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Sin in the theology of Paul

Paul has much to say about humankind's sinful condition. His understanding has huge implications for how Christians understand the Bible's teaching on the state of man, i.e., how he stands before God and how he relates to the rest of creation. The following discussion is an attempt to highlight the danger of absorbing ideas from the culture which Paul would have never owned, particularly about sin, and reading them back into Scripture. These non-Hebraic thought-streams have become so embedded in Western Christian thinking that we unintentionally misrepresent what Paul and the other Scripture writers actually teach.¹

OT background of NT *sarx* (NIV translation: "sinful nature")

The Greek word σαρκῶς (*sarx*) is used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew בָּשָׂר (*bāsār*), the accepted English translation of both *sarx* and *bāsār* being "flesh." It requires a close study of each OT passage in which the term is found to understand how it should be interpreted because it has a number of meanings. This brief OT survey will attempt to show the various ways in which the term was used by the OT writers.

1

The use of "flesh" to describe a covenant relationship

An important use of "flesh," is found in the latter part of Gen 2:23-24, where we find Adam saying of Eve: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." The writer of Genesis continues: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." Here, "flesh," implies the covenant relationship a man has with his wife. She was "one

¹ One of the most thorough studies of Paul's use of anthropological terms in the last fifty years has been that of Jewett, *Terms*. His conclusion have been summed up by Aune, "Nature," 298 who says: "Jewett's own thesis is that conflict situations are the primary reason for inconsistencies in Paul's anthropology." This inconsistency is the inevitable outcome of reading Paul as a Jew who has embraced Hellenism.

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flesh” with him. The provision of this relationship was Yahweh’s response to Adam’s loneliness and frailty. Despite it being a holy relationship (it was approved by God before the fall), it did not change the creaturely vulnerability of man.

The use of “flesh” to describe human frailty

The condition of human frailty is also called “flesh” in the OT. It is found in the writings of prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel. Isaiah, with his lofty view of Yahweh, emphasized that flesh was weak compared to the might of God. He paints a powerful picture of man’s frailty: “all men (flesh) are like grass ... the grass withers and the flowers fall” (Isa 40:6). The prophet Ezekiel promised that the great gift of the new covenant would be a “heart of flesh” which would replace a “heart of stone” (Ezek 36:26-27). Clearly, Ezekiel does not liken “flesh” to sin but to a heart dependent on God.

The use of “flesh” as a term for mankind

Isaiah indicates that “flesh,” can have another meaning, which the NIV translates “mankind”: “all mankind (‘flesh’) will come and bow down before me” (Isa 66:23). He says that, in the day of Yahweh: “all mankind (‘flesh’) will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Isa 49:26). Furthermore, the prophet Joel promised that Yahweh would pour out his Spirit on all people (flesh) (Joel 2:28).

The use of “flesh” as a term for the physical body

In Gen 17, the term “flesh,” was used for man’s flesh, that is, his body. So, Abraham and the males in his household were to be “circumcised in the flesh” (Gen 17:14). In the OT, “flesh,” is also used for animals. When the Flood was predicted, “all flesh” was to be destroyed. This judgment was particularized when God said he would destroy “every creature (‘flesh’) that

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has the breath of life in it” (Gen 6:17). After the Flood, it was recorded that “every living thing (‘flesh’) that moved on the earth perished – birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures (‘flesh’) that swarm over the earth, and all mankind” (Gen 7:21). Here, we see man grouped under the comprehensive description of “all flesh” which ranges from insects to man. Further, “everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died” (v.22). We can see from this the narrower use of “flesh,” restricting it to creatures that were air-breathing, that is, sustained by the breath of life. (cf. Gen 9:16; Job 34:15; Ps 136:25).

In conclusion, “flesh” can be interpreted in a number of ways in the OT, depending on context. It is very important to note there is no suggestion in the OT that “flesh” is in any way sinful or unclean. This is the very opposite to Greek understanding, which holds to a dualistic existence: spirit is pure and matter is evil. It would be easy to be influenced by Greek ideas and begin to think that flesh/body is evil, but this is something a Jew would never do. This assertion is supported by the fact that the blessing of the new covenant was the giving of a “heart of flesh” to his people by God (Ezek 36:26-27), and it was this that brought them near to him. On occasions, priests or people had to wash their bodies because of uncleanness. However, this was ceremonial uncleanness and not moral impurity (Lev 15:10). There is no more guilt in a dirty man than there is in an unclean garment that needs to be washed to fulfill ceremonial requirements. Dirtiness would only become the occasion of sin if the person refused to undergo the prescribed cleansing, for then he would be rejecting the command of Yahweh.

A special case?

There is an OT text which, while it does not contain the word *bāsār*, is deeply significant for OT support of the traditional Christian doctrine of sin. This text comes from David’s writings. In Ps 51:5, he writes: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother

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conceive me” (KJV). This well-known rendering of David’s statement has since been modified by translators. As a result, it fails to convey the proper meaning of the text. The NIV translates it as: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” The NAS has: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” The NET version has: “Look, I was guilty of sin from birth, a sinner the moment my mother conceived me.” Clearly, such a text has to be evaluated and the translators’ preferences considered. If it is speaking of being conceived in sin, then it is suggesting that David could not help his actions because of the sinful nature with which he was born. This is a major departure from what the rest of the OT teaches and what we know Jews throughout history have held to. The statement is intended to contrast the truthfulness of God with the deceitfulness of David. In fact, “the Psalms and the OT in general speak less in terms of ‘being’ (ontology) than in terms of experience and history (existence).”² David is not speaking about his nature but the social/spiritual environment into which he was born. This condition, which we shall see ties into what Paul has to say about being “in Adam,” does not deny David’s sinfulness but understands it in the framework of OT thinking.

So, what does David mean when he says he was “conceived in sin”? Scholars have noted the term $\sim XY$ (*yhm*) “to be hot, rut, conceive”³ describes raw sexual passion or sexual intercourse. It must be noted that David is not speaking of his own behavior but his mother’s, for she conceived him “in sin” (KJV). In an attempt to resolve the use of this term (a term not

² Broyles, *Psalms*, 228. However Kraus, *Psalms*, 1-59, 503, says: “the total depravity that is determinative for humans from the beginning is here acknowledged.” Kraus appeals to Gen 8:21; Job 14:4; 15:14ff.; 25:4; Ps 143. However, none of these texts assert the innate sinfulness of man’s being, rather the impossibility of his being able to come up to God’s standards. This is not the same as asserting “original sin.” Mays, *Psalms*, 200, notes that the idea of being conceived in sin has led to a very negative attitude to human procreation, and claims that the statement is not about David’s conception in sin but the rebellious, spiritual, and social environment that characterized Israel. Thus, he was conceived and born into a state of sin. Born into such a community, he cannot but sin. Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:128, says: “One can see how this declaration would apply to Israel as a whole, whose sinfulness goes back to the moment when its relationship with Yahweh was sealed at Sinai.” I consider that such an understanding reflects what the whole of Scripture is saying.

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normally used for conception), some have gone so far as to say the statement relates to adultery on the part of David's mother. This leaves us with a quandary, because there is no suggestion David describes his Jewish home-life as being anything other than normal and stable, albeit with typical sibling tensions.

