

Paul and the Power of Sin
Redefining 'Beyond the Pale'

T.L. CARTER



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1

INTRODUCTION

The context of the power of sin

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines sin as ‘A transgression of the divine law and an offence against God, a violation (especially wilful or deliberate) of some religious or moral principle.’ According to this definition, a sin is committed when someone does something wrong: human beings are the subject and sin the object. Without a perpetrator, sin would have no existence. Yet the apostle Paul portrays sin differently. In his letter to the Romans, sin comes to life. Humanity is no longer the subject, but the object. It is no longer the person who commits the sin: rather, sin is at work within the person.¹ In conjunction with death, sin rules over the entire world (Rom. 5:12–21). The law is powerless before it. It exploits the commandments of God for its own ends, using them to provoke the very things they were intended to prevent (7:7–13). Human nature, sold out to sin, is powerless to resist. Those who end up doing the evil that they deplore recognise, to their dismay, that sin has taken charge of their behaviour (7:13–25). In Romans 5–8, sin is the active agent and humanity its passive victim.

Two recent German monographs have explored what lies behind this distinctive portrait of sin. According to Röhser, sin is not some demonic being that holds sway over humankind.² Sin should not be referred to as a power, since this term is colourless and unbiblical. Instead, Paul conceived of sin as a personified deed. Drawing on a number of existing metaphors, the apostle personified sin in order to stress the full extent to which people are responsible for their actions. Röhser’s case is strongest in Romans 5–6, where it is possible to understand the singular ἁμαρτία as

¹Cf. E. Lohmeyer, ‘Probleme paulinischer Theologie III: Sünde, Fleisch und Tod’, *ZNW* 29 (1930), pp.1–59.

²G. Röhser, *Metaphorik und Personifikation der Sünde* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987).

a metaphor for acts of sinning.³ However, in Romans 7:7–25, ἁμαρτία takes on an identity of its own that is quite independent of the act of sinning and as Paul defines its relationship to the law, its character as ‘power’ becomes explicit.

Umbach takes issue with Röhser’s depiction of sin as ‘personified deed’.⁴ According to Umbach, the concept of sin as deed is subordinated to the concept of sin as power in Paul’s letters. For Paul, the term ‘Sin’ is always a power to which humankind ‘in Adam’ is completely subjected and from which they can only be freed by the power of the Spirit of God. According to Umbach, the concept of sin as a power is not really introduced until Romans 5:12–21, although Paul does refer to it in Galatians and 2 Corinthians 5:21. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul avoids the term when referring to deviant behaviour in the church because for him the term ἁμαρτία conveyed the deeper and more fundamental notion of sin as a power. On this basis, Umbach argues that Paul saw the church as a sin-free zone, since Christians have been freed from the power of sin and are now governed by the Spirit of God.

Although Umbach’s stress on the power dimensions of Paul’s sin language corrects Röhser’s over-emphasis on sin as deed, he overplays his hand. It is by no means the case that ἁμαρτία always denotes sin as a power, since there are a number of occasions when it can denote the act of sinning.⁵ Furthermore, he places too much emphasis on Romans 5:12–21. Although he acknowledges that it is only at this point that Paul introduces the concept of sin as a power, Umbach writes as if Paul had this passage in mind whenever he wrote in his other letters about sin. So if elsewhere Paul does not use ἁμαρτία to refer to deviant behaviour, Umbach implies that Paul avoids the term because ἁμαρτία necessarily denotes the power of Romans 5 that dominates unregenerate humanity. Where Paul does use the singular term ἁμαρτία in Galatians and 2 Corinthians 5:21, Umbach loads these references with semantic freight imported from Romans 5:12–21, even though Romans may well reflect a later development in the apostle’s thought. If the error of illegitimate totality transfer is to be avoided, the meaning of each occurrence of ἁμαρτία will depend upon its own particular context.

³Cf. K. Koch, ‘Sühne und Sündenvergebung um die Wende von der exilischen Zeit’, *EvTh* 26 (1966), pp.217–39; B.N. Kaye, *The Thought Structure of Romans with Special Reference to Chapter 6* (Chico: Scholars, 1979).

⁴H. Umbach, *In Christus getauft – von der Sünde befreit: Die Gemeinde als sündenfreier Raum bei Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

⁵E.g. Rom. 3:20; 4:8; 14:23; 2 Cor. 5:21; 11:7; possibly Rom. 5:13, 20; 6:1; 7:7; cf. J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans*, 2 vols. (Waco: Word, 1988), vol.1, p.149.

