

## **Diagnosing and Documenting the Problem Within Human Nature: The Medical Purpose of the Sinai Covenant in Paul's Letter to the Romans 1 – 8**

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### **Introduction: Paul's Interest in Judaism and Jewish Christianity**

'I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.' (Romans 1:16 – 17)

Why did God choose a chosen people? Systematic and dogmatic theologians rarely tackle the question. Their frameworks for salvation history usually move from creation, to fall, to redemption in Christ Jesus. What, then, of Israel? How do we explain why God chose a chosen people?

Many Protestant theologians have argued that God worked with Israel to establish His retributive justice, measured against the Law, against which they understand the work of Christ in absorbing divine retributive justice, leaving no divine wrath left over for 'the elect,' or 'those who believe in Christ.' In this understanding, the Sinai covenant served the purpose of Western law; God operated like a Western lawgiver, punishing the violators of his laws. Unfortunately, this places Christians at a profound handicap in dialoguing with Jews, with very little good news for Jewish tradition and people in history. It is extremely unlikely that God had to reinforce people's already retributive conception of deities – because those deities were already retributive enough. It is tantamount to making Israel out to be a whipping post, a mere foil against which Jesus was crucified to absorb the lashes from the spiritual whip, and from which Christians benefit.

By contrast, I wish to argue that Israel's existence under the Sinai covenant served a medical purpose. They were a 'focus group' of human beings chosen by God to diagnose the problem with human nature, document that diagnosis, and hope for its cure. My understanding of the Sinai covenant comes, I submit, from the apostle Paul's understanding, as outlined in his *Epistle to the Romans*. Throughout this summary, I will make specific comparisons between penal and medical substitutionary atonement theories.

### **Historical Background**

In 49 AD, Emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling all Jews from the city of Rome. 'At the instigation of Chrestus' was the precipitating reason. This might indicate that there were tensions among the Jews in Rome about 'Christ.' The departure of Jews from Rome would have left the church in Rome as a completely Gentile church. This might have concerned Paul, who wrote about protecting Jewish Christian distinctives in the church (Rom.14 – 15), advocated for ongoing Christian outreach to Israel with love and concern (Rom 9 – 11), and explained the Jewish foundation of the gospel (Rom.1 – 8).

The Roman church – with Jewish Christians having returned – might have also had concerns about Paul. Was Paul so zealous to minister to Gentiles that he abandoned the Jewish roots and foundation of the gospel? Was he against Judaism? Since Paul was hoping that the Roman church would financially support him in his mission to Spain, Paul was eager to prove to them that he had not forsaken the very foundations of the gospel in the Hebrew Scriptures and Israel's history.

### **Introduction to *Romans*: Paul's Gospel is Rooted in Jewish Hopes (1:1 – 15)**

Paul introduces himself and Jesus in Jewish terms. He calls himself a bondservant (*duolos*) (Rom.1:1) which was an image drawn from the laws of Exodus 21. He affirms that the gospel of God concerning the Son which was promised beforehand by the Hebrew prophets (Rom.1:2). That Son was born from Davidic lineage according to the flesh (Rom.1:3) and was declared 'Son of God' with power by the resurrection from the dead (Rom.1:4). This identification as 'son of David' and 'raised from the dead' come from passages from the 'the prophets.' Thus, Paul assures his Roman audience that his gospel is firmly anchored in the Jewish Scriptures.

The 'gospel' message is a term with a derivation and confrontation. Its derivation is Jewish: The hope for 'good news' is established by passages like Isaiah 52:7, which envision a proclamation rippling out from Jerusalem. But it

really comes from the biblical narrative logic of seeing King David as a 'new Adam,' whose reign is modeled after the reign that Adam should have had. Its confrontation is Roman: The Romans had a 'gospel' of their own. Everytime a new Roman Emperor ascended the throne, the euangelion of Rome rippled out from the city across the entire Empire. For the Christians to proclaim a 'gospel of God' concerning His Son, the heir of King David, was to place themselves on a collision course with the Roman 'gospel.' Paul is eager to preach the gospel to those in Rome (Rom.1:15). He does not shrink from this rhetorical collision.

### **Thesis: The Gospel Announces the Righteousness of God, Power Over Sin (1:16 – 17)**

The gospel announces God's righteousness (*dikaiosyne*). 'Righteousness' here indicates God's faithfulness to the covenant He made with Israel has been fulfilled and brought to its climax (*telos*) (Rom.10:4). That 'righteousness' has the meaning of 'faithfulness to the covenant with Israel' is evident in Romans 3:1 – 8. Paul thus invites us to have clarity about what God's covenant with Israel was about, and why it was forged. There are questions he will answer, both directly and indirectly, in the letter.

In this gospel is found the power of God for salvation to everyone believing (*to pistevonti*). This is salvation from sinfulness and the corruption of sin in the first place. The Hebrew prophets never envisioned salvation as being 'from God's retributive justice.' They consistently envisioned Israel going through the exilic experience, which for Israel was the expression of divine wrath. On the other side of that exile was God's promised restoration of Israel, and the circumcision of the heart (Dt.30:6).

### **The Wrath of God in Human Beings (1:18 – 20)**

Paul demonstrates that all humanity has the sin-sickness (Rom.1:18 – 3:20). The 'wrath of God,' for Paul is a present, ongoing reality that is shown in the further self-corruption of human beings (Rom.1:18). It has an eschatological timeframe, and Romans 2:5 – 11 and 5:10 are typically enlisted to support that view (e.g. N.T. Wright). However, 'the wrath of God' in Romans 2:5 – 11 and 5:10 is still a present day reality as well as an eschatological fullness. The question in these passages is whether and how we shall be saved from it.

What is the wrath of God? The wrath of God is presently directed against the unrighteousness and ungodliness of people. Possibly, this refers to the basic sinful postures of Jews and Gentiles. But whether the wrath of God is aimed at the people themselves is questionable. I would argue not, based on the grammar of Romans 1:18 and the further explanation of how God's wrath unfolds. The wrath of God has an objective that is not to avenge God's injured holiness, or rankled retributive justice, or offended honor. It is, consistently, to provoke human beings internally to notice the condition of their human natures, and turn to God for healing.

Paul argues that human beings know enough about God through their consciences (Rom.1:19) and through observing creation (Rom.1:20) to turn to Him and give thanks. What happens, then, when we do not? From here, we enter Paul's tour of the 'hospital of humanity.'