Can there be another explanation for this offensive language? The fact is that David speaks of having two mothers, and it is important that we recognize the one to whom he is referring in this psalm. The idea of Zion being a mother is found throughout the OT (Isa 3:16; 37:22; 62:11; Jer 4:31; Lam 1:6; Mic 1:13; 4:10), and the idea of Zion "bearing" children is also found (Ps 87:5). Admittedly, Ps 87 is not David's composition—but psalm 9 is attributed to him, and in that psalm he writes: "that I may declare your praises in the gates of the Daughter of Zion and there rejoice in your salvation" (Ps 9:14).

So could David be saying that, because he was born into a community which constantly broke Yahweh's commandments, he was set on the path of disobedience and sin? Is this why his conception is described as being "in sin"? It would certainly make sense of his use of ~XY "to be hot, rut, conceive" because Zion/Israel is repeatedly called a "harlot," going after other gods and leaving her husband (Isa 1:21; Jer 5:7; Ezek 16:28). In addition, there were many children of Zion who were described as being illegitimate (Hos 1:2; 2:4).

This line of reasoning is supported by the text of Ps 51:18, where David pleads: "In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem." The psalm recognizes Israel's sin, and, in a typically Semitic way, David confesses the sin of his people of which his own is a part. Forgiveness is not solely for himself but also for his wayward people, and it results in the rebuilding of the walls of Zion—the protection of Yahweh's inheritance. In other

³ Tate, *Psalms*, 18, who cites supporting evidence. The Oxford English Dictionary defines rut as: "the periodic sexual excitement of a male deer, goat, sheep etc." The Hebrew clearly suggests aggressive sexual animal activity.

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words, being born “in sin” is a reference to the type of community into which David was born, and he is conscious that his behavior has followed the national characteristic of unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Such an understanding is in complete harmony with the rest of the OT Scriptures and has stayed totally within a Jewish framework.

To summarize the OT’s teaching on “flesh,” we can note that the term is morally neutral, speaking of man’s creaturely existence and frailty. There is no lexicographical evidence to suggest that the term carried any negative moral connotation.

A major conundrum

That “flesh,” is a morally neutral term is a vitally important point. In Christian thinking, “flesh,” normally implies a condition of sinfulness in an individual. If the OT does not use it in this way, and it is widely accepted that Jews do not see their physical existence as in any way impure, then we have to ask if Jesus, a Jew, ever used “flesh” in our Hellenized Christian way. The answer has to be negative. The founder of Christianity, who lived and ministered entirely within the Jewish nation, shared that same understanding of “flesh”—an understanding based on the Jewish Scriptures.

If this assertion is true, and few would doubt it, then the question has to be asked: “where did the idea that “flesh” is sinful come from?” Did Paul introduce this concept into the church’s understanding and teaching? If he has done this, he has added something very un-Jewish and, therefore, very different from what Jesus himself taught. If the understanding did not come from Paul, where did it originate?

The OT use of “flesh” outlined above is the complex background to Paul’s Jewish thinking. If, after his conversion, he stayed within its framework, this semantic domain has to be consulted when interpreting his writings. However, if Paul moved into Hellenism—where

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“flesh” is intrinsically evil – we must interpret his letters accordingly. We have to make a decision as to whether Paul and the NT writers continued in the restricted stream of OT thought or whether they “advanced out,” absorbing Greek ideas. Certainly, these Greek ideas would have been familiar to the growing number of Gentile converts in the early church.

If we find that the OT understanding continues, it would have been necessary for the early church to have devised a program of careful instruction for the Gentile converts in order to bring their understanding in line with Jewish thought. This would not have been as formidable a task as might at first appear, for, in the early years of the church, almost all of the teachers were Jews. Indeed, we must remember that Gentile converts were being filtered into congregations which were mostly Jewish. They would have been taught from the LXX, and, finding that their understanding of the term *sarx* clashed with that of the Jewish community, would have been taught its “true” meaning by their Jewish brethren. If this did not happen, a Gentile takeover would have occurred causing serious problems for the Jewish majority and the church’s apostolic theology in its formative days.

The use of “flesh” in the NT: A caution

The translators of most English versions try to help their readers understand the term “flesh” by rendering it in ways they think appropriate. This seems reasonable, but, unfortunately, the translations often contradict the contexts in which the term is found. To translate “flesh” as “sinful nature” (as in the Romans passage under consideration) does not normally convey what Paul was writing but, instead, misrepresents him on a vitally important issue.⁴

⁴ Sadly, the NIV– upon which this commentary is based– is one of the worst examples of this misrepresentation as we soon shall see.

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The use of “flesh” in the Gospels

Of all the references to “flesh” in the Synoptics, only one statement (recorded by Matthew and Mark [Matt 26:41; Mark 14:38]) appears to be a possible reference to the human body. However, this is debatable as the phrase: “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” could imply the frailty of the human condition, where man without God is limited to his creaturely resources. Certainly, this interpretation is in agreement with one of the Jewish meanings of “flesh” and reflects the “heart of flesh” in Ezekiel. This meaning conveys an awareness of creaturely weakness and dependency upon God.

Another possible reference to “flesh” as “body” is in John 6:51-56. Since it is a controversial passage which is difficult to expound (it is the key text in support of the doctrine of transubstantiation, i.e., the changing of the Eucharistic elements into the body and blood of Christ), it would be easy to ignore. To do so would leave a weakness in the argument being presented. I will, therefore, suggest another possible interpretation.

In his Gospel, John repeatedly shows that Jesus was misunderstood. In chapter 1, the Jews failed to perceive the identity of the Son of God (John 1:10-11). In chapter 2, they thought he was referring to the temple of Herod when he said the temple would be destroyed and raised in three days (John 2:19-22). In chapter 3, Nicodemus misunderstood the nature of the second birth (John 3:3-9). In chapter 4, the Samaritan woman failed to understand the nature of living water (John 4:15) and in chapter 5, the Jews misunderstood the message of the Scriptures (John 5:39-40). When we come to chapter 6, the Jews were offended when Jesus said that unless they ate his flesh, there would be no life in them (John 6:53). Their thinking would have been consistent with OT ideas of “flesh” so they assumed that Jesus was referring to his body, a meaning that is in the OT semantic domain for *bāsār*. They misunderstood his words because they took them literally! Jesus was not speaking of his body any more than the

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“temple” of chapter 2 was a reference to the building in Jerusalem. So, how can we understand Jesus’ use of “flesh”?

The time of the statement was Passover (John 6:4), and Jesus was reminding the Jews that the manna sent down from heaven sustained their ancestors as they journeyed to the promised land. Now, God has sent living bread for people to eat, to sustain them until the last day when they will be raised up (John 6:40). Jesus is saying that believers must partake of him by faith, in order to be sustained on life’s journey. In the context of a relationship between himself and his needy people, his use of “flesh” reflects the way its used in Gen 2:24—it refers to the inaugural statement of marriage. This original marriage in Genesis foreshadowed the divine marriage of Yahweh and his people at Sinai, which, as we have seen earlier, was the purpose of the Passover and is the theme being traced in this commentary.⁵ The concept of the divine marriage had already been introduced by John. He recorded that Jesus attended the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee in order to typify the forthcoming new relationship between Yahweh and his people.⁶ John the Baptist bore witness that he was the friend of the bridegroom, and that, having heard his voice, he rejoiced (John 3:29).⁷ It was no coincidence Jesus’ statement was made near the time of the celebration of the Jewish Passover—a motif which is ongoing in John’s Gospel.⁸ If this understanding of “flesh” is correct, i.e., it is covenantal and speaks of the marriage relationship between Christ and his people, then the statement is only sacramental in that it speaks of the “mystic” union between Christ and his bride. In other

⁵ For the influence of the exodus/Paschal model on Paul, see Holland, *Contours*, 207-286.