As Umbach observes, references to the power of sin are not evenly distributed throughout Paul's letters. The majority are found in Romans 5:12–8:11, where Paul uses the singular noun ἁμαρτία 41 times, personifying sin and making it the subject of its own actions. Yet the question of the law is never far from Paul's mind in these chapters. After introducing the power of sin in Romans 5:12, Paul immediately clarifies its relationship with the law in 5:13. He goes on to imply that the law actually made sin abound (5:20), and by this means he introduces the discussion of dying to sin in 6:1–14, which culminates in the statement that sin will not rule over the recipients of his letter, because they are not under law, but under grace. This contrast between law and grace then introduces his exposition of enslavement to sin in 6:15–23. Those who have died to sin with Christ have also died to the law, which aroused sinful passions within their members (7:1–6). The arrival of God's law only served to reveal sin in all its sinfulness, since sin took advantage of the commandment by using it to provoke the very desire it forbade, thereby deceptively using the commandment to bring forth death instead of life (7:7–12). Those sold under sin find that any desire to do good is overruled by indwelling sin, so that they are held captive to the 'law of sin' in the body's members (7:13–25): it is only the law of the Spirit that brings release from sin's control (8:1–11), so achieving what the law was powerless to do, since it was weakened by the flesh. The requirements of the law are fulfilled in those who walk according to the Spirit.

Outside Romans, Paul uses the symbolism of the power of sin infrequently, but each reference occurs within the context of Paul's discussion of the Jewish law. In 1 Corinthians 15:56, sin is identified as the sting of death and the law as the power of sin. This verse encapsulates much of Paul's thinking in Romans on the relationship between sin and the law, but it bears little relation to the content of the rest of 1 Corinthians and can easily be isolated from its present context. For these reasons, it will be argued in chapter 3 that 1 Corinthians 15:56 should probably be regarded as a gloss.

The only other unambiguous references to the power of sin occur in Galatians. In Galatians 3:21–22 Paul declares that, instead of the law bringing righteousness and life, scripture has instead imprisoned the universe under sin, so that the promise might be given to those who have faith: the all-encompassing power of sin is introduced as part of Paul's argument that Gentiles and Jews alike are justified by faith, not works of the law. Another possible reference occurs in Galatians 2:17, where Paul defends himself against the charge that seeking justification apart from works of the law makes Christ the servant of sin. As in Romans, Paul

uses the power of sin in Galatians to address the question of the status of law-free Gentile believers within the church.

This exclusive association of the power of sin with the law establishes Paul's discussion of the law as the context within which the power of sin needs to be understood, a factor which is ignored by both Röhser and Umbach in their studies. Apart from 1 Corinthians 15:56, all the above references to the power of sin and the law form part of Paul's attempt to establish the position of non-observant Gentile believers within the church. The question of Jewish–Gentile relations within the early church thus formed the social context in which Paul formulated his theology of the power of sin.⁶ Yet from Augustine onwards,⁷ Paul's sin language has been studied at a theological and doctrinal level, in isolation from that social context. This study will explore the role played by the power of sin in Paul's attempts to deal with the question of Jewish–Gentile relations within the early church, and will analyse how his sin language was shaped and influenced by this particular social context. In essence, the thesis of this study is that the issue of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers in the early church constitutes the socio-historical context in which the symbolism of the power of sin in Paul's letters needs to be understood. In placing all humanity under the power of sin, Paul was primarily concerned to establish that the Torah-observant Jew had no advantage over the law-free Gentile.

The legacy of Augustine

Since the fifth century, the writings of Augustine have exercised a decisive influence over the theology of sin in the western church. Augustine himself was clearly aware that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in order to address the question 'whether the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ came to the Jews alone because of their merits through works of the Law, or whether the justification which is of faith which is in Christ came to all nations, without any preceding merits for works'.⁸ Yet in his controversy

⁶Cf. B. Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: an Appraisal* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1990), p.156: 'The social situation has to be included if we are to understand the reality the texts speak of, and not simply as a kind of "background" that might be useful to know about, but as a dimension of the meaning itself of this text and reality.'

⁷For a review of the pre-Augustinian perspective on sin, cf. R.A. Greer, 'Sinned we all in Adam's Fall?', in L.M. White and O.L. Yarbrough, eds., *The Social World of the First Christians* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1995), pp.382–94.

⁸*Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio*, 1; cf. P.F. Landes, *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans: Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Chico: Scholars, 1982).

with Pelagius at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine used Romans primarily as a quarry of scripture references to support the doctrine of original sin. On the basis of Romans 5:12–21, Augustine argued that the entire human race sinned in Adam, and that this original sin alone suffices to damn even unbaptised infants.⁹ In order to strengthen his hand against Pelagius, Augustine also revised his own interpretation of Romans 7:14–25. Initially he had thought that the ‘wretched man’ was under the law, bound to mortality as punishment for inherited original sin, and to sensuality as punishment for his own repeated sinning;¹⁰ in his autobiographical *Confessiones*, he had even used the language of Romans 7 to portray his own pre-conversion struggles.¹¹ However, in the light of Pelagius’ teaching that unaided human nature was capable of sinlessness, Augustine argued that Romans 7 must refer to Christian experience, since only the grace of God could produce the delight in the law referred to in 7:22.¹²