### **Patient A: The Self-Centered, Self-Corrupted Gentiles (1:21 – 32)**

The first diagnosis of humanity Paul produces is the self-centered Gentile (Rom.1:21 – 32). This person is characterized by a downward spiral. 'They knew God,' but 'they did not honor Him as God or give thanks,' and as a result, they damaged themselves: 'they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened' (Rom.1:21). Self-centeredness is an abuse of our God-given relationality, and it has an ontological impact on us, reciprocally and simultaneously. We 'exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God,' which Sigurd Grindheim argues from the LXX is 'the tangible presence of God' (*A Theology of Glory: Paul's Use of Doxa Terminology in Romans*, p.451). 'Glory' is not a reward from God external to Himself, but His own presence, as it was in Israel's history. If Grindheim is correct, then this phrase also refers to intrinsic and internal damage human beings inflict upon themselves, by alienating themselves from God and God's original vision for them. Consequently, in response to this 'exchange' by human beings, also restated in Romans 1:25 as the 'exchange' of 'the truth of God for a lie', God honors human free will: 'God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them' (Rom.1:24).

Paul continues to elaborate another aspect of the downward spiral of self-corruption and sin-sickness. 'God gave them over to degrading passions' (Rom.1:26), because the self-centered Gentiles 'exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural' (Rom.1:27), referring to bodies and sexual expression. Once again, Paul perceives the sequence of human choices and God's choices. Human inward choices to resist God result in God giving people

over to those very choices. Consequently, disordered passions, desires, and drives, are the result. Once again, those expressions of sexuality – although they can be called ‘sinful’ in themselves – are, in this diagnosis, the ‘downstream’ results of prior sin that occurred ‘upstream.’ Another ‘exchange’ is committed by humanity in Romans 1:28a, and God ‘gave them over’ once again in 1:28b. Human beings are therefore ‘being filled’ with vices (Rom.1:29 – 31). They are ‘worthy of death’ (Rom.1:32) because they have turned away from God as the source of life, and encourage others to do so, too; death is the appropriate, ontological result. It is not that God is lurking in the background waiting for the right moment to kill these people to satisfy some sense of divine retributive justice. Their death is deserved because that is the relational direction they chose.

### **Patient B: The Hypocritical Moralists, Plagued by Their Consciences (2:1 – 16)**

Paul then rhetorically turns the tables on his audience. He presumes that his audience agrees with the condemnation heaped upon the first case study of human beings. He then says that those who pass judgment are guilty of the very same thing, in principle (Rom.2:1). The second case study of humanity, therefore, is the moralist, the person who is a hypocrite by his/her own standard.

This is a bit of a surprise to us, partly because in our contemporary Western secular culture, people claim to ‘not judge’ others. Paul would find that to be a lie. People do, in fact, judge others, all the time. The other reason Paul’s rhetorical turnabout sounds hollow is because we interpret Paul as more concerned about the outward symptoms rather than the deeper, inward choices. That is putting the cart before the horse, as far as Paul is concerned. When people judge one another, over the course of our whole lives, we really accuse others of being self-centered, generally. Our judgments change and vary, but the foundational principle is the same.

The judgment of God, however, will reveal the hypocrisy of the moralist. This judgment is, indeed, eschatological. God will have a ‘day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment’ He will declare (Rom.2:5). The criterion will be fair: God will judge according to what people have done; ‘perseverance in doing good’ will receive ‘eternal life’; ‘selfish ambition’ will receive ‘wrath and indignation’ (Rom.2:6 – 8), for ‘for both Jew and Greek’ (Rom.2:9 – 10), ‘for there is no partiality with God’ (Rom.2:11).

How will God judge the non-Jewish person who lives apart from the Sinai covenant? ‘Without the Law,’ says Paul (Rom.2:12). In other words, God does not need the Sinai covenant law for everyone. Gentiles, too, do ‘instinctively the things of the Law,’ and therefore ‘are a law unto themselves’ (Rom.2:14). They ‘show the work of the Law written in their hearts,’ which involves both an awareness of moral standards from God, and also our failure of those moral standards in the sight of God. This is why their ‘conscience’ will bear witness to their whole lives, including every moment they failed any standard they turned against another: ‘their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them’ when all is revealed (Rom.2:15 – 16). The problem with the moralist, indeed, all human beings, is not just that we are self-corrupted, but that we are hypocritical about our standards. God will not use His own standards against us; own standards are already against us, and that is all God will reveal and use to point out who and what human beings are.

### **Patient C: The Jews Who Fail the Sinai Covenant Because of Uncircumcised Hearts (2:17 – 3:8)**

Paul moves onto the Jewish people as a subcategory of those who profess a moral standard and yet fail it. The Jew ‘relies on the Law and boast in God... being instructed out of the Law... having in the Law...’ (Rom.2:17 – 22). But ‘through your breaking the Law,’ Paul says, the Gentiles blaspheme God’s name (Rom.2:23 – 24). Later, Paul will recall his life as a Jew as Saul of Tarsus, falling afoul of the tenth commandment, and implicating everyone by his own failure (Rom.7:14 – 25) – everyone, that is, except Jesus.

The signpost of Judaism and the Sinai covenant is circumcision. Paul says it is worthless for all those who break the Law, which is every Jewish person (Rom.2:25 – 27). Yet, circumcision *of the heart* as a category is what the Sinai covenant was driving at (Rom.2:28 – 29). Doing the commandments would have accomplished an internal change in human nature (Dt.10:16). That is the ‘perseverance in doing good’ which Paul established in Romans 2:7 – not just a disembodied experience of perseverance, and not just a legalistic accomplishment on a moral scoreboard in God’s mind, but an experience in embodied and fallen human nature, commissioned and obligated to follow the good physician’s health regimen. The Jews could not do it, so God had to promise that He would accomplish it in human flesh on the other side of Israel’s exile (Dt.30:6). This indicates that Paul’s understanding of the Sinai covenant is medical: The laws of the covenant were given to guide Israel to accomplish a transformation of human nature, in partnership with God. But Israel could not do it. Israel’s Messiah would have to accomplish it for them.

Paul anticipates objections from Jews (Rom.3:1 – 8). Some are honest, others perverse. Paul's concern, however, is to establish God's righteousness in relation to His covenant with Israel (Rom.3:5). In and through Jesus Christ, God fulfilled the covenant, and is righteous.