⁶ If the early church read the texts in this OT manner, i.e., as the fulfillment of the promises of the new exodus and divine marriage, they would identify the point of the statement. Their sustenance comes from the relationship they have with Christ.

⁷ The theme of the divine marriage in John’s Gospel has been established by McWhirter, *The Bridegroom*. This study, establishing the presence of the divine marriage imagery in John, supports evidence that the early church knew of the presence and importance of this OT motif and that she understood references to it in the writings of the apostles. It, therefore, supports the reading that I am suggesting for Romans, where the divine marriage is a key component of the apostle’s thinking.

⁸ Jn 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28; 19:14.

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words, it carries the same significance as Paul's understanding of what it means to be "in Christ" and nothing more.

Paul's use of "flesh"

As I have already stated, we have to decide if the teaching on "flesh" in the NT reflects the OT understanding or whether it widens to embrace Greek language and culture. Many scholars believe Paul was influenced by Greek thought, and that this was reflected in his teaching.⁹ Certainly, as noted, a growing number of converts to the Gospel were Greek-speaking Gentiles, and it would seem reasonable for Paul to adapt his message to make it more "Gentile-friendly."

However, we have seen in the Greek understanding of "flesh" that it was sinful because all material things were considered evil. If the assumption is correct that Paul adapted his message, we should find evidence that Paul uses "flesh" in this Greek way. However, when we look closely at his letters, we find that he does not introduce this meaning but continues to make use of its multi-faceted, OT perspective.

Paul's use of "flesh" to describe a covenant relationship

We have seen that the term "flesh" in the OT can refer to a covenant relationship, e.g., in the creation account. Paul uses this meaning when writing of the Jews, the covenant people of God. He makes it clear that he puts no confidence in this covenant relationship ("flesh"), despite his own pedigree and achievements as a Jew: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the 'flesh' – though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the

⁹ See Casey, *Jewish Prophets*, passim; Barth, *Colossians*, 248; Wright, *Colossians*, 68.

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people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil 3:3-7).

Paul is not saying that his background and ambition to be a faultless Jew were sinful in themselves. Rather he is saying now that he is in Christ, he recognizes that before his conversion, he had been in Adam and living outside of God’s kingdom and covenant relationship. Everything he did, including the meticulous practice of his religion, was an expression of his separation from God. When he says “the acts of the sinful nature (flesh) are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Gal 5:19-21a), he includes his own failings. His “noble achievements” in trying to destroy the church before his conversion, dragging men and women off to prison and breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples (Acts 8:3; 9:1), would surely have qualified for acts of “hatred,” “jealousy,” “selfish ambition,” and “fits of rage.” These and other acts of the “flesh,” were evidence that Paul was in the wrong kingdom or the wrong covenant, i.e., that he was “in the flesh.”

Again, Paul makes use of the covenantal OT perspective of “flesh” when he states that being “in the flesh” is the same as being “in Adam.” Both terms describe the condition of being unregenerate and disobedient to God’s word (cf. Rom 5:12ff.; Gal 3:10ff.). Paul says: “those controlled by the sinful nature (‘flesh’) cannot please God” (Rom 8:8). He is not writing with an individualistic Greek understanding of the spirit of a man being polluted by his sinful body (“flesh”) but of the solidarity of mankind with Adam. In other words, unredeemed mankind is “in Adam,” and controlled by Satan. These unredeemed members of the human race form the

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“body of Sin.”¹⁰ The picture is of a covenant community, which is outside of the kingdom of God.

This is made plain in Rom 8:9, where Paul tells the Romans that they are not controlled by the sinful nature (“flesh”) but by the Spirit, “if the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Paul appears to be saying that those who are in Christ are not controlled by Satan but by the Holy Spirit. To be “in the Spirit” is to be “in Christ” where no confidence is placed in human ability or attainment, but all confidence is placed in Christ (cf. Rom 6:5-11; 8:4-8).

In Rom 7:5, Paul speaks of being “in the flesh” as a past experience: “For when we were controlled by the sinful nature (flesh), the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.” Since nothing acted to control them, the “sinful passions” had free reign to steer them into even greater rebellion against God, producing the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21), leading to “fruit for death.”

All this is made clear when Paul’s statements concerning “flesh” and “Spirit,” when “lust” and “sin” are considered.¹¹ The Mosaic law was powerless in that it was “weakened by the flesh” because man, in Adam, was under the law of Sin (or Satan). Therefore, while man was in this covenant relationship with Satan, he could not respond to God’s demands or claims. However, God rescued him from this relationship by “sending his own Son in the flesh (‘likeness of sinful man’ [NIV]) to be a sin offering” (Rom 8:3). “And so he condemned sin in the flesh (‘sinful man’ [NIV]) in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh (‘sinful nature’ [NIV]), but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the flesh (‘sinful nature’ [NIV]) have their minds

¹⁰ For details of this term, see notes on Rom 6:6.

¹¹ For the covenantal-exodus background of this language in Gal 5:18, see Wilder, *Echoes*.

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set on the things of the flesh ('what that nature desires' [NIV]); but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires" (8:3b-5).¹²

In the Corinthian letter, Paul implies that Sin¹³ is related to man's weakness. He draws on the OT covenantal meaning of "flesh," insinuating that believers, because of being in the "flesh" can be enticed back into darkness and bound by the power of Satan. He actively encourages the Corinthian believers not to trust in their own abilities, gifts, wisdom and influence (1 Cor 1:18-25). In their folly, they concede to temptation and begin to boast of their prowess. They are in danger of turning from Christ and substituting other gods in place of him. Paul develops this line of thinking later, especially in Rom 8:1-13; 10:1-22; 11:17-34. The implication is that there is an attempt by Satan to re-establish the relationship he had with them when they were part of the kingdom of darkness (that is, part of "fallen flesh") and Sin (Satan) was their "husband." Acting "in the flesh" causes man to trust in his own abilities and to secure his salvation without taking God's claims to heart. In this sense, Sin and flesh are related. This OT concept is not compatible with Hellenistic ideas. For Paul, a Jew, the issue is essentially relational: living in the flesh was living as though he was still in Adam and serving the purposes of the kingdom to which he has succumbed.¹⁴

Paul's use of "flesh" to describe human frailty

On occasions, Paul uses the term "flesh" to speak of man's creaturely limitations, reflecting another OT usage: "No one ('flesh') will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law" (Rom 3:20), and Christ came "in the likeness of sinful man ('flesh') to be a sin offering"

¹² There is more said in this passage that needs clarification. It will be dealt with as the commentary proceeds.

¹³ The upper case is used to emphasize that Sin is personal. It refers to Satan.

¹⁴ This understanding is supported by what Paul says in 1 Cor 5-6. In 1 Cor 6:16 he warns the Corinthians of the danger of being delivered over to Satan—a condition which he calls "one flesh" (their pre-converted state). For details of this argument, see Holland, *Contours*, 85-139. See also remarks made on Rom 7:1-6 in this commentary.

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(Rom 8:3). Clearly, Paul is not saying that Christ shared our sin but that he shared our creaturely limitations.

In Gal 2:20, Paul says: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body (flesh), I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Here, Paul acknowledges that he continues to live in a state of weakness. In his earthly body, he is in the “flesh.”

When writing to the Corinthians, Paul was aware there were some who no longer realized their limitations! They prided themselves in their intellectual gifts and oratorical powers.