In *de spiritu et littera* Augustine wrote a detailed exposition of key passages from Romans in order to counter the Pelagian teaching that without God’s help the mere power of the human will was able to advance towards perfect righteousness. Yet he did not do so without reference to Paul’s original aim in writing the letter, which was ‘to commend the grace which came through Jesus Christ to all peoples, lest the Jews exalt themselves above the rest on account of their possession of the law’.¹³ At one point in the treatise Augustine may betray an awareness that his own anti-Pelagian exposition stands in tension with Paul’s original meaning. In his exposition of Romans 2:11–16, Augustine is concerned to argue against Pelagius that those who have the law written on their hearts are Christian believers, who are able to keep the precepts of the law because their human nature has been restored by grace. Yet he recognises that others see a reference to unbelievers in these verses and accepts that their

⁹*De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, I 10.9; 11.10–39.70; *contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum* 4.7; *de nuptiis et concupiscentia* II 5.15; *de civitate Dei* 13.14; *enchiridion* 26.27; cf. G. Bonner, ‘Augustine on Romans 5:12’, in F.L. Cross, ed., *Studia Evangelica*, 7 vols. (Berlin: Akademie, 1969), vol.v, pp.242–7; A. Vanneste, ‘Saint Paul et la Doctrine Augustinienne du Pêché Originel’, *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus*, 2 vols. (Rome: Analecta Biblica, 1961), vol.II, pp.513–22; B. Delaroche, *Saint Augustin: Lecteur et Interprète de Saint Paul dans le ‘De peccatorum meritis et remissione’ (hiver 411–412)* (Paris, Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 1996).

¹⁰*Ad Simplicianum* 1.1.10–11.

¹¹*Confessiones* 8.10.

¹²*De gratia Christi* 1.39.43; *de nuptiis* 27.30–31.36; *duas epistolas* 1.8.13–11.24; *contra Julianum* II 3.5; 4.8; 5.13; III 26.61; *retractationes* 1.22–25; 2.27; cf. M. Huftier, *Le Tragique de la Condition Chrétienne chez Saint Augustin* (Paris: Desclé, 1964).

¹³*De spiritu et littera* 9.6.

interpretation of Paul's words makes a valid point: 'It may be that this is his way of proving what he had already said, that there is no respect of persons with God, and what he says later, that God is not the God of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles . . .'¹⁴ This second interpretation is fully in accord with Augustine's summary of the original purpose of the letter, and this suggests that Augustine himself may have been aware that his preference for the first interpretation was determined more by the need to counter Pelagius than by his own understanding of the letter's historical context.

Yet, while Augustine himself was aware that Romans addressed the question of Jews and Gentiles, it was his own theological interpretation of the letter as a treatise on human sin that decisively influenced subsequent understanding of the letter, particularly in the Reformation period. Unlike Augustine, Luther made the straightforward assertion that, 'The chief purpose of this epistle is . . . to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh . . . and to affirm and state and magnify sin, no matter how much someone insists it does not exist.'¹⁵ After Luther's death, Protestant orthodoxy took its bearings from Calvin's *Institutes*, which defined original sin as 'a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath then also brings forth in us "works of the flesh"'.¹⁶ Paul's epistle to the Romans was used to support and undergird this doctrine without any reference to the letter's historical context.

With the Enlightenment came a readiness to read biblical authors on their own terms, rather than interpreting their writings through the grid of later doctrinal formulations. John Locke, who openly opposed the principle of hereditary depravity, pierced behind 1300 years of dogmatic interpretation when he argued that the aim of Romans was to establish that 'god is the god of the Gentiles as well as the Jews, and that now under the gospel there is no difference between Jew and Gentile'.¹⁷ The importance of the historical setting of the letter was also underlined over a century later by F.C. Baur, who regarded Romans as a key historical source for his reconstruction of the history of the New Testament period, since it contained the deepest and most comprehensive account of Pauline universalism against Jewish particularism. Baur interpreted the letter against the background of the supposed conflict between the

¹⁴Ibid., 49.28.

¹⁵*Lectures on Romans* 1.1.

¹⁶*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.1.8a.

¹⁷J. Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, ed. A. Wainwright, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), vol.II, p.483.

Petrine and Pauline parties of 1 Corinthians 1:12, and argued that Paul was writing to the predominantly Jewish Christian community in Rome in order to oppose their particularist understanding of the gospel.¹⁸ However, although he set Romans within a particular social context, Baur's understanding of history as the vehicle for the self-disclosure of God's Spirit led him to define sin in terms of contemporary Hegelian philosophy, rather than seeking to understand it in the light of the historical context he reconstructed.