### **Paul's Summary Diagnosis of Humanity: Under the Sin-Sickness (3:9 – 20)**

Paul concludes that 'both Jews and Greeks are all under sin' (Rom.3:9) – all humanity is sin-sick. No one is righteous (Rom.3:10) in the sense that no Jew fulfills the Sinai covenant, nor Gentile fulfills the requirements of his/her conscience. No one 'seeks for God' and 'does good' (Rom.3:11 – 12) as in *consistently with perseverance*. Meanwhile, the disorder and infection of sin courses throughout the human body: throat, tongues, lips, mouth, feet, eyes (Rom.3:13 – 18). The Sinai covenant, therefore, does not justify human flesh; it brings only 'the knowledge of sin' (Rom.3:19 – 20).

### **The Righteousness of God is the Faithfulness of Jesus (3:21 – 31)**

But the Torah and the Prophets bore witness to the loving intention of God to fulfill the Sinai covenant – both the divine side and Israel's side (Rom.3:21). 'The righteousness of God has been manifested' by, in, and 'through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (*dia pisteos Iēsou Christou*) (Rom.3:22). Jesus took up Israel's side of the covenant, to press the commandments of the Sinai covenant so deeply into his human nature as to circumcise the sinfulness away from it, through his faithful life, death, and resurrection. Jesus also expressed God's side of the covenant, to provide back to Israel a circumcised heart – a cleansed human nature – on the other side of Israel's exile, which He brought about in Jesus' resurrection, because resurrection signified the end of exile. Hence, the righteousness of God is manifested through the faithfulness of Jesus.

All human beings 'have run out/been deficient' of the glory of God (Rom.3:23). The translation 'fall short' evokes the world of archery, which could place the concept of 'sin' in the realm of 'external moral achievement,' but I think that translation and that association need further clarification. The Greek term *hysterountai* is cognate with the term 'having run out,' *hysterēsantos*, evidenced in John 2:3. God is concerned with the *internal* impact, *within* us, of our own moral-spiritual choices. Thus, God is not a moral perfectionist for His own sake, as if He keeps a moral scoreboard abstracted from actual human development. Since God has always sought our truly human development in partnership with Himself, and in light of the fall, our full participation in the undoing of the corruption of sin and the renewal of our human nature, we must understand the 'virtue ethics' perspective inherent in the biblical perspective. Thus, we can only be 'justified as a gift by His grace through' the new humanity that Jesus redeemed 'in' himself (Rom.3:24).

God's public display of Jesus as a *hilastērion* (Rom.3:25) must be understood against its proper Jewish background. The LXX predominantly translates this term as 'mercy seat.' Paul therefore appears to use the term in a locational sense. I do not think *hilastērion* should be translated either 'propitiation' or 'expiation' immediately. More work must be done to demonstrate what the sacrificial calendar system was accomplishing, culminating in the Day of Atonement when the high priest stood before God, who sat enthroned above the 'mercy seat.' But in brief, I believe that the entrance of the high priest into the holy of holies to stand before the 'mercy seat' recapitulated the ascent of Moses up Mount Sinai. The sacrificial system therefore represented the purification of Moses, who was Israel's representative and mediator in the Sinai covenant. The 'mercy seat,' therefore, was the location where God operated as a modern day dialysis machine. Through the symbolism of the two goats, God took the sin of Israel into Himself, and simultaneously sent it away from Israel as far as the east is from the west. Jesus accomplished a total purification of his human nature, unlike Moses. That is, in Jesus, God took the corruption of sin into Himself and destroyed it. I think it can be said that, in relation to the human nature of Jesus, God 'propitiated' Himself by 'expiating' the corruption of sin, circumcising it away (Rom.6:6; 8:3) through the moment-by-moment choices of Jesus to be absolutely faithful to his Father.

God's righteousness, therefore, has a dual aspect in relation to the divine and human sides of the Sinai covenant. But it is a righteousness that means 'faithfulness' to that covenant. I believe Thomas Schreiner, in his commentary on Romans, is incorrect when he posits two types of divine righteousness to support his penal substitutionary atonement view: the righteousness of God to finally and absolutely punish every sinful action in an infinitely retributive sense, on the one hand, and the righteousness of God to make sinners right with Himself, on the other. To posit two different meanings of the term 'righteousness' goes beyond the text.

Schreiner's penal substitutionary view requires him to define God's interaction with Israel under the Sinai covenant to be a delay of retributive punishment. This poses problems with many other biblical statements. Hebrews says that 'every transgression and disobedience [in Israel already] received a just penalty' (Heb.2:2), probably in the *internal* sense that Paul already delineated in Romans 1 – 3, and perhaps also in a *revelatory* sense, where God honored Israel's desire to escape His lordship and fare for themselves among the Gentiles. At the same time, the actual suffering that the Gentiles inflicted upon Israel was on top of the lordship principle and in addition to it. This is why Isaiah said that Jerusalem received double for its sin (Isa.40:1), and Zechariah said that the Gentiles inflicted far more damage on Israel than God intended (Zech.1:13). Statements like these are difficult to reconcile with Schreiner's view that God did not retributively punish Israel because He was waiting to retributively punish Jesus instead.

However, Israel's history is easier to understand if we understand Paul's meaning in Romans 3:25 – 26 to be the following: 'God has finally been righteous to fulfill the Sinai covenant in Jesus, because in the forbearance of God, He passed over the sins previously committed' because nothing in God's character requires Him to make Israel suffer in order to satisfy His retributive justice, because retributive justice is not what God's righteousness is! God's righteousness consists of God simply being just/righteous (*dikaion*) in relation to giving the circumcised heart and signaling the end of Israel's exile (Dt.30:6), and justifying/making righteous (*dikaionta*) the one of the faith of Jesus (*ton ek pisteos Iēsou*).

Jesus' atonement is a medical, not a penal, substitution. God is the great Physician who was working with His focus group, Israel. He accepted Israel's inability to live up perfectly to His health regimen. He never required that they suffer to repay Him as a substitute for their obedience. But God nevertheless bore patiently and worked with them as partners so they would diagnose the disease within human nature and document it in the form of the sacred Scriptures, building up hope for God to personally resolve the problem within themselves. In Jesus, God became His own patient. He acquired human nature with its disorder and disease. He defeated the disorder of sin, and perfected the antibodies to the disease within his own human body. Enough Israelites would be persuaded by their own documentation and experience of exile to come to Jesus as His partners.

#### **Abraham, Father of Faith for Both Jews and Gentiles (4:1 – 25)**

Paul now explains the significance of God's covenant with Abraham. Abraham was the recipient of God's covenant, the archetype of the Christian believer – in terms of believing that God brings forth life out of death from our own human bodies – and also forefather of faith for the people of God, both uncircumcised and circumcised.