They no longer felt a need to depend on God. So, Paul tells them: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards (flesh); not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Cor 1:26-29).

Paul’s use of “flesh” as a term for humankind

Surprisingly, when Paul uses “flesh” to speak of man, at first glance, it seems that he never uses the term to speak of humankind as a corporate entity but to refer to the individual person. This emphasizes his argument that each individual, Jew or Gentile, will be treated in the same way by God: “Therefore no one (‘flesh’) will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom 3:20), and “no one (‘flesh’) may boast before him” (1 Cor 1:29). However, it could be argued that “no flesh” is distinguishing between Jew and Gentile rather than individuals, in which case the argument continues to be corporate and the texts are not exceptions to what has been said above.

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Paul's use of "flesh" as a term for the physical body

Paul was aware that the OT concept of "flesh" could refer to the bodies of men and beasts, and we find him employing this in 1 Cor 15, where he differentiates between man's flesh and that of animals: "All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another" (1 Cor 15:39). Apart from this one mention of animal "flesh," Paul reserves the term for man and his experience, and follows the LXX in using *kre,aj* (*kreas*) for animal meat (Rom 14:21; 1 Cor 8:13).

In Rom 12, Paul urges the believers in Rome to: "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" (v.1). He is not suggesting their sinful bodies¹⁵ can be changed, but he is calling the believers to respond to the claims of God by changing their attitudes as they submit to the word of God. The result will be that the church becomes "a living sacrifice," offered to God in the city of Rome. In the statement: *parasth/sai ta. sw,mata u`mw/n qusi,an zw/san a`gi,an euva,reston tw/| qew/|* "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God," it is only "your bodies" (*ta sōmata hymōn*) which is plural. In other words, the NIV's "living sacrifices" should be translated "a living sacrifice," making it a corporate offering. This is made explicit when Paul goes on to tell the church: "Do not conform (*mh. suschmati,zesqe [mē sychēmatizesthe]*, pl.) any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed (*metamorfou/sqe [metamorphousthe]*, pl.) by the renewing of your mind (*tou/ noo,j [tou noos]*, sing., literally 'of the mind'). Then you (*u`ma/j [hymas]*, pl.) will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). Paul's argument is typically Semitic. Conceptually, he thinks in corporate terms, and these ideas are very much part of the OT understanding of "flesh." The key point to note is

¹⁵ Paul's use of "body" (*sw/ma*) is typically Hebraic and his appeal is holistic. Thus, Paul is saying that corporately, they should yield their entire being as "a living sacrifice." See Holland, *Contours*, 85-110, 179.

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that if Paul had adopted a Hellenistic understanding of man (i.e., his body is sinful), he could not have appealed to the believers in Rome to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. A sacrifice has to be clean and holy—an impossible requirement within Hellenistic dualism.

There are other examples of Paul using the term “flesh” to describe man’s physical make-up. In speaking of Christ, he says: “who as to his flesh (‘human nature,’ [NIV]) was a descendant of David” (Rom 1:3). When speaking of circumcision, he speaks about it being “in the flesh” (Rom 2:28; Eph 2:11 [“body,” NIV]). He speaks of the necessity of remaining “in the flesh” (Phil 1:24 [“body,” NIV]) and of his sufferings “in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7; Gal 4:13, 14 [“illness,” NIV]; Col 1:24). Finally, Christ suffered “in the flesh” (Eph 2:15; Col 1:22 [“physical body,” NIV]).

Paul – a Jew

The difference between a Hebraic reading of Paul and a Hellenistic reading ought to be clear. The latter assumes that “flesh” is sinful, physical, and rebellious. However, the OT uses “flesh” in a way that is diametrically opposed to such a reading. The term is morally neutral and its meaning has to be decided from its context.

In conclusion, our study has shown that Paul followed the OT understanding when using the term “flesh.”¹⁶ He made use of its wide variety of meanings and applied the term in differing contexts to support what he was teaching. He made particular use of the term when writing of the frailty of man as well as of his solidarity to his representative head, Adam. What Paul did not do was use “flesh” in the Greek way and so teach the Roman church it was intrinsically sinful.

¹⁶ “Paul was not a dualist. He proposed that it was God himself who subjected creation to ‘futility’ and that he had done so ‘in hope’ planning for its redemption.” See Sanders, Paul, 39.

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We can draw two conclusions from this study. First—and more importantly—Paul did not embrace Greek thinking on “flesh,” but stayed within the OT framework. Second, a well-developed program for educating Gentile believers, who were steeped in Greek ideas, would have been a necessity in the early church.

Hellenism and Christian thought

In the light of all this, we must recognize that the Hellenistic meaning of “flesh” has dominated Christian thinking.¹⁷ If we claim this was the way that Paul thought and taught,¹⁸ then we have to acknowledge that he introduced ideas and teachings into Christian thinking which are at variance with those of the Lord Jesus, who, as a Jew, was reared on the OT. If this is the position we come to accept, then we have to designate Christianity as the religion of the Apostle Paul, who has hijacked Jesus and repackaged him for the Gentile world.

If, however, we accept that the multitude of OT quotations and allusions in Paul’s letters, along with his dependence on OT theological structures, demonstrate that he was as much a Jew as was Jesus, then we have to do everything in our power to avoid translating “flesh” in a way that suggests our physical condition is “sinful,” i.e., believers have sinful “natures” which have permanently tainted their physical, fleshly bodies. This leads us to reflect on the biblical doctrines of sin and the fall to rediscover the distinctive roots of Jewish-Christian understanding.

¹⁷ See, for example, Jewett, *Terms*, 154, who, commenting on Paul’s use of the term, says: “For the sake of communication he took over the usage which had become current in Corinth and possibly elsewhere in the Hellenistic church.”

¹⁸ As claimed by Blocher, *Original*, 27, who says: “Paul’s extraordinary development of the idea, whereby the flesh becomes the seat and power of indwelling sin, even the hypostasis of sin’s tyranny, maintains continuity with previous usage; (*kata anthrōpon*) and ‘being human beings’ (1 Cor 3:3ff.). This language describes the fact that human nature *concretely* is at enmity with God; hence the meaning attached to ‘flesh.’” (Original emphasis.)

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Sin

If I am correct in claiming that the NT meaning of “flesh” has Jewish roots and that there is a need to be alert to Hellenistic influences in Western Christian understanding of the doctrine, then we need to ask if the doctrine of sin has been influenced by Hellenism in any significant way. The normal Western Christian understanding of sin is something like this: “acts which break the laws of the OT.” This is an understandable definition, but it is not entirely in tune with Scripture.

To construct a doctrine of sin which emphasizes wrong actions rather than wrong relationships is akin to a builder failing to examine the foundation before building a superstructure. For most people, the belief is that wrong actions (sins) come from indwelling sin or man’s sinful nature. Such an understanding of sin allows Hellenistic dualism to filter unchallenged into our understanding, leading us away from biblical thinking.