Baur was succeeded by Pfleiderer in undertaking the task of setting the writings of primitive Christianity in their historical connections. Unlike Baur, Pfleiderer argued that Paul wrote to effect a reconciliation between the oppressed and aggrieved Jewish minority in the church and the victorious Gentile Christian majority. Pfleiderer noted that Jewish belief in the law formed an 'insuperable barrier' separating Pharisaic Judaism from Gentiles, whether Christian or not. Yet, instead of examining Paul's theology of sin within that social context, Pfleiderer concentrated on identifying Jewish and Hellenistic elements in his thought. According to Pfleiderer, Paul's theology of sin was influenced by popular Hellenistic animism: sin was a demonic spiritual being, enthroned in the flesh of the human body.¹⁹

The first genuine attempt to understand Paul's sin language in its original social context was undertaken by Wernle, who emphasised that Paul related righteousness to the community, rather than to the individual. Wernle broke new ground by considering the different Pauline communities in turn: whereas in Thessalonica the problem of sin simply did not arise, Paul encountered the reality of sin in the incestuous man in Corinth. Paul saw this as an incident of sin crossing the boundary from the world into the church, but the overriding strength of his eschatological expectation enabled him to discount this as an exceptional event. Wernle argued that Paul's decision to excommunicate the offender reveals the communal dimensions of his thought, since all his instructions had the primary aim of cleansing the community and of producing a clearer separation from the world.²⁰

In writing Galatians, the apostle's optimism returned, so that he saw entry into the Christian community as effecting a break with previous sins,

¹⁸F.C. Baur, 'Über Zweck und Veranlassung des Römerbriefs und die damit zusammenhängenden Verhältnisse der römischen Gemeinde', *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie* (1836), vol.3, pp.59–178.

¹⁹O. Pfleiderer, *Primitive Christianity: its Writings and Teachings in their Historical Connections*, 2 vols. (Clifton: Reference Book, 1965), vol.1, pp.69, 218, 289f.

²⁰P. Wernle, *Der Christ und die Sünde bei Paulus* (Leipzig, 1897), p.50.

and although he addressed the problem of the sinful individual in 6:1, he could not conceive that sin had any permanent place in the community. Indeed, the question of how Christians could find peace with God when they sinned did not even occur to him.²¹

Wernle's social analysis was not applied to Paul's letter to the Romans, since he rightly did not number this among the Pauline communities. Instead of investigating Paul's intention in writing Romans, he contrasts the apostle's theory of the relation of the Christian to sin with that of the Reformation:

Den Reformatoren liegt alles daran, daß der Christ trotz der Sünde ein fröhliches Gotteskind sein kann; dem Paulus, daß er aus der Sünde herausgerissen sei und sein Zukunftsleben antrete.

For the Reformers, everything hinges on the way in which a Christian can be a joyful child of God in spite of sin; for Paul, what is important is that he has been delivered from sin and is entering the life to come.²²

The break with sin occurs conclusively on entry into the messianic community, after which it is no longer possible to sin: whoever sins is not a Christian. The possibility of a Christian sinning is faintly raised in Romans, only to receive the answer μή γένοιτο.²³ Thus Wernle exonerates Paul from the charge of making Christianity a 'religion of sin', and identifies Augustine as the culprit.

Wernle's insight into the communal dimensions of Paul's thought was temporarily obscured by the rise of the existentialist theology of Rudolf Bultmann. Citing Augustine's dictum that 'our heart is restless until it rests in thee', Bultmann argued that the universal existential question about the authenticity of our own existence furnishes the reader with the pre-understanding necessary to engage with the subject matter of pre-scientific biblical texts.²⁴ The real purpose of Paul's mythical sin language was to express people's understanding of themselves and the world in which they lived. For Bultmann, the ultimate sin is individual

²¹Ibid., p.90.

²²Ibid., p.109.

²³Meyer challenged Wernle on this point from a Lutheran perspective, arguing that Paul was aware of sin both in the church and in his own life: M. Meyer, *Die Sünde des Christen nach Pauli Briefen an die Korinther und Römer* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1902); *Der Apostel Paulus als armer Sünder: ein Beitrag zur paulinischen Hamartologie* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1903); cf. also H. Windisch, *Taufe und Sünde im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1908).

²⁴R. Bultmann, 'The New Testament and Mythology', in H.-W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1972), vol.1, p.154; cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 1.1.

self-reliance, an attitude which he saw exemplified in the supposed Jewish attempt to earn righteousness through works of the law. Bultmann argued that the very attempt to attain life by one's own efforts results in death, and this reveals the deceitfulness of sin: 'Man, called to selfhood, tries to live out of his own strength, and thus loses his self – his "life" – and rushes into death. This is the domination of sin. All man's doing is directed against his true intention – viz, to achieve life.'²⁵

Bultmann's attempt to interpret Paul's thought in terms of individual self-understanding was attacked by Stendahl, who claimed that the 'introspective conscience of the west' could be traced no further back than Augustine, who was the first to interpret Paul in the light of his own personal struggles.²⁶ Since Paul himself had a 'robust conscience' and was untroubled by any pangs of guilt, Stendahl claimed that the apostle was not concerned with a personal quest for a gracious God, but rather with the social question of the status of Gentile believers within an originally Jewish church. Stendahl misrepresents Bultmann somewhat, in that the latter is not preoccupied with a guilty conscience, but rather with the existential question of care over one's own existence, but Stendahl's thesis that this kind of personal preoccupation cannot be traced back before Augustine still undermines Bultmann's individualistic understanding of Paul.