As recipient of God's covenant promise, Abraham, who also represented his wife Sarah, partnered with God to begin to undo the sin of Adam and Eve. God brought them into a new garden land and made them a promise which was a restatement of the original creational blessing (Gen.12:1 – 3; cf. Gen.1:26 – 28). By learning from his mistake with Pharaoh (Gen.12:10 – 20), Abraham learned that he could not make Sarah ancillary to the promise; he had to honor their marriage as Adam should have done with Eve (Gen.3:12); and Abraham honored Lot as a 'brother' (Gen.13:8) as Cain should have done with Abel (Gen.4:1 – 16).

Yet Abraham was not justified 'by works,' but by believing in God's word of promise (Rom.4:1 – 3). Specifically, Abraham believed that God would bring forth life from his body (Gen.15:6). This fact – the content of Abraham's faith – must be firmly in view. Abraham did not simply believe that God existed, or that God could do miracles. Abraham believed that God would do something in and through him, which required his participation. God fulfilled His promise through the supernatural birth of Isaac, indeed bringing life out of death biologically, since Abraham was one hundred years old, and Sarah was ninety (Rom.4:18 – 22).

Furthermore, Abraham was the forefather of faith for both Gentiles and Jews. Abraham was reckoned as righteous before he was circumcised. God gave him the sign of circumcision some twenty five years later (Gen.17). This makes Abraham the father of faith for both the uncircumcised and the circumcised.

More should be said about circumcision itself being a sign of 'new creation' when God originally issued it to Abraham. God had 'cut off' the possibility that Abraham could discard Sarah and monopolize God's promise and blessing for himself without her (Gen.12:10 – 20). Then God 'cut off' the possibility that Abraham could use his cultural power as a man to name an heir (Gen.15:1 – 6). Then God 'cut off' the poor decision Sarah and Abraham made to utilize Hagar as a surrogate mother (Gen.16). Finally, God 'cut off' the foreskin of Abraham's penis. The

point could not be more dramatic: God 'cut off' every attitude that led Abraham, primarily, and Sarah away from the original creational vision for marriage. Circumcision signified 'new creation' in a preliminary way. Although this is not Paul's point for the moment in Romans 4, it is in the background of Romans 2:25 – 29 and Christ's circumcision of the heart implied in Romans 6:6 and 8:3 and 10:4.

Circumcision of the heart might be coordinated with Romans 4:23 – 25. Significantly, Paul associates our justification with Jesus' resurrection (Rom.4:25). Of course, Jesus' death is 'because of our transgressions' and by sequential association, for our justification as well. But this is another indication that the resurrection of Jesus is part of the atonement, formally. Jesus is 'the justified one,' the true Israelite who emerged on the other side of Israel's exile, circumcised of heart, on the other side of the Sinai covenant and the Mosaic Law. The Sinai covenant served a medical purpose; it was always guiding and driving Israel towards the full healing of their human nature by calling for their faithful obedience, but this anticipates Paul's discussion in Romans 7 – 8.

### **Reconciliation with God, Peace Towards God (5:1 – 11)**

Paul returns to the ontological-relational dimension of what Christ achieved on our behalf. He says, 'We have peace towards God' (Rom.5:1). I prefer, with David Bentley Hart, to translate *pros ton Theon* as 'towards God' as befits the most common usage of the Greek preposition *pros*; Paul does not use the preposition *meta*. That translation is further warranted because Paul does not think of atonement as Jesus propitiating God's wrath towards us and exhausting it. Therefore the 'peace' he discusses here is not 'from God and towards us.' Even the generic phrase 'peace with God' can be misunderstood. 'Peace' is most precisely the cessation of hostility from within human nature towards God; Paul's mention of 'peace' anticipates 'while we were yet enemies' (Rom.5:10) and 'the mind of the flesh is hostility towards God' (Rom.8:7). God was not our enemy, but we were God's enemies. Only Jesus' humanity is at perfect 'peace' towards God, welcoming the Spirit. Thus, our peace towards God comes, on the one hand, 'through [*dia*] the death of the Son,' by which Jesus destroyed the resistance of sin in his humanity, and, on the other, 'in [*en*] his life.'

Paul observes that God has poured out His Spirit into our hearts (Rom.5:3 – 5). He argues that our access to the Spirit is assured on the basis of God's love already committed to us by sending His Son. While we were yet enemies, God sent His Son to die for us, that we might be saved from His wrath 'in' his life (Rom.5:6 – 10). Here again, Paul shows his understanding of the reconciliation we have in Christ. We will be saved from the wrath of God – that is, the ongoing, present decline resulting from us 'exchanging' truth for lies and being 'given over' to our disordered passions (Rom.1:21 – 32) – by the life of Jesus – not his death per se, although Jesus' death is of course the capstone of his earthly life, and is sequentially related to his resurrection life. Paul's logic is that if God loved us this much while we were yet His enemies, how much more will God do for us now that we are His children, in Christ?

### **Adam and Jesus (5:12 – 21)**

In a particularly dense passage, Paul contrasts Adam and Jesus (Rom.5:12 – 21). Much can be said about this, but I will focus on two aspects. First, condemnation and justification are juxtaposed as opposites, and made symmetrical to death and life. Adam corrupted human nature such that all his descendants inherit a proclivity to sin, a weakness of will and desire in relation to God, and mortality (Rom.5:12 – 14). This resulted in 'condemnation,' which Paul indicates by 'death' and mortality. 'Condemnation' befell all human beings through death (Rom.5:16), before the Sinai covenant was given to Israel, and this fact means that the Sinai covenant itself was not the vehicle by which this 'condemnation' occurred, formally. This will be significant for interpreting Romans 8:3, when God 'condemned' sin in the flesh of Christ, by bringing about the death of the sinfulness Jesus carried in his human nature, when he died on the cross. 'Justification,' by contrast, is associated with 'life' (Rom.5:17, 18, 21). Jesus, in order to undo the sin of Adam, must have had to carry human nature from its fallen Adamic condition through death and into resurrection life. This corroborates what Paul said in Romans 4:25, that Jesus' resurrection is for our justification.