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A typical dualistic approach sees that for everything good there is a corresponding evil. In terms of anthropology, man is seen as having two natures: one that is good and the other that is evil. If such an understanding of man takes control of our theology, we will find great difficulty in reconciling it with what the Bible says about the believer and humankind in general. We will have departed from the holistic, OT understanding of man which holds that his being is indivisible. The Hebraic view of man has no place for the dualism of the Greeks who see man as being tripartite: body, soul, and spirit.¹⁹

What, then, is sin? The OT sets out its stall very clearly. Hosea, commenting on Adam’s disobedience, says: “Like Adam, they have broken the covenant ... they were unfaithful to me there” (Hos 6:7). Hosea lays the charge at Israel’s door that she is being unfaithful to

¹⁹ The nearest that the NT apparently gets to such a view is found in 1 Thess 5:23 but most commentators are very clear that the description is not tripartite but reflecting different aspects of the one being a person is, for further comment see Page 213fn 19

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Yahweh, who is likened to her husband. She is playing the prostitute, taking other lovers (gods) and breaking her covenant relationship with God. This, says Hosea, is what happened in Eden.²⁰ Adam rejected God's good and pure love for him and, in its place; he embraced the lies of the serpent. He went after another god, putting him before the God who made him.

In other words, sin is essentially relational.²¹ Breaking God's law is the symptom of the problem. Man has declared himself to be a lover (a covenant partner) of the one who is at war with Yahweh. This imagery continually appears throughout the OT, sin is betrayal. It is rejecting Yahweh and the espousal of other gods. Thus, Adam was not merely disobeying Yahweh but forming a new relationship with God's adversary. In NT terms, at the time of the fall, Adam entered into a relationship with Satan himself.²²

This relational definition of sin is found throughout the OT. In Deut 5:9, God said to Israel: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me."

²⁰ A reference to Adam's disobedience in Eden is disputed by most OT scholars on the grounds that Genesis makes no mention of Adam being in covenant with God. See Macintosh, *Hosea*, 236-239, who says: "It is doubtful, however, whether Adam could be said to have transgressed a covenant or whether his transgression of the divine command is here referred to since that is not the case anywhere else in the OT," 236. Stuart, *Hosea*, 111; Anderson & Freedman, *Hosea*, 438; although Landy, *Hosea*, 84-5, offers reasons why Hosea does refer to the Genesis story. Most scholars claim that Hosea refers to an East Jordan city called Adam, where something terrible was done that violated Israel's covenant with Yahweh. This suggestion is weak because all attempts to find evidence of such covenant-breaking behavior in the city of Adam has failed. In support of Hos 6:7 being a reference to Eden, we find in Hosea a reference to Yahweh leading Israel out of Egypt, as a bridegroom woos a bride, to marry her in the wilderness (Hos 2:14-16). Such an understanding of the exodus was not found in Israel's literature prior to Hosea's writings. So if he was able to create, or preserve, this previously unknown tradition concerning the significance of the exodus event, was he not able to create or preserve a previously unwritten tradition about Eden? If Hosea did create a new understanding of what happened in Eden, i.e. that it was about Adam breaking the covenant relationship with Yahweh, then he has provided new insight into the significance and nature of Adam's disobedience. Thus, the objection raised by Macintosh that the concept occurs nowhere in the OT is answered in the divine marriage imagery, which many of the writing prophets utilized. Indeed, once it is recognized that the divine marriage metaphor has been created by Hosea, it is only a small step for him to read it back into the Eden story and thereby expand its meaning and significance.

²¹ "sin as covenant disloyalty permeates most of the Hebrew Bible," Sanders, "Sin," VI.36.

²² This is far from being a novel concept. Israel exchanged her relationship with Yahweh—her husband—for a relationship with other gods. The OT is full of this imagery. For a fuller discussion, see Holland, *Contours*, 85-139.

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In Deut 6:14-15, Israel is again warned: “Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.”

Again, the definition of sin is made clear in Deut 32:15-19, where it is written: “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior. They made him jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols. They sacrificed to demons, which are not God—gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear. You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth. The LORD saw this and rejected them because he was angered by his sons and daughters.”

It is true, of course, that Israel broke the commandments of God, and because she did not repent, this brought punishment. These disciplinary episodes took place when the nation turned away from the God who had done everything for her and embraced other gods instead. In other words, sin is not essentially legalistic—it is covenantal and relational.

In most countries today, when a man is unfaithful to his wife and commits adultery, no legal infringement has occurred, even though court proceedings may follow. Adultery is relational. It is the betrayal of the covenantal promises which were entered into when marriage vows were made. The husband’s or wife’s unfaithfulness brings their covenantal relationship to an end. No husband should ever say: “My nature merely got the better of me and nothing has changed in our marriage.” He should say: “I chose to do this because it appealed to my desires and instincts. I preferred to break my marriage vows rather than be faithful to my wife. I chose infidelity.” This is what sin is. It is man’s betrayal of God’s covenant love so that he can embrace another. The created one is unfaithful to his Creator. In terms of

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identifying sin “in” man, it is found in his stubborn refusal to obey God and keep his covenant. The seat of sin is the will of man.

This covenantal understanding of sin is found in texts whose significance and meaning scholarship has failed to appreciate. Many recognize that in Rom 5-7, Paul speaks of sin in the singular. Indeed, there are many who recognize that this singular use of sin is intended to portray sin as a force or as a person (Sin).²³ Sin is repeatedly contrasted with God or righteousness, and most scholars understand that righteousness is an example of a metonymy (a substitute name) for God. In other words, in this scheme, sin is Satan.

This use of “Sin” (which I have suggested should be identified as personal [Satan] by the use of the higher case) alerts us to Paul’s much larger view of the doctrine than many understand. It is Sin which has taken humankind captive, and it is the law of Sin (the authority that Sin has over people, similar to the authority that a husband has over his wife) that controls mankind in Adam. As we have seen, Sin is Satan, and the adulterous relationship—the idolatry—has been formed with him. All who are in Adam, i.e., “in the flesh,” are in this relationship.

Western Christianity has mostly lost this OT understanding. The subject has been wrenched from its covenantal context and interpreted in a legal setting. Sin is seen as breaking God’s law, a crime that requires punishment. In contrast to this forensic understanding, the OT sees sin to be essentially the betrayal of Yahweh’s love and the sacrifices which are provided to restore the relationship. The OT concept of sacrifice is, therefore, covenantal rather than judicial. It is not so much the punishment of man’s sin but the removal of the fundamental problem that had violated the covenant. In the OT the problem of sin is much more serious than breaking any of the laws, it is about the betrayal of Yahweh’s covenantal love. Turning

²³ See Dunn, *Romans*, 1:360; Wright, *Romans*, passim; Sanders, *Paul*, 43. Kennedy, *Conception*, 102, note 2; Sandy and Headlam, *Romans*, 169; Wedderburn, *Structure*, 342.

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OT sacrifice into an essentially legalistic issue loses a vitally important dimension of its significance; it is about the restoration of the covenant relationship by dealing with the issues that have caused the “divorce”. This does not deny the need for a legal element, that is, a need for propitiation, etc. Nevertheless, this legal issue is subordinate to the much greater theme of covenant restoration which requires the termination of the relationship with Sin which in the OT is the ending of the relationship with foreign gods.

By interpreting “sin” mainly in legal terms, we miss a more important framework, which places its emphasis on a God who is the lover of mankind rather than its judge. We have noted in our comments on chapter 4 that justification is rooted in covenantal ideas. These observations lend support to the need to define “sin” in the same terms.

Is Rabbinic Judaism the source of Paul’s doctrine of sin/Sin?

Some scholars argue that the Christian doctrine of “sin” bears a resemblance to the rabbinic doctrine of *yeshar hara*, which is about the human tendency towards evil.²⁴ At first glance, such a case seems attractive, for Jesus was familiar with rabbinic teaching. Moreover, before his conversion, Paul trained as a rabbi under Gamaliel. One problem with Rabbinic Judaism being the source of Christian understanding is that Jesus clashed with the teaching of the rabbis on various doctrines and refused to be entangled in their web of traditions.²⁵ Because he challenged his hearers with the direct meaning of the OT text, the people were amazed: “he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law” (Matt 7:29). The rabbinic perspective is far from what the NT teaches, and it is abundantly clear that Paul had

²⁴ Davies, *Rabbinic*, 25.