Bultmann was also accused by Käsemann of reducing theology to anthropology. According to Käsemann, Paul's thought should be understood from the apocalyptic perspective of the divine claim upon the cosmos, and it is not permissible to isolate the individual from the world which is marked by sin and death. Since people's behaviour is determined by the world to which they belong, sin has the character of an inescapable universal force to which everyone is subject both passively and actively. The fact that people are caught in a nexus of destiny and guilt does not absolve them of responsibility, since all confirm in their bodily conduct that they belong to a sinful world. This is particularly the case with the religious person, personified by the Jew, whose desire for life leads to the attempt to attain life by obeying the commandments. This, however, is to snatch what can only be given, and thus typifies the self-willed and rebellious nature of a world which is subject to the power of sin. Käsemann also rejected Stendahl's claim that Paul was concerned with the question of Jewish–Gentile relations, insisting that Jewish nomism represents

²⁵R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1952), vol.1, p.246.

²⁶K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1976).

the community of 'good' people who turn God's commandments into instruments of self-sanctification.²⁷

This perspective on Judaism was exposed as a parody by Sanders' thorough analysis of Jewish writings from the Second Temple period and beyond, which showed that participation in the covenant and the salvation of the individual were matters of God's grace, not something to be attained by legalistic effort. Asking why Paul rejected Jewish covenantal nomism as a means of salvation, Sanders claimed that Paul thought backwards from solution to plight: since God had provided for the salvation of everyone in Christ, it followed that everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike, were in a plight from which only Christ could save them: 'The real plight of man, as Paul learned it not from experience, nor from observation, nor from an analysis of the result of human effort, but from the conviction that Christ came to be lord of all, was that men were under a different lordship.'²⁸

According to Sanders, Paul simply placed all those not under the lordship of Christ under the lordship of sin. Paul's hamartiology is thus based entirely on his soteriology and this is why the apostle's attempts to demonstrate universal sinfulness in Romans fail to convince: 'The conclusion "all are under sin" is not accounted for by his arguments in favor of it, but by the prior conviction that all must have been under sin, since God sent his son to save all equally.'²⁹

It was the conviction that God had saved both Jews and Gentiles through Christ that prompted Paul to reject Jewish covenantal nomism, but this belief inevitably led to the pressing question as to why God gave his people a law by which they could not be saved. Sanders here traces a development in Paul's thought.³⁰ In Galatians 3:22–24, Romans 5:20, the view is put forward that God gave the law with the express intention of increasing the trespass, so that grace might ultimately reign. God thus intended to condemn by the law, with a view to saving everyone through Christ. That, however, leads to the conclusion that the law is evil, which Paul is anxious to deny in Romans 7. Accordingly, in verses 7–13, he argues that God gave the law with a view to granting life by it, but, contrary to his will, the power of sin twisted the law to its own ends, arousing covetousness in its adherents and so condemning them to death. Paul then

²⁷E. Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (London: SCM, 1971), pp.1–31, 60–78; *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM, 1980).

²⁸E.P Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977), p.500; cf. J. Denney, 'The Doctrine of Sin', *Expositor* 6.15 (1901), pp.283–95.

²⁹E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (London: SCM, 1983), p.151.

³⁰Ibid., pp.70–81.

drops this explanation, possibly because he wished to avoid ascribing to sin the autonomy of a dualistic power, and proceeds immediately to a third theodicy, in which all connection between the law and transgression is broken. According to this scheme, God gave the law with the intention of granting life, but people are unable to obey it because of the law of sin, which resides in their fleshly human nature; it is primarily this last perspective upon the human plight that is resolved in 8:1–8, but not before Paul has uttered a cry over the theological difficulties in which he finds himself (7:24). By 8:20, Paul has reverted to the view that everything has taken place in accordance with the sovereign will of God.

Sanders' study is a watershed, in that he is the first to attempt to understand the power of sin within the historical context of the first-century debate over whether Gentile converts should keep the Jewish law. Yet in claiming that the power of sin is simply a reflex of Paul's soteriology Sanders fails either to note or to account for the way in which the power of sin is restricted in Paul's letters to his discussion of the law. When Sanders does address the relationship between sin and the law, his explanation is unconvincing, since it is scarcely credible that Paul should introduce himself to the Roman church by expressing his own inner confusion over why God gave the law. Although Paul asks what is the point of the law in Galatians 3:19, this question is not personally motivated, and it is not repeated in Romans: the issue of the role of the law seems to have troubled Sanders more than it did Paul.

Despite ongoing opposition to Sanders' thesis,³¹ it is increasingly accepted both that Paul thought from solution to plight, and that his presentation of the gospel in Romans needs to be understood against the background of Jewish–Gentile relations in the first century. Attempts to integrate a Lutheran understanding of Paul with this new perspective tend to use the social setting as a framework for a traditional presentation of the gospel.³² Even Dunn, who sees the primary function of the law as a boundary marker separating Jew from Gentile, insulates Romans 6:1–8:39 from the social context of the letter as a whole by reading this section as 'The outworking of the gospel in relation to the individual'.³³ Thus the power of sin is perceived as a feature of individual existential reality

³¹Cf. especially F. Thielman, *From Plight to Solution*, NT Supp. 61 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989); T. Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum: Anthropologische Erwägungen* (Åbo: Akademis Förlag, 1991).