Second, the purpose of the Sinai covenant was to trigger an increase in transgression (Rom.5:20) in Israel. This amplifies Paul's statement about 'the Law' in Romans 3:19 – 20 and anticipates what he will disclose personally in Romans 7:14 – 25. The Sinai covenant made sin more measurable and imputable to individual Israelites and/or to Israel as a whole (Rom.5:13). For 'sin is not imputed when there is no law.' Therefore, it is true that the Sinai covenant and its commandments established a legal purpose (imputing responsibility and therefore guilt), and utilized legal terminology, but in a specifically Hebraic restorative context, not a Western-Latin meritocratic-

retributive context. To clarify, the Sinai covenant made Israelites more aware of what they had to do in order to restore their human nature back to God. Moreover, God gave the Sinai covenant to Israel to draw out and elicit a particular relational response to Himself, so that sinfulness could be more readily apparent, understandable, and indisputable. But this does not mean that Israel only ever opposed God. That would be an unwarranted overgeneralization which requires us to examine Romans 7:14 – 25 more carefully to disprove. The Sinai covenant always had the Messiah in mind, and always sought to cultivate Israelite partners for Jesus.

### **Union with Christ: Human Participation in Christ and Transformation (6:1 – 11)**

How do we respond to Jesus' lordship? How do we benefit by his victory over sin and death? Paul now draws out the meaning of our union with Christ in Romans 6 – 8 using the narrative of Israel. Like God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea, so God has delivered us from bondage to sin through baptism in Christ (Rom.6:1 – 11). Like God called Israel to be His bondservant, so God has now called us to be bondservants of Christ (Rom.6:12 – 23). As God brought Israel to Mount Sinai to draw them into the Sinai covenant, so God has now brought Israel to Christ to draw them out (Rom.7:1 – 8:4). As God revealed His shekinah glory and took up residence among Israel, so God now dwells by His Spirit in the believer (Rom.8:5 – 39). This is far too precise to be coincidental. Paul not only expresses our union with Christ in terms of the narrative of Israel, he expounds on the inner meaning of the Sinai covenant, and why God gave it to Israel in the first place.

Paul answers the question, 'Shall we sin that grace may abound?' by expounding on the profound identity change brought about by the believer's baptismal union with Christ. Our baptism related us to Jesus' baptism. What Paul reminds us of is not the quantity or intensity of Jesus' passive suffering, but the quality of his active, victorious life over sin revealed by his own baptism in the Jordan River, expressed ultimately by his death and resurrection. Christ did not die instead of us, Paul maintains, but ahead of us. Do not sin, Paul urges, based on our transformation. Notably, Paul does not construct a motivation in his audience based on the depth of Jesus' experience of pain, in his so-called 'passive obedience.' That is, he does not construct a 'gratitude motivation' or 'debt-obligation,' which would be the logical response to a penal substitutionary atonement. Instead, he constructs a motivation based on the 'active obedience' of Jesus, and what he assumes about the reasons we came to believe in Jesus: our desire to participate in his victory over sin and death.

Our baptismal union with Christ means we share in 'newness of life' (Rom.6:3 – 4). But we do not just start a new life on the same plane as before, with the certain likelihood of making the same mistakes. We are freed from sin on the basis of Jesus having put the 'old self' to death (Rom.6:5 – 7). Because of our union with Jesus' death and resurrection, we share in his victory over sin and death, and live to God (Rom.6:8 – 10). Paul then gives his first command in Romans, to recognize our new spiritual identity in Jesus: 'Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom.6:11).

Paul's discussion in Romans 6:5 – 7 is of special interest. I believe 'the old self' (*palaios hēmōn anthropōs*, Rom.6:6) corresponds to the fallen human nature into which Jesus became incarnate at conception. If Jesus instantly cleansed human nature at conception, simply at the start of his hypostatic union, it would be doubtful that Paul could speak this way, referring to Jesus' victory over sinfulness at the moment of his death and resurrection. The 'old self' over which Jesus was victorious at his death and resurrection requires that Jesus fought it throughout the course of his life. If, furthermore, we can identify our human bodies as 'the body of sin' (*sōma tēs hamartias*, Rom.6:6), what else can this mean but Jesus identified his own human body as such at the cross? His death 'for our transgressions' was the culmination of the battle Jesus fought to be faithful to his Father, to press the Holy Spirit more deeply into every area of his humanity. Because our transgressions marred human nature choice by choice, Jesus through his faithfulness undid the marring choice by choice. This means that the hypostatic union expressed at Chalcedon refers to a dynamic process involving Jesus' life and faithfulness.

This reading, moreover, is reinforced by Paul's use of *dedikaiōtai*, which is the passive perfect indicative tense of 'justify' (*dikaioō*) in Romans 6:7. This has bearing on defining 'justification' in fundamentally ontological and participatory terms and not the forensic, judicial terms of penal substitutionary atonement. Unfortunately, most English translations render *dedikaiōtai* as 'freed' and thus suppose Paul's intention as meaning 'freed from sin.' However, if Paul intended the meaning 'freed,' then he would have used a form of the Greek verb *eleutheron*, which he does use in Romans 6:18 and 6:22, where he in fact discusses being 'freed from sin.' In the New Testament, *dedikaiōtai* is used in two other places:

‘The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom *is vindicated* by her deeds.’ (Matthew 11:19, NASB)

‘Yet wisdom *is vindicated* by all her children.’ (Luke 7:35, NASB)

The idea is that wisdom is ‘done justice by’ her deeds, or her children. Therefore, I suggest that a better translation of Romans 6:7 would be:

‘For he who has died *is done justice* by sin’ or ‘*vindicated* by sin’ (Romans 6:7)

Paul will later use the master-servant, employer-employee metaphor to say that the wages of sin is death (Rom.6:23), meaning that the ontological consequence of serving sin is death. In Romans 6:7, the meaning is that death already has had its intended impact on us, and on Jesus. Our death in Christ is by participation in his. Correspondingly, Jesus’ death for us is by his participation in our humanity – our fallen humanity – to undo it from within the depths of our humanity, and to die the death that none of us could die: a death that summed up a life of utter faithfulness to the Father.

God has turned physical death in this sense into His purging strike against sinfulness itself. Arguably, this is how Genesis 3 portrayed physical death categorically: Death was God’s imposition of His severe mercy upon corrupted humanity, so that we would not eat from the tree of life in a corrupted state and immortalize evil and sinfulness within ourselves. Patristic writers (Irenaeus of Lyons, Methodius of Olympus, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, etc.) understood it as such. God was severe by exiling humanity from the tree of life and the Garden of Eden, but He was still acting in a restorative way. The ‘condemnation’ of God expressed by physical death (Rom.5:12 – 21; 8:3) was directed not at the personhood of people, but at the underlying corruption of sin within human nature. The separation of the corruption from the nature and personhood of human beings was imaged already by the Jewish rite of circumcision, which emphasized surgical separation which was a purging strike, even when that rite was redeployed as ‘circumcision of the heart’ (Dt.10:16; 30:6; Jer.4:4; 9:28 – 29; Rom.2:28 – 29).

