to their fellow Christians (vs 9-13) and of their response (it must be gracious!) to those non-Christians who may become hostile to their witness (vs 14-21). The 13th chapter discusses the State and the Christian response to the civil authorities (vs 1-7). From vs 8 onward Paul stresses the need for love to bind Christians together despite differences in age, personality and spiritual development. All this until 15:6. Then he underscores God's concern for the nations (15: 7-13) by piling up OT passages that express this concern (15:7-13). Finally, at long last he

reveals his mission strategy and concludes with his expectation that the church at Rome will participate in his mission to Spain (15:14-21). Details regarding his collection tour for the Jerusalem believers (vs 22-29), his plea for prayer (vs 30-33) and his greetings to his friends (ch 16) bring the letter to an end.

The Identity of the "I" in Chapter 7

The key text that must be kept in mind when we seek the identity of the "I" is verse 9. This verse describes the sequence of four spiritual phases that brought the unidentified "I" to the utter end of himself and provoked his cry in verse 24: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Note the sequence. Initially, this person was "once alive, apart from the Law". Then "the commandment came." This caused "sin to spring to life." The end result was that "I died."

How are we to understand this sequence? Apparently, it began with comparative innocence ("being alive apart from the Law"). On this basis the early Greek fathers argued that Paul was referring to **Adam and Eve** in their primal innocence in Paradise. Sin was already in the Garden of Eden because of the serpent's presence there, but the serpent's temptation demanded the prior issuance of an expression of God's Law. Only when God commanded that Adam and Eve should "not eat of the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden," did the serpent feel free to act. He could now awaken desire in Eve for what its fruit promised: she and Adam would be "like God, knowing good and evil." His deception was successful. Adam and Eve sought freedom from God's control. "Sin sprang to life," and with their disobedience "sin came into the world through one man and death through sin" (Rom 5:12). Eventually death overtook them both, and all their descendants.

Despite this striking parallel one major problem with this sequence is that Paul makes no reference to the Genesis account. Furthermore, the only Law mentioned throughout Chapter 7 is the Law given at Sinai, long after the Fall. Even so, there are scholars today that hold to this view (Kasemann 1973:196--"everything fits Adam alone").

Others have contended that this passage depicts **Saul of Tarsus**, **before he became a Pharisee**. Its immediate objection is that it is inconceivable that there ever was a time in Saul's life when he could be accurately described as "alive apart from the law." After all, he was brought up in an orthodox Jewish home. This meant that he was "circumcised on the eighth day" (Phil 3:5) and carefully prepared for the Bar Mitzva ceremony at thirteen when he took upon himself the yoke of the law. True, he knew the comparative innocence of youth, but it is virtually impossible to believe that he was not early made aware of the greatest event in Israel's history: when "the Lord came down upon

Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people . . . and met them at the foot of the mountain" (Ex 19:11,17). It was at that time that the Law of God was revealed to all Israel. Those who defend the view that the "I" was Saul prior to becoming a Pharisee argue that in adolescence sin doubtless "sprang to life" in the form of covetousness, and he then found himself unable to overcome its temptations, despite his knowledge that the tenth commandment forbade it (Rom 7:7-12).

There are several obvious problems with this sequence. Large among them is Paul's claim that touching the Law ("in my attitude to the law"--NEB) he was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5). This brings up the third possibility: the "I" depicts **Paul the Pharisee**. So far as Paul was concerned "as to righteousness under the Law," he saw himself as "blameless" (vs 6). From this we conclude that his external conformity to the Law was of the sort that produced no warnings or experiences of self-condemnation. Nor did he cry out in anguish for any deliverance from his discovery of what he least expected: an awareness of his innate and enslaving sinfulness. Indeed, those who contend that Paul the Pharisee is the "I" in Romans 7 are at a loss to account for any experience that would have caused a crisis shift to have taken place in him from the self-righteousness of a Pharisee to the defeated person who cries out for liberation from sin in his members.

We must interject at this point the question: was the "I" a regenerated person? To raise this question is to be reminded that unbelievers tend to be self-righteous. This person uses "believer" language. He confesses he is a carnal and unspiritual person, one who sees in his sinful nature nothing good, only carnality (7:18,14). Furthermore, his attitude to the Law is not hostile (8:7). He finds the Law "holy, righteous and good" (7:12). It embodies all the good he wants to do (7:19). The law is his inner delight (7:22), and he knows himself to be its "slave" (7:25). All this is hardly the confession of one who has not experienced the new birth. Even so, there are those who argue for the sort of person one finds at evangelistic gatherings: emotionally caught up in an intermediate state--neither unregenerate nor regenerate. They delight in God's Law but are "not Christian enough" to obey it. In contrast, the person we meet in Romans 7 is not spiritually immature. He has struggled too long and too hard to come to terms with the God-ordained function of the Law in his life--which is a dominant concern of Paul in this letter.