²⁵ Matt 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44.

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rejected such understanding.²⁶ Just how much Rabbinic Judaism was influenced by Hellenistic Judaism to become a law bound religion is a point of disagreement amongst scholars.²⁷ However, far more important is the observation that the meaning of the concept of *yeshar hara* was not uniform throughout Judaism. In the midrashim of Rabbi Akiba, the concept implies a natural tendency which is not inherently evil. It functions quite differently from the concept found in the teaching of the school of Rabbi Ishmael.²⁸ If this is right, Paul could not have been influenced by the later “negative” concept of the *yeshar hara*, because Ishmael ben Elisha, known as Rabbi Ishmael (90-135 CE), was yet to be born!

Is Hellenistic Judaism the source of Paul’s doctrine of sin?

However, the above Jewish evidence does not affect the argument of some scholars. They see Hellenistic Judaism to have influenced NT understanding concerning the doctrine of “sin.” The argument of those who hold this position is that, because Judaism had interacted with Hellenism, the texts of Hellenistic Judaism provide us with the evidence for unraveling Paul’s thinking. Some of these texts, which reflect the interface between Judaism and the Hellenistic world, are found in the literature of intertestamental Judaism.

But is this a valid position? It is a huge assumption that Paul ever quoted from these texts. Despite the lack of evidence, scholars assume that Paul derived his dualistic teaching on “flesh” from these texts.²⁹ We have already explored the supposed influence of Hellenistic Judaism, and found that its teachings have repeatedly masked what the Scriptures actually teach. So, for example, we have found that *doulos* is not a “slave” but a “servant,”³⁰ and that the “body of sin” is not the human body but the corporate body of man in his allegiance to

²⁶ The only explicit evidence of Paul’s rabbinic background is found in Gal 4:21-31 where he gives a typical Midrashic exegesis of the story of Sarah and Hagar. For a view that sees more extensive influence see Davies, *Paul*, and Hanson, *Methods*.

²⁷ See Davies, *Rabbinic*, who argues for significant influence, as does Powys, *Hard Question*. Ridderbos, *Outline*, 101, rejects any rabbinic influences in Paul’s doctrine of “sin.”

²⁸ Rosen-Zvi, “The Origins.” I owe this information to Seung-Ho Kang, who brought it to my attention.

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Satan.³¹ We have also found that “righteousness” in Paul’s writings is not a law-court image (a fundamental Greco-Roman concept of legal perfection) but has roots in Isaiah and the psalms, where the “righteousness of God” is his covenant-faithfulness and saving activity.³²

Elsewhere it has been shown that the teaching of Wisdom Christology; which depends heavily on Jewish Hellenistic texts, has misrepresented Paul’s thinking. The key term in Wisdom Christology is *prōtotokos*, which has not been derived from Hellenistic literature as is widely held. It is rooted in the OT account of the Passover where the firstborn was the designated object of judgment.³³ In each of these cases, using the literature of Hellenistic Judaism has been disastrous. Rather than opening up the teaching of Paul, it has imposed a mindset on his teaching which has distorted many of his key concepts. This fact alone ought to dissuade us from embracing this literature in order to discern Paul’s understanding of “sin.”

Sinful nature

Another expression which influences our understanding of “sin” needs to be considered. Peter appears to write indirectly about man’s “sinful nature.” When speaking of the promises of God, he says: “through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Pet 1:4). The reference to being partakers

²⁹ See Dunn, *Theology*, 84-90. Dunn’s evidence that Paul used this literature is his claim that Paul draws on intertestamental wisdom sources in his discussion on “sin” in Rom 1:18-32. Dunn says: “Of greater importance is the Wisdom of Solomon. Its particular relevance for us lies in the fact that Paul certainly knew and seems deliberately to echo this in his opening indictment (Rom 1:19–2:6).” See also Lincoln, *Wrath*, 137. However, despite Dunn’s confidence in this matter, his claim is challenged by the exposition of Jewett, *Romans*, 191, who shows the OT (LXX) source of many of Paul’s ideas that make up the argument of the passage. Indeed, Jewett gives specific examples of how Paul’s argument clashes with Hellenistic understanding: “The content of Hellenistic Judaism was the exact opposite of what we encounter in Romans,” (154). To see how this literature has obscured what the NT writers are saying, see, Holland, *Contours*, 339-351.

³⁰ See Holland, *Contours*, 69-82.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 85-11.

³² Ziesler, *Righteousness*, passim; Hill, *Greek Words*, passim.

³³ For further information, see Holland, *Contours*, 237-286; 339-351.

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of the “divine nature” is read by some³⁴ as the counterpart of the condition of unbelievers, i.e., of not having the “divine nature” but having a “sinful nature.”

Against this traditional understanding of “nature” is that the Greek term *fu,sij* (*physis*) has two possible meanings. It not only refers to “nature” in terms of an ontological state, but also to a system or order. For most people ‘human nature’ is in contrast to the divine nature that Peter speaks of, and it is this sinful nature that is thought to be replaced or held in check when the divine nature is given. It is this close relationship between the two natures that allows the term “divine nature” in Peter to support the idea of the existence of a human or sinful nature. This understanding is resting on a fundamental misunderstanding, for neither meaning of *fu,sij* (*physis*) necessarily carries a negative connotation.³⁵

Clearly, the believers Peter writes to have escaped the corruption that is in the world. When he speaks of *qei,aj koinwnoi. fu,sewj* (*theias koinōnoi physeōs*) “partakers of the divine nature,”³⁶ he could mean sharing in the divine order, i.e., the kingdom of God. This way of thinking is supported elsewhere in the NT³⁷ and by Peter himself: “you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:11).

³⁴ The Platonic influences on the understanding of “divine nature” are widely recognized without acknowledging that the term has a natural Hebraic content of “divine kingdom” See Sherlock, *Humanity*, 77; Owen, *Temptation*, 13–14. Green, *Peter*, 184 recognizes the significance of the promises and their place in redemption history but does not appreciate how they link with the believers being partakers of the divine nature (kingdom), so argues for a moral significance for “nature.” Kelly, *Peter*, 301–4, also acknowledges links with OT vocabulary but drifts into what he acknowledges is a Hellenistic interpretation of “the divine nature” which he says the first century church received from Plato and Aristotle.

³⁵ *fu,sij*(*ewj h`* “nature,” “natural endowment,” or “condition.” See, Rom 2:27; 11:21, 24; Gal 2:15; Eph 2:3. Also, *fu,sij* means “natural characteristics” or “disposition,” (Gal 4:8; 2 Pet 1:4). Furthermore, it may be used with the sense of “nature,” carrying the meaning of the regular natural order. See Rom 1:26; 2:14; 1 Cor 11:14. Finally, it can be used with the sense of (natural) “being,” “creature,” “species,” “kind.” See Jas 3:7a and probably, 3:7b (BDAG).