If such is the case, then the Sinai covenant served to remind Israel of their solidarity with the rest of humanity. They had the same human nature as the Gentiles, and needed the same remedy from God: a messiah who was a medical substitute. Though the Sinai covenant prescribed death and exile for Israel’s disobedience, this was to be understood in a particular way. Paul gives evidence of that view in Romans 7 – 8.

### **Bondservants to Christ, Not Sin (6:12 – 23)**

In Romans 6:12 – 23, Paul draws upon the Jewish image of the bondservant of Exodus 21:2 – 6, in which a man or woman voluntarily becomes a lifelong (or near lifelong) servant to a kind master. There is an Exodus deliverance motif present, both in the Exodus text but also explicitly in Paul’s exhortation. We must obey our new master, not our old one. Throughout this section, Paul urges his audience to be consistent with their true identity ‘in Christ’ to be servants of God. He distinguishes between the true ‘self’ and the ‘members’ of our bodies. ‘Present yourselves to God... and your members as instruments of righteousness to God’ (Rom.6:13). Paul works with that distinction a second time, saying, ‘You were slaves to sin... but then you became obedient from the heart’ (Rom.6:17). The Christian’s core identity, or ‘self,’ is distinct from her/his ‘members,’ as we also read in v.19: ‘For just as you presented your members... so now present your members...’ Not only is there a strong ‘participation/union’ paradigm Paul works within, there is, once again, none of the forensic ‘imputation of righteousness’ paradigm.

Curiously, in Romans 6:14, Paul associates sin being ‘master over’ us with being ‘under law.’ Now that we are ‘under grace’ as a governing principle, our experience will be different. This has nothing to do with the Sinai covenant being misleading or defective in itself. Nor does Paul situate ‘commandments and threat of punishment’ with ‘law’ and ‘forgiveness’ with ‘grace,’ as Martin Luther did. ‘Commandments’ of God permeate both ‘law’ and ‘grace.’ In Paul’s view, the problem with the Sinai covenant and its commandments is that they did not grant Israel the full power to follow them faithfully. He will elaborate on this later.

### **The Medical Purpose of the Sinai Covenant (7:1 – 8:4)**



In Romans 7:1 – 8:4, Paul then gives his most expansive and generous treatment of the importance of the Sinai covenant. In this section, he explains much about why God chose Israel, why the Jewish experience took the shape that it did, and why it continues to be important.

Paul speaks here to those ‘who know the Law’ (Rom.7:1). He uses the metaphor of marriage – which he feels more comfortable with than the metaphor of bondservice (Rom.6:19) and he gives no overt qualification to the metaphor – to illustrate the relationship Jewish Christians have with Christ, in view of the Sinai covenant. After establishing from the Jewish Law that only the death of a spouse frees the widow/widower to marry again (Rom.7:2 – 3), Paul moves to his main point. He says that the Jewish Christian has been marriage-united to Christ twice: once at his death and once at his resurrection (Rom.7:4). The effect of being joined to Jesus when he died to the Law is that the Jewish Christian also, by participation in Christ, died to the Law. The effect of being joined to Jesus when he rose from the dead is that the Jewish Christian also by participation in Christ, can bear fruit for God without having our ‘sinful passions’ in ‘the flesh’ aroused by the Law (Rom.7:5). Consequently, we are ‘released from the Law, having died to that to which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter’ (Rom.7:6).

Paul names the chief problem of the Sinai covenant, which he will expound on: that it stimulated the sinful passions in the flesh. He also infers that Jesus’ victory over the sinful passions is also in view here. For when Paul mentions serving God ‘in newness of the Spirit,’ he has a ‘union with Christ’ by the Spirit in mind. Paul is also probably drawing upon a reservoir of Old Testament prophetic hopes which saw the outpouring of the Spirit as constitutive of the ‘new covenant’ (Isa.59:20 – 21; Jer.31:31 – 34; Ezk.11:18; 36:26 – 36; Joel 2:28 – 29; etc.).

Why then did God ever initiate the Sinai covenant with Israel, if it only served to aggravate the problem of ‘the flesh’? Was God cruel to Israel? No. Paul gives a semi-autobiographical account of his experience of the Sinai covenant. In it, he reflects on his experience of himself before he came to believe in Jesus. Paul had been an upstanding Jew who outwardly upheld Jewish law and tradition with scrupulous zeal (Philippians 3:1 – 6). Yet, he looks back to his pre-Christian Jewish days (Romans 7:8 – 25), and says that inwardly, he experienced ‘every kind’ of lust and jealousy (i.e. ‘coveting’): ‘But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead...’ (Rom.7:8)

Then, Paul explains his inner conflict over this. To show this more clearly, we can place his statements into a table:

‘I myself’	‘Sin which indwells me’
But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it... (Romans 7:16 – 17a)	
	but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh... (Romans 7:17b – 18a)
for the willing [of the good] is present in me, but the doing of the good is not... (Romans 7:18b)	
	I find then the principle that evil is present in me... (Romans 7:21)
...me, the one who wants to do good... Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free... (Romans 7:21b, 24)	
	from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24b – 25a)
So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God... (Romans 7:25b)	
	but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:25c)

For Paul and for Israel, the human person, including her/his human nature, was still made in the image of the good Creator God (Gen.1:26 – 28). But Adam and Eve fell into sin; they internalized into human nature a corruption, a disorder by which they became beings who wanted to use the language of good and evil in an absolutist sense, but control the definitions and therefore be relativists. This created deep contradictions at the heart of human existence, because it was an internal problem which needed an internal resolution, for which human beings would constantly seek other explanations and therefore, propose superficial solutions. Paul says that the Sinai covenant helped him, and other Israelites, accurately distinguish between the ‘I myself’ and the ‘flesh.’ So, far from saying that the human being is purely and wholly ‘evil’ because ‘nothing good dwells in me,’ Paul is actually clarifying that ‘nothing good dwells in me, *that is, in my flesh.*’ ‘Evil is present in me’ but that evil can be conceptually distinguished from the ‘me’ speaking. Of course, Paul feels like a prisoner in his own body, which he calls ‘the body of this death.’ But this is why he needs the Spirit of the victorious Jesus Christ also in his own body.