Years ago I attended a series of lectures by a prominent rabbi of the Reform tradition in Judaism: Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz. His subject was the doctrine of man in rabbinic Judaism. He spoke of the Jewish contention that in every person two tendencies or impulses are at work--something akin to two distinct natures. Whereas he said that we should think of human beings as better than neutral in their ethical makeup, we must recognize that God placed an evil impulse in the very embryo in the womb prior to birth. It

was "yetser hara," a malevolent "second personality," seeking the person's ruin. To counter this God provided "yetser hatob," a good impulse that made it possible for any person to be able to overcome the evil impulse. Furthermore, God provided the Law to insure that the person tempted to do evil need not succumb to its blandishments. Jewish sages are reported as teaching: "If you occupy yourself with the Law, you will not fall under the power of the evil impulse" (Barclay 1957:102). The Law has antiseptic value. Concerning this William Barclay has written: "When the evil impulse attacked, the Jews held that wisdom and reason could defeat it. ... The Law is prophylactic; at such a time the good impulse can be called up in defense" (1957:102).

Rabbinic Judaism rejects what in Romans is called "sin which dwells within me" (7:17). This has been identified as "total depravity" in the sense that it renders one incapable of making oneself fit for God's presence and friendship.

Well then, what other possibility remains? Some might want to bring this investigation to a full stop by saying that we are getting nowhere. Their contention is that all Christians pass through periods of spiritual despair. In unguarded moments they find themselves overtaken by temptation, and become so captivated that they offer no resistance. They yield, only to awaken moments later to the enormity of the sin they have committed. In shame and brokenness of spirit they grieve most over their betrayal of the God whom they truly love. There is a sense in which all of us can say we have known such times of defeat. On those occasions the sequence of Romans 7:13-24 vividly described our own failure and resultant despair.

But there is a portion of the Scripture that we have not yet explored. It is most significant that in the penitential psalms in the Old Testament we find clues to a fourth possibility. And this one has missiological overtones! Has Paul embodied in his autobiographical record deliberate identification with the typical experience of **the believing Remnant in OT Israel**? Is he seeking to have his readers enter into the spiritual struggles of this faithful Jewish Remnant? On occasion we find in the psalms people who wept over their bondage to sin, confessed their spiritual weakness and repented of their frequent failure. Furthermore, does Paul want them to enter into the joy he himself experienced when he realized that "through Jesus Christ" full deliverance could be experienced "from this body of death?" (7:24,25)? Let us explore this further.

Within the OT one encounters many expressions of the Remnant's delight in God and in his Law. But there are occasional psalms of personal lamentation, of penitence and heart-felt longings for forgiveness. These are the expressions of truly regenerated persons. Psalm 51 contains the sort of expressions of personal shame and specific confession that we find in Romans 7. And frankly, this language is terribly remote from Paul's great

affirmations of the NT believer's boast that he/she is "no longer enslaved to sin" (6:6), but rather has been "set free from sin" (6:17), having attained the status of "slaves of righteousness"..(and).. "slaves of God" (6:22,18).

But how valid is equating the "I" with OT believing Israelites? Without hesitation Stott states: "The I' seems to be an OT believer, an Israelite who is living under the Law, including even the disciples of Jesus before Pentecost and probably many Jewish contemporaries of Paul" (1994:209). But do the four phases detailed in 7:9 apply to them? Certainly, we could argue that a long historic period elapsed between the call of Abraham and the Exodus, when many Israelites knew God "apart from the Law." At Sinai "the commandment came" and in the wilderness wanderings "sin sprang to life" with the result that many experienced bitter defeat, and then "died." Those who pressed on to know the Lord were truly born of the Spirit, but they were neither indwelt nor empowered by the Spirit. They loved God and his Law, and were justified by grace through faith, but had yet to experience what could only be experienced after Pentecost when they were no longer "under the Law" but "under the Spirit."

All which brings us to the great omission in Romans 7. It contains no mention of the wonderful provision of the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31-34) and Ezekiel (36:26). No mention of the Holy Spirit, who alone can enable the believer to enter into the sort of ongoing life with God wherein one, by faith and obedience, accepts the experiential reality of co-crucifixion with Christ followed by the Spirit's empowerment of Christ's resurrection victory. Paul continually experienced the desire to enter into the power of Christ's resurrection that he might consciously share in his sufferings, and become like him in his death (Phil 3:10,11). Without the conscious appropriation of the power of the Holy Spirit in one's life, Christian experience is reduced to nothing less than the OT faith and the spiritual experience of members of the believing Remnant on a B.C. basis.

