

The fundamental idea of Paul's 'I' in Romans 7:14–25 and Christian spirituality as a lived experience



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The idea of 'I' in Romans 7:14–25, used rhetorically, is written to have an impact on its reader and to reach into something readers have experienced: a spiritual reality. When Paul wrote the pericope, it was written in a specific context to and a specific group of people. They would have recognised what Paul's fundamental idea was concerning 'I' and the law. That is, the struggling image of 'I' under the law, wanting to do what is right, but is unable to. However, the way the original audience would have received and understood the law and the tension would differ exponentially to the way the pericope is read today. But does that make Paul's fundamental argument invalid for readers today? An initial reading of the text does evoke some kind of inner experience, relating or convicted by Paul's 'I'. This falls in the realm of spirituality as a lived experience. What makes it spiritual is the fact that the pericope is part of the Christian sacred text, and there is a certain initial stance or attitude taken when the text is read. The author is painting a mental picture using 'I' as a rhetoric device to lead the reader in participating in Paul's argument. Thus, the text is experienced. There is no spirituality without experience. This participation leaves a lasting impact on the reader, and pointing the reader by the Spirit in a direction that moves from hopelessness to hopefulness found in Jesus Christ.

Contribution: Firstly, the article adds to the body of work done on Romans 7:14–25, particularly the discussion referring to 'I'. Secondly, there has been a large volume of work done on this specific pericope, especially on the interpretation of the text. However, a contribution can be made in respect of spirituality and the lived experience of the reader in relation to the text, because not much on the topic was found. The focus on the fundamental idea as a lived experience constitutes a specific angle to the text that may contribute to scholarly body of knowledge.

Keywords: I; experience; fundamental; law; evoke; spirituality; reading; Paul; Romans 7:14–25.

Introduction

Background

Romans 7:14–25 is often seen as one of the most difficult passages written by Paul. Van Zyl (2015) writes:

Often, more than one valid reading of the text is possible. This results in preachers often having to choose between exegetical options. Romans 7:14–25 is a case in point. It is widely recognised as a *crux interpretum*. (p. 1)

It is not what Paul says in the pericope, but rather who 'I' is, that is debated. When it comes to the 'I' Paul refers to in the pericope, the options concerning the identity of 'I' are numerous. There is no real consensus regarding the interpretation of 'I's' identity. However, what sparked interest in this specific passage was the fact that when reading the passage at face value – just a reading – confronted a reality that is shared with 'I'. That is, the inner tension Paul is referring to between doing what the law requires and not being able to. The question then is: Who is Paul referring to with 'I'? Schreiner, (1998) gives a summary of the theories of who 'I' might be:

The identity of the 'I' in verses 7–25 has generated intense controversy. Three main theories have been propounded, although variations and combinations of these views have also been suggested: (1) The 'I' refers to Adam's experience with God's commandment in the Garden of Eden; (2) it designates Israel's experience of receiving the law at Mount Sinai; (3) 'I' is autobiographical, denoting the experience of the apostle Paul. I would argue that the last view is closest to the

truth, though the first two views contain truth since Paul replicates the history of Adam and Israel. (p. 361)

Bruce (1985:155) contends that Paul's writing could not be autobiographical, given that the character portrayed, is centred on indwelling sin without any reference to the Spirit, as mentioned in Galatians 5:17. Had the Spirit been referenced, the passage would not convey an image of loathing. This suggests that the use of 'I' is more dramatic in nature. According to Longenecker (2016):

Kümmel argued that there is evidence that ancient Judaism and Paul did not always use the first-person singular pronoun in a strictly biographical sense, but at times employed 'I' as a rhetorical and literary *Stilform* in the presentations of their respective teachings. (p. 652)

The debates then are mainly whether Paul is describing a believer or unbeliever and if 'I' is autobiographical or biographical. In a very recent work done by Du Toit (2019) is argued that:

Although both positions are well accounted for, it is more likely that 'I' represents the person before or outside of Christ. More specifically, the 'I' can be understood as a rhetorical device that arguably points to Israel under the law from the perspective of a believer in Christ. (p. 192–193)

Scholars and writers such as Stott (1994), Van Zyl (2015), Harrison (1976) and Schreiner (1998) contend that Paul is 'I' (although writing in the present tense) who was thinking of his experience as a Pharisee showing his readers the fate of those under the law as an example. This then, in some sense, is also autobiographical as Paul is drawing from his own experience, but not as a follower of Christ. Others such as Dunn (1998), Barth (1910), Deenick (2010) and Keller (2014) in various ways argue that 'I' in fact is Paul, and that he is writing to his audience as someone who is experiencing this inner tension presently as a follower of Christ. Scholars such as Wright (2013), Ridderbos (1975), Witherington III and Hyatt (2004), and Käsemann (1980) are interpreting 'I' either as Adam or Israel, which has to do with a much larger salvation-historical view in which case Paul is not speaking autobiographical at all.