Thus, the Sinai covenant was ultimately meant to guide Jesus. Jesus, in his own human body, was victorious in the same struggle Saul of Tarsus experienced. What Israel was unable to, God did, in Jesus:

‘For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.’  
(Romans 8:3 – 4)

The Sinai covenant, therefore, was not Israel’s opponent. Nor did it turn God into Israel’s adversary. Nor was it a trick God played on Israel so that they would seek their own righteousness and grow in pride. The Law was trying to accomplish something in and with Israel. God wanted Israel to absolutely condemn sin in the flesh, which could only be done by a human life lived in utter faithfulness to God, not mere intellectual nodding or verbal repudiation, but a totally integrated, lived human life culminating in a faithful and victorious death. Only such a human life and death would serve to ‘condemn sin.’ Contra much of Protestant thinking on atonement, Paul refers us to Jesus’ active obedience, not his supposedly passive obedience.

Correspondingly, what should be apparent is that the Sinai covenant served Israel as a tool for diagnosing their own human nature in the context of biblical theodicy and the moral discernment of good and evil. No other people group had the capacity to do this with accuracy. People had various other logical options. Perhaps people would make good and evil meaningless categories because they projected both onto a deity/reality who was both and therefore neither (Hinduism, atheism). Or, people would make good and evil into two eternal and opposite gods (Zoroastrianism) or multiple gods (paganism), thereby sacrificing impossible an eschatological victory of good over evil, and the beauty of personal hope which would bloom in such soil. Or, people would blame other people for evil, and regard themselves as good, as Adam did after he fell into sin, or as Western Enlightenment advocates did (and do) in colonialism and imperialism. Or, people would simply blame circumstances, like secular liberals tend to do, making human beings the mere products of their environment. The Sinai covenant prevented Israel from pursuing those options. The true struggle between good and evil is within every single person. The tenth commandment against covetousness, lusting, and jealousy reflected the primal sin in the garden, and reminded Israel of it. Arguably, covetousness of some sort underlies every other sinful motive and act. Therefore, the tenth commandment in particular exposed Israel’s internal life, even before it became evident via another sinful action. That is what Paul learned from the Sinai covenant.

Moreover, ‘the requirement of the Law’ (Rom.8:4), I believe, is ‘circumcision of the heart.’ The requirement of the Law was already summed up by Deuteronomy, and directed internally towards the problem in us: ‘Circumcise your hearts’ (Dt.10:16). By this language of internal transformation and surgical healing, the Sinai covenant summed up what God intended if any Israelite had been able to live out the commandments in their totality, in complete faithfulness. The Jewish wisdom literature attests to this internal change as well, using the same language of ‘internalization’ as Deuteronomy (Prov.2:1 – 10; 3:1 – 8; 6:21; 7:1 – 5; 22:18; 23:12 – 19; 26:21 – 26; 27:19 – 22; 28:14). The entire purpose of the Sinai covenant was to foster a genuine partnership with God on the part of Israel towards the restoration of their human nature. It was genuine and not a farce or trick God deployed. The Sinai covenant was, in effect, the demanding health regimen which the Great Physician called upon Israel to undertake. They did take significant steps towards health. But ultimately, the covenant was designed to guide Jesus in his own human journey from infancy, and to develop conviction among Israelites that God would have to cure them in some

deeper way, through the messiah who would be faithful when they were faithless, all the way through death as the full extent of exile, into resurrection life and the return to the original garden.

What other resolution to the Sinai covenant makes sense? ‘The requirement of the Law’ is not moral perfection on a mental scoresheet God has in His mind, as if He were constantly preoccupied with measuring offenses against His holiness, and as if God only wanted Israel as a case study to demonstrate His eagerness to punish people. The Sinai covenant always connected Israel’s moral performance to the impact of that faithfulness upon our human nature as character-formation. We now progress in this internal transformation by participation in Christ, by the power of the Spirit and ‘according to the Spirit.’

On the surface, Paul’s answer to the question of how Jesus delivered Jewish people from under the Law here in Romans 7 is quite different than Galatians 3:10 – 14. Where is any specific discussion of Jesus becoming a ‘curse’ of the Law for us? However, the deeper structure of Israel’s historical experience suggests that in both cases, Paul is surfacing his christological participationist paradigm. The way Jesus releases Jews from the Sinai covenant is certainly by his death (Rom.7:4), but the meaning of his death is not determined by a framework whereby Jesus absorbed some deeper, additional torturous pain doled out from the Father which would otherwise have fallen on Israel. Jesus participated in the conditions of Israel’s life under the Sinai covenant, because Israel was participating in the conditions of fallen Adamic humanity, but with the additional burden of being under the commandments. How did Jesus do this? By bearing ‘the flesh,’ like all fallen human beings, as his post-fall Adamic inheritance, in order to ‘circumcise the heart’ (Rom.2:28 – 29) and put ‘to death the old self’ (Rom.6:6). Jesus bore with, and completely subdued, the provocation of the commandments (Rom.7:14 – 25; cf. 5:20), which incited some kind of resistance from fallen, corrupted human nature. Not only that, Jesus participated in Israel’s conditions of exile and death, at the hands of the Gentiles. It is notable that Jesus endured persecution from both *Jews and Gentiles* in the manner of David, in his pre-enthronement life, which Paul glancingly alludes to in his introduction (Rom.1:3), and probably by way of an implied Israel-christology and David-christology in his Adam-christology (Rom.5:12 – 21). Although further supporting arguments are needed here, all this suggests that human nature after the fall was itself ‘cursed,’ and Israel’s experience under the Sinai covenant deepened and spotlighted that ‘curse’ in a particular mode. Thus, Galatians 3:10 – 14 is simply a more compact way of saying Romans 7:1 – 8:4.

### **God’s Spirit of Life Indwelling His People (8:5 – 39)**

God lived among His people. In Paul’s paradigm where he uses the narrative of Israel – in particular the Exodus and wilderness portion because of its significance for when God delivered and called a new people into being – the high point is the coming of the shekinah glory of God into a tabernacle-tent, which was similar in principle to the tents in which the Israelites were dwelling at the time. Another such moment in thematic continuity with the previous is the coming of the shekinah glory of God into the temple in Jerusalem. That reflected the efforts of King David and King Solomon to build a more permanent ‘house’ for God (2 Sam.7; 1 Ki.8). Now, because Jesus is the ‘new temple’ in whom God dwells, and in fact the very ‘mercy seat’ where the shekinah glory once hovered enthroned, God lives within a human being. By extension, God’s Spirit now draws us into Christ and reciprocally lives in us, making believers in Jesus into a corporate ‘new temple.’ If Paul were going to be accused of being ‘against’ his Jewish heritage, it would be accurate to say that he was anti-temple, because he believed that in Jesus, God opened up a new relation to human beings. Paul would have also said quickly that he believed that Jesus was not an innovator as a Jewish teacher; the Hebrew Scriptures themselves prophesied of this, and Jesus interpreted them faithfully.