³⁶ The subject becomes more difficult because the NIV (though not limited to it) keeps translating *sa,rx* as “sinful nature,” when there is nothing in the language or text to support this choice. See, Rom 7:5, 18, 25; 8:3-5, 8-9, 12-13; 13:14; 1 Cor 5:5; 11:14; Gal 5:13, 16-17, 19, 24; 6:8; Eph 2:3; Col 2:11, 13; 3:5. Also *sa,rx* is found in 2 Pet 2:10, 18, where the NIV again translates as “sinful nature.” Translating the term as “sinful nature,” (as is done throughout the NIV), seriously misrepresents what Paul and Peter are saying.

³⁷ Acts 14:22; 1 Cor 6:10; Eph 5:8-20; Col 1:13-20; 2 Pet 2:19.

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I am suggesting, therefore, that the term “nature” refers to the *order* to which a person belongs—the kingdom of darkness into which he was born in Adam or the kingdom of God. The natural order of the kingdom of darkness is rebellion against God and the natural order of the kingdom of God (into which a person comes through faith in Christ) is obedience to the will of God. The term does not define the intrinsic being of man but the ontological and moral reality of the realm to which he belongs.³⁸

It is important to clarify what is going on in this passage in Peter. Clarity over the way use of the way *φύσις* is used will guide us to appreciate the OT roots of the term.

When Israel was redeemed from Babylon, she was brought out of the pollution of a pagan society (Isa 52:11; Jer 13:27). The dry bones in Ezek 37 exposed the nation itself as dead and polluted (evidenced by the need for cleansing after a corpse has been touched [Lev 22:4; Num 5:2; 6:7; 9:6.]) This situation was dramatically changed when Israel was brought back to her own land where she could be in fellowship with God. If this is how Peter’s comments should be read—and in its favor, it is not dualistic and contrary to Jewish thinking – then the text does not support the admittedly convoluted suggestion that man has a “sinful nature.” The recipients of Peter’s letter had been in a state of sin not because they had a sinful nature that needed to be replaced by a new nature, but because they had belonged to the kingdom over which Satan ruled – a kingdom that had polluted them but from which they had been delivered.

This logic fits Paul’s statement in Eph 2:3: “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature (‘our flesh’) and following its desires and

³⁸ John Murray describes the pollution of sin in this way: “This refers to the depravity of disposition and character. Man is totally unholy. All of his functions and exercises are unholy because they lack conformity to the will of God; they come short of the perfection which his holiness demands. Man’s understanding is darkened, his will enslaved, his conscience perverted, his affections depraved, his heart corrupted, his mind at enmity against God.” Murray, *Writings*, 80. Such understanding fits the covenantal model of being “in sin” that I am suggesting, and does not imply anything of a “sinful nature.”

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thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.” In the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul lists the blessings that the church experienced as a result of being under the headship of Christ (Eph 1:18-23). These blessings are the result of God’s saving mercy when she was rescued from Satan’s control: “In him (Christ) we have our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Eph 1:7). Like the Israelites, the church has been brought into another kingdom where she is to serve God. This is the context in which the statement “objects of wrath” must be interpreted. Before their conversion, the Ephesian believers had been, like the Jews in Egypt, living under a system that was in rebellion against God and was part of the order that was under God’s wrath. Here, “nature” refers not to the ontological condition of man but to his relational condition, as in 2 Pet 1:3. As members of the community that is in Adam, the Ephesians were under God’s wrath. They were, by “nature,” rebellious children of wrath, but because of God’s grace towards them, all of this had changed!

The heart

There is one final term that we need to consider—the use of “heart” in both the OT and NT. One obvious reference seems to suggest the heart of man is corrupt. Jesus states: “But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean’” (Matt 15:18-20).

The problem with presenting this as firm evidence that the very being of man is sinful is that the term “heart” is used positively elsewhere in scripture without any suggestion of innate sinfulness. If the “heart” is sinful in the way normally understood, then all references to it

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would support this view. The fact is that this is not the case, in either the OT or the NT. This ought to cause us to reconsider the traditional understanding of Matt 15:18-20.

The following is a selection of references which speak of the heart of man in a positive way. Of course, there are others that speak of the heart as being evil, hardened, polluted, etc. It is undeniable that different people at different times have hearts in these conditions – but this is not always the case. To have the heart spoken of in the following positive ways can only mean that the heart of man, i.e., his nature (however that is defined), is not permanently wicked or corrupt:

everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the LORD for the work on the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for the sacred garments. (Exod 35:21)

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. (Deut 4:9)

But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deut 4:29)

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deut 6:5)

So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today – to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deut 11:13)

The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. (Deut 10:6)

'Do not be afraid,' Samuel replied. 'You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart.' (1 Sam 12:20)

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But the LORD said to my father David, 'Because it was in your heart to build a temple for my Name, you did well to have this in your heart.' (1 Kgs 8:18)

Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. (2 Kgs 22:19)

You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous. (Neh 9:8)

Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Ps 37:4)

My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music. (Ps 57:7)

I will be careful to lead a blameless life – when will you come to me? I will walk in my house with blameless heart. (Ps 101:2)

May my heart be blameless toward your decrees, that I may not be put to shame. (Ps 119:80)

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:30)

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:45)

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming. (Rom 10:8)

For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Rom 10:10)

Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. (Eph 6:6)

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The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. (1 Tim 1:5)

There is one OT text that speaks about the human heart being sinful which appears to contradict what has been argued above. It is Jer 17:9, which says: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it”? However, when the text is read in its context it takes on a different meaning from that normally understood.

He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.⁷ “But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.⁸ He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?¹⁰ “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”¹¹ Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay is the man who gains riches by unjust means. When his life is half gone, they will desert him, and in the end he will prove to be a fool.¹² A glorious throne, exalted from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary.¹³ O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water.¹⁴ Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.¹⁵ They keep saying to me, “Where is the word of the LORD? Let it now be fulfilled!”¹⁶ I have not run away from being your shepherd; you know I have not desired the day of despair. What passes my lips is open before you.¹⁷ Do not be a terror to me; you are my refuge in the day of disaster.¹⁸ Let my persecutors be put to shame, but keep me from shame; let them be terrified, but keep me from terror. Bring on them the day of disaster; destroy them with double destruction. Jer 17:6-18

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In its context it is clear that the statement about the heart of man being deceitful above all things is not intended to categorize the whole of humanity, for the heart that has confidence in God cannot be desperately wicked. While Jeremiah speaks of a forthcoming new covenant in which the covenant community will receive a new heart, the statements he makes about himself in this passage refer to the present, and cannot be read as though he only speaks of the time in the future when the new covenant is established. The statement concerning the wickedness of the human heart refers to those who keep saying: “Where is the word of the LORD? Let it now be fulfilled!” It is clear that Jeremiah sees himself as having been faithful to Yahweh, he has been a faithful shepherd (17:16) and one who has been planted by the water (17:8). It is those who have turned away from God who are described as being desperately wicked and they are contrasted with those who seek to walk in the ways of the Lord and who will be rewarded with blessing (17:7, 14). The passage is an expansion of Ps 1 which uses the same imagery of the tree planted by the water, and in that psalm is also found the contrast between the righteous and the ungodly that we find here.

The reason for citing these passages is to show that the blanket statement which says the human heart is continually and permanently wicked is not tenable. There are times when it is wicked, and there are times when it is not. Just as in our earlier study on the use of “flesh,” we have to listen to the context of each use of the term “heart” and interpret it appropriately. The reasoning given to support the doctrine of the total depravity of man does not always discern the range of uses for the term. Indeed, the doctrine falls apart if this is its only foundation.