The majority of scholars argue that 'I' cannot be someone under or before Christ, but is rather someone still under the law. Keener (2016b) agrees by writing:

I will agree with the strong majority of scholars that this passage depicts life under the law. I will further argue that this is only life under the law without life in Christ; with the majority of current scholars, I deny that 7:7–25 depicts Paul's current experience as a Christian. (p. 56)

Thus, 'I' in the text is used as a rhetoric device to point to a reality of someone under the law.

Keller (2016: podcast) made a statement in a sermon on Romans 7:14–25: 'When you become a Christian you don't move from war to peace (inner-conflict). You move from a battle you could not win to a new battle you cannot lose'.

This statement resonated as it speaks to a human experience of an inner tension. But this statement obviously comes from his view that 'I' is Paul (autobiographical), and that Paul does in fact have this inner tension as a follower of Christ and thus, as followers of Christ, we will also experience it. Fee (1996:128) again argues that '[n]owhere does Paul describe Christian life, life in the Spirit, as one of constant struggle'; thus, saying that Paul cannot be referring to the Christian life. Fee (1996:127) continues: 'People accept this unfortunate reading of Paul at face value, because the text in Romans vividly describes something they know all too well.' In other words, the reading of the text at face value does evoke some kind of an inner experience. Fee continues with an explanation to why this might be, arguing that this could be the direct result of the 'intense individualism of Western culture', where the focus in both psychology and Christian teaching is much on the 'inner self', and as a result 'individualistic faith turns sourly narcissistic'. He (Fee 1996:128) continues by writing that this is 'incompatible with life "according to the Spirit" (Rm 8:5–8)'.

Reading the sacred text, as is just confirmed, does in some way evoke a kind of inner experience in relating or convicted by 'I'. Van der Merwe (2015) writes:

Introspectively, the dialectic discourse (a dialogue between two or more persons holding different viewpoint trying to establish truth through an argument or reason) in the text and some choices made by the readers create tension and sometimes even guilt within the readers, as well as a longing to do the right thing. This is reminiscent of what Paul says in Romans 7:15 (also v. 19): 'For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate'. (p. 5)

According to Thurston (n.d.):

It is not adequate to proceed from a 'text as text' approach to the New Testament. Scholarship must take into account the experiences that gave rise to it. The New Testament is not just a text like any other document from antiquity. It is a record of human beings' experience of communication between themselves and God in and through the person of Jesus Christ. (p. 228)

Paul might have written this out of some kind of experience with the 'spiritual law' (Rm 7:14) whether pre- or post-conversion, and as mentioned by Fee (1996:127), many readers may identify with the text, because there might be the 'will' to do what is right, as it also connects to the passages in Romans 7:15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21. Could this inner experience move into the realm of spirituality? Waaijman (2016:1) refers to Cousins (1986):

The study of spirituality also uses keywords to point to its field of interest and to indicate its approach. First of all, the word "spirituality" itself indicates its field of interest: the "spirit" as "the inner dimension" of human reality, where human beings are "open" to the transcendent and ultimate dimension. (p. xii)

Lombaard (2019:3) writes:

Central to spirituality remains, namely, experience – this in both classic and current writings on the human phenomenon of spirituality (e.g. James (2002 [1902]) and Pretorius

(2008:147–165), respectively, are only two examples amongst many on this, as it is difficult to describe the human quality of ‘experience’. There is no spirituality that is not experiential. (p. 3)

Spirituality equals experience, more accurately, a lived experience. Bouyer (1982:229) defined his subject as the ‘experiential counterpart of dogma’. Christian spirituality, he (Bouyer 1982) noted:

[I]s distinguished from dogma by the fact that, instead of studying, or describing the objects of belief as it were in the abstract, it studies the reactions which these objects arouse in the religious consciousness. (p. 229)

The study of Christian spirituality focuses on experiences ‘in which the reference to God is not only explicit but immediate’.