Paul discusses how we acknowledge and welcome the Spirit first in our minds, of course (Rom.8:5 – 8). Having the Spirit of God – also called ‘the Spirit of Christ’ – indwelling us is constitutive of belonging to God (Rom.8:9). The Spirit dwelling within us also gives us ‘life and peace’ and the power of Jesus’ resurrection, that we might be victorious in the internal battle with sin and temptation (Rom.8:10 – 11). In fact, we have an obligation to fight this spiritual battle well, to be and become who we already are in Christ: ‘sons of God’ who cry out ‘Abba, Father!’ (Rom.8:12 – 17).

Paul then honors his Jewish cosmology. The whole creation groans, waiting for the full revealing of the sons of God (Rom.8:18 – 25). The fall of Adam and Eve did not just affect human nature. It affected the whole creation, in the sense that (if we personify it as Paul does) its initial hopes were frustrated. Creation ‘was subjected to futility... because of him – [which I take to be *Adam*, not God] – who subjected it’ (Rom.8:20). God made human beings to spread the unique conditions of the garden of Eden along the four riverways (Gen.2:4 – 10) across the wild creation.

Not only did that not happen, human beings also brought ‘thorns and thistles’ (Gen.3:17 – 19), emblems of the fall. Moreover, human bloodshed polluted the creation even further. And in the case of Israel, God made creation do double-duty for a time: Not only did the creation have to feed Israel, it had to cover their sins as well. Jesus relieved the creation of that second duty for Israel, commensurate with his fulfillment of the Jewish sacrificial system. Nevertheless, creation still ‘hopes’ with ‘groaning.’

The Spirit groans in us, too (Rom.8:26 – 27), interceding to the Father for us. The Son also intercedes to the Father for us (Rom.8:34). Meanwhile, God works all things for our good – that is, our ultimate good: to be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus (Rom.8:28 – 30). Despite what a groaning creation with its natural disasters and diseases might suggest to a superficial observer, compounded by human evil in general, and specific persecution of Christians, in point of fact God has no attribute, no aspect, no characteristic, which is turned against us. That is evident when we look at the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of them, and all of them taken together, work ‘for us’ in love (Rom.8:31 – 39). God is therefore perfectly loving and good. And nothing will separate us from His love.

### **Conclusion: Why Choose a Chosen People?**

I return to the question, ‘Why did God choose a chosen people?’ And what is the cost to Christian ministry and proclamation to not explore the answers to that question?

My exploration of Romans 1 – 8 suggests answers to these questions. To reach these conclusions about the character of God, and other aspects of Christian teaching, Paul relies thoroughly upon the Hebrew Scriptures and the experience of Israel. Although he said in his introduction that the gospel message comes from the Hebrew prophets, Paul draws much more from them than ‘the gospel message’ as Christians have come to think of it today: the announcement that Jesus has ascended the throne, or in some Protestant circles, the specific claim that Jesus was a penal substitute. From the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul expounds the meaning of creation, fall, sinfulness, exile and human death, Abraham, Sarah, God’s promise, circumcision, Israel as nation, Sinai covenant, Moses, sanctuary, Davidic kingship, and Israel’s exile from the land. Although space has not permitted me to explore this further, I believe Paul never ‘prooftexted.’ Instead, he was always cognizant of the full literary and historical context of every piece of biblical literature from which he quoted. He paid full honor to his Jewish heritage. It is a testament of Paul’s fidelity to Scripture that the Roman Christians who received his letter – according to *1 Clement* – welcomed him and supported him on his way to Spain.

Why did God choose a chosen people? Why did God not simply jump right to Jesus? Because if God needed to send His Son to save human nature and unite it with Himself, then His Son also had to be truly human. And if Jesus had to be truly human, then he also had to truly be a human infant and child. Which means that God needed a family and community to support Jesus. But that is not all. God works with human beings to whom He granted free will. By direct deduction from Romans, Paul says that God wanted Israel to diagnose the problem which had set into human nature from the fall, distinguishing between the ‘I myself’ and ‘the sin which indwells me.’ God wanted them to document that diagnosis to provide a rational basis for that conviction. He wanted them to struggle to obey the commandments and understand viscerally that they could not wholly keep them; they could not, therefore, blame their evil behavior on the lack of adequate laws. Nevertheless, God wanted them to perceive and enjoy the benefits of the improved spiritual health brought about by the Sinai covenant, even though the Israelites could not be completely faithful to the commandments. He wanted them to resist the temptation to simply be like their pagan neighbors. God wanted them to hope for His resolution to that problem in the person of the messiah, who would heal human nature in himself. He wanted them to use Israel’s historical experience as a narrative ‘container’ into which the messiah poured more meaning, meaning which filled to the full and overflowed the original narrative. God wanted them to be so passionate and rationally persuaded about God’s cure and His messiah that they would venture out into the hostile Gentile world at all cost to themselves, proclaiming this message. God wanted Israel’s partnership. Dare I even say that God, out of His love and respect for human free will, *needed* Israel’s partnership. Biblical Israel has permanent importance to Christian theology, just as diaspora Judaism today has permanent importance to Christian mission.

The cost to Christian ministry and proclamation for not maintaining a basic understanding of Israel and the Sinai covenant has unfortunately been quite high. The absence of this understanding bore the evil fruit Paul almost certainly hoped to avoid. Christian witness to Jews has suffered. Jews have suffered immeasurably because of Christian hypocrisy and misunderstanding. Christian proclamation of the gospel has suffered because of mutually

reinforcing tendencies: ignoring the true role of biblical Israel leads to a defective view of the atonement, especially, along with other aspects of Christian theology. Protestants tend to view God's justice as retributive as opposed to restorative, which results in Christian explanations to Jews today about God's choice of Israel that are deeply hurtful. Did God simply need to punish people for their sins, so that people would fear God and come to Jesus? How has mission to the Jews suffered under such terms? Nevertheless, it is my hope that clearer understanding of Romans, and the heart of Paul as biblical theologian and Jewish Christian missionary, would do something to remedy the situation, and restore the enthusiastic exuberance of the apostle Paul who was eager to preach a gospel which was, indeed, 'good news.'