³²E.g. S. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); P. Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); D.J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

³³*Romans*, pp.viii, 243.

that has nothing to do with the different ethnic groups with which the remainder of the letter is concerned:

The one fact which matters is that man experiences (consciously or unconsciously) a power which works in him to bind him wholly to his mortality and corruptibility, to render impotent any knowledge of God or concern to do God's will, to provoke his merely animal appetites in forgetfulness that he is a creature of God – and that power Paul calls 'sin'.³⁴

Ziesler's commentary on Romans also embraces the new perspective, and Ziesler gives specific consideration to Paul's power language, suggesting that it has its roots in the ancient world's experience of subjection under an imperial power.³⁵ This suggestion takes due account of the first-century culture in which Paul wrote, but again pays insufficient attention to the issue of Jewish–Gentile relations, which forms the social context of the power of sin in Paul's letters.

N.T. Wright integrates Romans 5–8 with Romans 3:21–4:25 and Romans 9–11 by claiming that they address the question of God's covenant faithfulness.³⁶ According to Wright, the divine answer to Adam's sin was to make a covenant with Abraham that he should be the father of Israel, a new humanity. In the light of the cross and resurrection, Paul argues that that new humanity should be defined as a world-wide community of faith; in Romans 6–8, he argues that Israel's privileges of fulfilling the law and being God's children have been transferred to Christ and those in Christ. God's purpose in giving the law was always to concentrate sin in Israel (Rom. 5:20; cf. 7:7–13), and then in the messiah as Israel's representative, so that it could be dealt with on the cross (Rom. 8:3).

Wright's exposition has the strength of explaining why Paul only refers to the power of sin in the context of the law: it is the law that reveals the power of sin as the true plight of humanity, and in thus exposing it, prepares the way for it to be dealt with by Christ. Wright's case makes Romans 5:20 crucial to Paul's argument, a claim that he supports by arguing that the meaning of this verse is elucidated in Romans 7:7–13 and God's ultimate purpose is revealed in Romans 8:3. In the intervening

³⁴Ibid., p.149, cf. J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp.111–14. The oddity of the statement that one's experience of sin may be unconscious highlights the inadequacy of defining sin in terms of individual experience.

³⁵J.A. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM, 1989); cf. L. Schottroff, 'Die Schrecken Herrschaft der Sünde und die Befreiung durch Christus nach dem Römerbrief des Paulus', *EvTh* 39 (1979), pp.497–510.

³⁶N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp.18–40, 137–230.

sections, Paul warns his ex-proselyte readers that the Torah is not itself to be identified with sin (7:14–25) and release from Torah does not open the door to antinomianism (6:1–23) or anti-Judaism (9–11).

The problem with Wright's reading of the letter is that it is not clear whether Romans 5:20 will bear the weight of being the linchpin of chapters 5–8, particularly since the thread of Paul's argument in 5:20–8:3 is almost totally obscured by his intervening paraenesis and defence of the law. Furthermore, Wright's interpretation of sin in Romans sits uneasily with Galatians 3:19, 22, where he ascribes a final meaning to *χάρις*, and understands 3:22 as a statement that the law has been superseded. Here the power of sin plays a different role: it is not revealed through the law and concentrated in Israel and her messiah; it is simply used to explain the inability of the law to bring righteousness and life. This different understanding of the power of sin in Galatians 3:22 places a question mark over Wright's interpretation of Romans. The problem of integrating the two letters could be solved by insisting that they be read independently, and positing a development in Paul's thought from seeing the power of sin as a problem that the law could not solve (Gal. 3:22), to sin as a problem that the law was intended to expose (Rom. 5–8). Yet the question remains whether Wright's dependence on a particular interpretation of Romans 5:20 is not too fragile to be sustained alongside a very different understanding of the relationship between the law and sin in Galatians.

Stowers' rereading of Romans is a conscious attempt to understand the letter within a pre-Augustinian frame of reference.³⁷ Stowers claims that the letter is addressed exclusively to Gentiles who are attracted to Judaism as a means of attaining self-mastery, the coveted ancient ethic of moderation and restraint. Paul responds by claiming that Gentiles and Jews alike are caught up in the divinely appointed, apocalyptic period of sin's domination over the world before the end. God has punished the Gentiles by allowing them to be enslaved by their passions and desires (1:18–32). In 2:17–29 Paul portrays a Jewish teacher of Gentiles as one who speaks in the recognisable character of the pretentious person, and argues against him that the law is no solution to the problems of the Gentiles, since the Jews have difficulty keeping it themselves. Romans 6 demonstrates that Gentiles can only achieve self-mastery by relating in baptism to Christ's act of obedience, while Romans 7 illustrates the inner struggle of a Gentile who is unable to keep the law of God, and who can only attain self-mastery by the Spirit.

³⁷S.K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles* (London: Yale University Press, 1994).