Where are We?

We can well believe that Paul was very conscious of the Jewish "remnant" believers he encountered in the synagogues--sometimes many, other times few--during the course of his evangelization of the eastern Mediterranean. They were the Jews that responded to his gospel and participated in the growth of the Christian movement in and through the local congregations that were planted. And we can well believe that he had a particular concern for them. This arose out of his own spiritual struggles to realize experientially the Holy Spirit's enabling that "through Jesus Christ" he might be delivered from "sin in his members." After all, they became the spearheads to the gospel penetration of their

communities--God's "light to the gentiles"--and Paul knew that when he went to Spain he would visit synagogue after synagogue and scoop up this segment of believing Jewry into the growing Christian movement. But they must be carefully discipled so that they would truly "walk in the Spirit and not fulfil the lusts of the flesh." Then they would make significant contributions to the ongoing of God's reaching out to the gentiles with his gospel of redeeming love.

I feel that reflection on the OT Remnant believer is essential to our understanding of the possible reason for his taking to himself the unidentified "I" of chapter 7. That he did so can be attributed to his great love and burden for his people. He well knew that the Remnant represented an unbroken though flawed line of truth and devotion within the total length of OT history--from Abraham to Christ. They were the people alone responsible, humanly speaking, for the forward movement of "Holy History" under the old covenant. They loved God and his Law, but even the most devout found themselves woefully weak when it came to resisting those temptations before which they were particularly vulnerable.

One can carelessly read Paul's references to the Jewish people in the earlier chapters of Romans and believe that emotionally he was somewhat detached from the themes he was developing concerning the sinfulness of the gentile world and the failures of the Jewish people. Although the Jews had the Law, the gentiles without this Law nonetheless had a God-implanted, almost instinctive knowledge of right and wrong in their hearts. But both were guilty before God (2:12-16). Apart from divine grace, even the multi-advantaged Jewish people were without hope. They presumed too much on the merit they assumed to inhere in their election. This troubled Paul. When later they underestimated, even denied the reign of sin in their lives and promoted the certainty of Jewish salvation secured by their Abrahamic lineage and Law obedience, this added to his distress over them.

However, when Paul addressed the tragedy of their rejection and crucifixion of God's Son, it seemed as though great waves of heart-break flooded his soul. He never forgot that he was a Jew. Indeed, he spoke of his willingness to be cursed of God, if by this, he might bring his own people to faith in Jesus Christ. Increasingly, as he writes, a deep sorrow diffuses his thought. It is the poignant sorrow of a broken heart. What is impressive is that he does not write in either anger or condemnation.

In all this Paul never forgot the Remnant and the struggles of its members to be faithful to God, despite the absence of the Spirit in their lives. How they longed to experience personal victory over temptation and sin for the sake of the God whom they loved. Why did Paul go to such length in chapters 6-8 to speak of the possibilities of living in the Holy Spirit? Because he knew of the limited victory accessible to them in the OT dispensation and among believing Jews in his own day. Do you not think that the

possibility of their coming into the full blessing of Pentecost must have heightened the motivation that compelled him to reach these Remnant-type people in synagogue after synagogue as he ranged throughout the Mediterranean world? And was he not excited over the prospect of finding some of them in the large Jewish communities throughout Spain?

Conclusion

Is this the reason why at the conclusion of his discussion of his own people--past, present and future--Paul uses the word"now" three times to underscore the importance of of the sequence he earlier described (11:30,31)? This was the sequence of Jewish unbelief, gentile response, Jewish jealousy, and finally the sort of Jewish response that will bring "life from the dead" to the gentile world. Note that his final "now" refers to the Jewish people "receiving mercy". What does this mean but that there is a present obligation to the Christian movement to engage in **Jewish evangelism** (11:30,31)? No longer is it a matter of God's grace being available to them in a "before Christ" context. The crucified and risen Christ has sent forth the Holy Spirit. The salvation to be shared with the Jewish people today is not "B.C." but rather "A.D." Hence, with God having provided so great and so complete a salvation, should his love not constrain us as never before to evangelize the nations? Of course, but particularly the Jewish people! This debt must be paid: "Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have **now** received mercy as a result of their disobedience (vs 30), so they too have **now** become disobedient in order that they too may **now** receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you (vs 31)." We are well aware that God's mercy to disobedient Israel belongs largely to the future (11:25-32). And you and I, by faith and obedience, and with this vision before us can be part of this futureeven though our evangelistic responsibility to Israel must be carried out in the present.

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