While there are individual texts that when collected together form the basis of the traditional doctrine of sin, it is not an adequate biblical theology that depends on ignoring texts which speak to the contrary. If we are to achieve a truly biblical doctrine of sin then we are obliged

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to search for an explanation that holds all the evidence together in one cohesive understanding.

The NT and the doctrine of sin

However we define “sin,” we must not be influenced by the dualism of Greek understanding. If we are, our understanding will differ from the OT writers and Jesus himself. As a Jew, he was saturated in the OT Scriptures, and his understanding was essentially covenantal and relational. If we argue that Paul’s understanding of “sin” was different from Jesus’, we claim that Paul turned from the understanding into which he was born. This understanding of Paul’s development has been widespread as a result of the twentieth century German Religio-Historical School’s assumption that Hellenism was his natural home. This has now been rejected by much of recent scholarship. Because Paul’s commitment to the OT Scriptures has been recognized, fewer scholars now want to defend direct Greek influences on his thinking. This gives good grounds for questioning the assumed meaning of “sin” in Paul’s writings. For Paul, being “in sin” is the consequence of being Adam’s offspring. It is relational. We were born outside of the covenant with God which man was created to enjoy, and into a covenant with the very enemy of God. The consequence of Adam’s disobedience was universal, as all his descendents were driven out of God’s presence with him. For Paul, this is what it means to be a sinner. Committing wrong actions is a consequence of being born into a kingdom that is at war with God. Wrong actions are a consequence of sin, not the root of it. To “walk in the flesh” is to “live in Adam,” preferring to live by the values of the “kingdom of darkness.” It is to deny God his right in our lives, and the awful consequence of this choice is death. If believers continue to flirt with the realm that is opposed to the rule of the God of heaven, they will suffer discipline as happened in the OT (Deut 28:15-68; Neh 1:2-3; Ezek 21:1-32) and in the NT (Matt 18:18; 1 Cor 5:1-11; 10:1-22; Rev 2:4-5, 14-16, 19-23).

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The reason for much of the confusion about the nature of “sin” is because Bible translators have been unclear about its biblical, covenantal dimension. They have been guided by syncretistic (especially legal) ideas, which have prevailed in Western Christianity. These views have produced deep pastoral problems, with many people in distress because they fear that they continually sin against God. Most translators – especially those who have produced the NIV – have done a huge disservice to the Christian public by constantly translating *sarx* as “sinful nature.”³⁹ Such a translation has enforced a dualistic understanding of man, locking many believers into a state of ignorance and despair.

It is clear that the NT has a doctrine of “sin.” The sins that Paul refers to have to do with the failure of Christians to live within the new covenant’s ethos. Instead of living or walking in the Spirit (that is, living under the Lordship of Christ), the Roman believers are being enticed back into the lifestyle of the kingdom of darkness from which they have been rescued. Such behavior—such sins—will bring God’s judgment on them, and Paul warns them of this very forcefully.

Thus, Paul’s teaching on “sin” is essentially the same as that found in the OT. All unbelievers are in Adam and, because of this, they share his fate. Their union with him means that they are bound up in the covenant relationship into which he entered.⁴⁰ Through Adam, man is bound in a covenant relationship with Satan. This is the reason for God’s judgment, and the sins that spring from this condition are the result of freely made choices to live independently of God. This independence may express itself in gross immorality or in devoted religious pursuits. Whatever its expression, all that is done within this relationship (a relationship that excludes the living God) is of the “flesh.”

³⁹ Rom 7:5; 8:4-5, 8-9, 12-13; 13:14; 1 Cor 5:5; Gal 5:13, 16-17, 19; Eph 2:3; Col 2:11, 13; 3:5; 2 Pet 2:10, 18.

⁴⁰ See excursus F: Sin in the theology of Paul, page 203

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There is, therefore, no “sinful human nature.” Such an understanding leads right into the jaws of Hellenism where Christian truth is devoured. Rather than speaking of the NIV’s “sinful nature,” we must learn to speak of the “fallen condition” of man. He is born in Adam, and in that state he can neither please God nor know him. He is cut off from God, and in this condition of death he will eternally remain. This can only change if God comes to his aid, and does something so God-like that it secures the overthrow of Satan and releases him from the master who has ruled over him. God secured this salvation when he came into the world in the person of his Son and died on a cross at the hands of Roman soldiers.

Sin is not found, therefore, within a distorted human nature. It is the result of Satan enslaving the will of man. This bondage is nothing less than Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*. As a fallen human, man is not intrinsically evil in his physical make-up. He is a part of Evil, a part not only of Adam but of Satan.⁴¹ In this condition, he cannot love God; for Satan, who holds the heart and will of man in Adam, is the very opposite of God. In such a condition, man is not “less sinful” but “more sinful” than the prevailing Hellenistic view understands. He is not physically, intrinsically evil. His sinfulness is in a different dimension. He is in covenant with Satan—held captive by him and unable to deliver himself from his clutches (Rom 7:21-25).

It is because this is the NT’s understanding of the sinfulness of man that we can recognize that the image of God continues to be reflected in our fellow men (Luke 18:21; Acts 10:1-2).⁴² We do not have to search for flaws in their characters to prove they are sinners. We can acknowledge the reality of God’s common grace, and be delighted at their achievements and moral virtues. However, no matter how fine they may be, unredeemed men and women are still in Adam, cut off from their Creator and under the sentence of eternal separation from

⁴¹ “Paul regards sin not merely or in the first place from the individual and personal, but from the collective and supra-individual point of view.” Ridderbos, *Outline*, 125.

⁴² Of course, no matter how attractive and decent a person is, being “in Adam” means that the disposition is of no consequence. In the Second World War, there were many, very decent German people who did not want war but were under Hitler’s “headship.” That determined their state as enemies of the allies.

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him. This separation is finally sealed as irrevocable in death, when the awful condition of being “in Adam” will be fully realized by those who have rejected the “last Adam” in life (Rom 5:15-19; 1 Cor 15:45-49).

In this excursus, and earlier in the commentary, we have examined a range of terms which have traditionally been thought to speak about “sin” in man. Such terms as the “body of sin,” the “old man,” “flesh” and “sinful nature” have all been explored and found to be Hebraic terms describing corporate states. We have also examined chapter 7 of Romans, finding that its argument has a corporate dimension and that its language should be read in terms of man’s condition in Adam rather than seeing sin as dwelling inside of each person. These key terms, interpreted individualistically, have been used to build the church’s doctrine of “sin.” As a consequence, she has embraced an understanding which has taken her from her Jewish foundations and which has replaced it with a Hellenized view of the being of humanity. What has been constructed is at serious odds with the intended teaching of the NT.⁴³

In concluding this excursus, I want to affirm the Scriptures teach that when it comes to sinfulness, humanity is totally depraved because Adam’s sin has alienated all his offspring from God, leaving them enemies of their maker. Furthermore, because of humanity’s solidarity with Adam, his sin and guilt have been imputed (credited) to everyone of his descendents.⁴⁴ Because of this, subsequent generations are left with no hope of ever being accepted by a God who is holy. We must understand that this relational model of sin speaks of man being in a far worse condition than does the Hellenistic model. Man “in Adam” is helpless and sentenced to an ongoing separation unless his Creator can, or will, bring about a salvation that is “godlike and divine.”

⁴³ The claim that the terminology under consideration has been interpreted through inappropriate categories has also been noted by Jewett, *Term*, 248, in relation to the widespread understanding of the term “body of Christ.”

⁴⁴ The term—despite objections from Wright, *Really Said*, passim—is used deliberately, as it is the language used by Paul himself in Rom 5:18.