Stowers' reconstruction of the social context is vulnerable, in that the existence of proselytising Jewish teachers cannot be taken for granted.³⁸ Yet even if this is granted, Stowers still fails to locate Paul's sin language within this context, inasmuch as he claims that Paul's view of sin as a power is derived from Jewish apocalyptic, and Paul believed that the whole universe was subject to tribulation and sinfulness in the last days.³⁹ Not only does this have nothing to do with the social situation addressed in Romans, it actually conflicts with it, since Paul's respect for the governing authorities as God's agents for law and order in the world (13:1–7) indicates that he neither shared the pessimistic worldview of Jewish apocalyptic, nor experienced the social oppression that formed the crucible for apocalyptic thought.⁴⁰ Stowers' work in fact underlines the current lack of a convincing integration of Paul's sin language and his social context.

Conclusion

The doctrinal considerations that prompted Augustine to isolate sin from the context of Paul's letters determined the way in which sin was perceived until the time of the Enlightenment. Although Baur and Pfleiderer were both aware of the historical context of Paul's writings, they did not set sin in that context, but rather examined it from the perspective of Hegelian philosophy and the history of religions. Wernle's study stands out as an incipiently sociological approach, but his interpretation of the power of sin in Romans was driven by anti-Reformation polemic rather than by any appreciation of the historical context of Jewish–Gentile relations in the first century. In twentieth-century studies of Paul, Bultmann and Käsemann have dominated the theological interpretation of sin, and while a growing awareness of the apostle's social context has undermined their position, no study to date has specifically attempted to ground Paul's references to sin in that context. What is needed is an approach which seeks to understand Paul's language about the power of sin in the light of the apostle's own socio-cultural context, rather than in the light of subsequent theological reflection.

This study endeavours to meet that need by using the work of Mary Douglas, whose 'Grid and Group' model can be used to ground the

³⁸Cf. J.C. Paget, 'Jewish Proselytism at the Time of Christian Origins: Chimera or Reality?', *JSNT* 62 (1996), pp.65–103.

³⁹Stowers, *Rereading*, pp.176–87.

⁴⁰Cf. C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1982), pp.193–247.

meaning of symbols in social experience.⁴¹ Working within the field of social anthropology, Douglas has used her model to explore the connection between a society's cosmology⁴² and its social location. According to Douglas, symbols are influenced by social structures and can also reinforce or subvert those structures. When the model is applied to the epistles of Paul, it enables us to see not only how Paul's perception of sin is a given part of his socially determined cosmology, but also how the apostle employs the power of sin to shape the symbolic universe of the churches to whom he writes. Thus, on the one hand, Paul's language about sin is shaped by his socio-cultural location within the first-century Mediterranean church, while on the other, Paul employs the symbolism of sin as a power in order to bring his own influence to bear on the social issue of Jewish–Gentile relations within that church. 'Grid and Group' thus offers a potential means of analysing the interrelationship between the symbolism of the power of sin and the original socio-historical context of Paul's letters.

Furthermore, 'Grid and Group' was originally designed as a cross-cultural model and it specifically provides an analysis of the way in which sin is perceived and symbolised in different cultures. This makes the model a particularly useful heuristic tool, since it offers a way of understanding Paul's sin language in the light of the apostle's own first-century cultural context, thereby avoiding the prevalent error of interpreting it anachronistically through the lens of westernised individualism fashioned by Augustine. It is all too easy for modern readers to find their own experience as sinful human beings mirrored in Paul's letters and so to interpret the apostle's sin language in the light of their own self-understanding. Douglas' model highlights the way in which anthropology varies from culture to culture, and so offers the modern interpreter a way of perceiving how the original readers of Paul's letters would have understood the apostle's sin language in the light of their own, very different, culturally determined self-understanding.

After reviewing the many different permutations of Douglas' matrix and also engaging with its critics, a version of the model is developed which renders it suitable for application to Paul's letters (chapter 2). The horizontal 'group' dimension on the matrix is used to measure the extent

⁴¹M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (1st edition, London: Barrie & Rockcliff, 1970; 2nd edition, London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973; 3rd edition, USA, New York: Pantheon Books, 1982; 3rd edition, UK, London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴²A society's cosmology is its 'theory of the universe as an ordered whole and of the general laws which govern it': S. Howell, 'Cosmology', in A. Bonnard and J. Spencer, eds., *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.129–32.

to which a given social unit is collectivist (high group) or individualist (low group), while the vertical 'grid' dimension is used to measure the extent to which an individual or group accepts (high grid) or rejects (low grid) the symbol system of the surrounding culture. By applying the model to Paul's letters, it is possible to ascertain Paul's own position on the matrix, and that of the community to which he writes, thus clarifying both Paul's concerns when he wrote the letter, and also how the letter would have been understood by its recipients.

The model is initially applied to 1 Corinthians (chapter 3), and the various applications of the model to this letter are assessed. The apostle's preoccupation with group cohesion and boundaries indicates that Paul belongs to the strong group/weak grid quadrant of the matrix, which is that of the small bounded group. Within the cosmology of this quadrant, sin is perceived as an external evil threatening the good inside of the physical and social body, and the apostle's response to the problems of sin within the Corinthian community is analysed in these terms.

Turning to Galatians (chapter 4), both Paul and his readers are found to be low grid/high group. Making use of the low grid/high group technique of witchcraft accusations, Paul redefines the boundaries surrounding the community in such a way as to exclude his judaising opponents from the eschatological community of believers, while at the same time also placing himself and his converts outside the ethnic boundary marker of the law, thereby making the law and the Spirit mutually exclusive spheres. Paul's rejection of the law as a boundary marker leads to the accusation that those who seek justification in Christ are no better than Gentile sinners (2:17). Yet Paul denies that this makes Christ the servant of sin. Galatians 2:18 should be understood as a reference, not to the rebuilding of the law, but rather to Paul's act of restoring the church which he had previously tried to destroy out of zeal for his ancestral traditions. Paul accepts that rebuilding the church makes him a transgressor of the law, but he accepts the law's sentence of death on himself, since it is by being crucified with Christ as a transgressor of the law that he now lives to God and knows Christ living within him. Paul thus identifies with his Gentile converts as outsiders to the Jewish law, and legitimates their position by asserting that it is as a transgressor of the law that he has died to the law with Christ, so that he can now live for God in the eschatological sphere.

Countering the exegesis of his opponents, Paul argues that this eschatological life is available only to those who are justified by faith, whereas all those who are of the law are under a curse (3:7–14). As part of this strategy of exclusion, Paul uses the symbolism of the power of sin to denote the cosmic wickedness outside the eschatological community of

the righteous. Instead of keeping sin at bay, Paul argues that the law actually functions as a gaoler imprisoning people under the old aeon. In Galatians the power of sin thus plays its part in Paul's attempt to redefine the boundaries around the community along eschatological, rather than ethnic, lines.

In chapter 5, it is argued that Paul's letter to the Romans is the apostle's response to the social situation in Rome, where the small bounded groups of weak and strong are divided over the question of Torah observance. Romans represents Paul's low grid/high group attempt to reconcile the different groups on the basis of their common faith. As in Galatians, Paul attempts to define the boundaries surrounding the community along eschatological, rather than along ethnic lines (chapter 6). In Romans 1–4, Paul subverts the distinction between righteous Jew and sinful Gentile, making it clear that all alike are only justified through faith in Christ.

To replace the discredited boundary marker of Torah observance, Paul draws fresh boundaries along eschatological lines in Romans 5:12–21 and uses the power of sin to symbolise the evil of the old aeon. Paul portrays baptised Gentile believers as righteous insiders, who participate in the new aeon and have died to sin (6:1–23). However, Torah-observant Jews who do not have the Spirit are sinful outsiders, who are subject to the power of sin, which makes its presence felt through the common experience of the disjunction between willing and doing (7:1–25). Although the good inner mind of the Jew desires to fulfil the law, it is overpowered by the cosmic power of sin, which has taken up residence in the flesh, which again denotes both participation in the old aeon, and also the ambiguous bodily boundary between the good inside and the evil outside. It should not, however, be assumed that Paul understood the flesh to be literally sinful: his emphasis on the sinfulness of the physical body in Romans 5–8 is part of his strategy to emphasise the need of an eschatological deliverance from sin that the law could not provide. The main focus of Paul's attention throughout Romans is not on individual anthropology, but rather on those concerns which are characteristic of high group and low grid, namely the establishment of clear boundaries to protect the inner purity of the physical and social bodies against outside evil. Accordingly, Paul seeks to establish that the eschatological Spirit, rather than the law, should be seen as the sole effective boundary separating righteous insiders from sinful outsiders. On the basis of their common faith, Paul sought to legitimate the position of both Gentile believers and Torah-observant Jewish Christians within the church.

Paul's language about sin needs to be understood in this context. It is argued that the symbolism of the power of sin does not reflect a conviction

on the apostle's part that all humanity is in bondage to the enslaving power of sin; instead, Paul developed this perspective on the human plight as a specific part of his strategy to establish a symbolic universe that would safeguard and legitimise the position of law-free Gentile believers within the eschatological community of the church.

In conclusion, it will be argued that the difference between our modern understandings of sin and that of the apostle is summed up in the different interpretations of the phrase 'beyond the pale'. For the modern reader, the phrase pertains to behaviour that is unacceptable, beyond the bounds of acceptability.⁴³ For the first-century apostle, however, 'beyond the pale' was precisely where sin belonged: beyond the boundaries of the social and physical body, and his primary concern in 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Romans was to establish effective boundaries that would keep sin at bay and affirm the identity of the church as the ethnically mixed but morally pure eschatological people of God.

⁴³According to *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, the phrase was coined in the fourteenth century. The 'English Pale' referred to the boundary surrounding the English settlement in Ireland under Henry II. The phrase 'beyond the pale' was used to denote anything beyond the bounds of civilisation or civilised behaviour.