Christian spirituality, according to McGrath (1999), in turn:

[C]oncerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith. (p. 2)

This is the fundamental problem: if McGrath’s definition is correct, the problem is not whether ‘I’ is before Christ or not, but rather, how the lived experience cohere with the fundamental idea of Paul’s ‘I’.

Objectives

The primary objective of this article is to demonstrate how the fundamental idea of Paul’s ‘I’ in Romans 7:14–25 is related to the Christian spiritual experience. Given that ‘I’ has been identified by a sea of scholars as a person still under the law or before Christ, and Paul using the ‘I’ as a rhetoric device, why is there a disposition of the reader in relation to ‘I’? With what attitude does the reader approach the text? How does Paul draw the reader into his argument using ‘I’ and the law? Does the intentional reading of the text evoke some kind of lived experience that impacts or transforms, making it spiritual?

Method

By implementing the spiritual hermeneutic, a spiritual reading praxis of the lived experience suggested by Waaijman (2002:702–755), this problem could be addressed. Waaijman (2002:689) writes that the spiritual reading praxis has three key moments or movements which consist of the following: ‘[t]he initial stance which attunes the reader to the text; the reading procedure made up of a number of interlocking moments; the ongoing impact of the process in life’. These moments consist of six subheadings which are initial attitude, the performance of the text, the internal dimension, God-relatedness, the mystical dimension, and the continuing impact. This article will consist of only three of the six subheadings, for not all the moments can be used exhaustively within one interpretation. The three subheadings are initial attitude, the performance of the text, and the continuing impact.

Initial attitude

In all spiritual reading practices, the reader takes a certain inner stance or a disposition that the reader must embrace (Waaijman 2002:710). Paul used the ‘I’ rhetorically to awaken a certain spiritual reality within the reader of Paul’s letter. How did the original audience receive this letter and pericope? The disposition of the original readers of the letter would receive this rhetoric very differently from a reader today. Green (2010:6) writes: ‘Every reading of every New Testament text today is an exercise in intercultural communication and understanding’. What Green rightly points out is that the reader and Paul are in totally different cultures, settings, and even in totally different millennia. But does that mean that Paul’s argument is not valid? Does it mean that the result Paul was looking to evoke, is different then, and now?

Romans is a letter written in Greek. Paul, in writing the letter, assumes certain shared cultural norms as well as assumptions regarding the language without giving details about them. According to Keener (2009):

[B]etter understanding the local situation in Rome does not mean that Paul would expect the principles he articulates there to be applicable there only; he does, after all, apply many of the same principles to other situations in other congregations. But noting these situations will help us better understand his argument and better identify the principles he is applying. (p. 2)

In Romans 7:14, Paul states, ‘we know that the law is spiritual’. In contrast, Paul employs the law as combative hyperbolic rhetoric in his letter to the Galatians. Nevertheless, in Romans, the law functions more as a persuasive device than as a tool for rebuking, as noted by Keener (2009:16). The law was central to 1st-century Judaism, and they would have approached it with great awe and reverence, as it was seen as life giving. Paul argues rhetorically that the law highlights death and is unable to give life and to reflect God’s righteousness because of sin.

Sanders (1977), one of the forerunners to the *New Perspective on Paul*, argues that the way in which the initial attitude towards the law in 1st-century Judaism was portrayed by the Reformation as a legalistic religion, was wrong. Carson and Moo (2005) write:

After a study of Jewish sources likely to give us evidence about 1st-century Jewish beliefs, Sanders concluded that these sources unanimously portray a view of soteriology that he dubs “covenantal nomism”. (p. 376)

According to Sanders (1977:75), God chose Israel, and his gracious choice was the basis for their salvation. Jews did not have the law to be saved (as the Reformers suggested: justification by faith) – they were already saved and justified. Carson and Moo (2005:379) admit that many Jews did indeed view obedience to the law within a covenant context and, according to Sanders (1977:422), they obeyed the law to keep or maintain their covenant status. They obeyed the law to ‘stay in’ not to ‘get in’ (Carson & Moo 2005:376). So, according

to Sanders (1977:544) and the New Perspective view, for 'I' to 'stay in' obedience to the law is emphasised. What Sanders highlights, is the importance of the covenant as the basis for Jewish life and thought, however, it is evident that certain Jewish groups in Paul's day thought of themselves as being 'in' while other groups were 'out' (Carson & Moo 2005):

[T]hus the effect of national election had been replaced by a form of individual election ... For such groups, 'getting in' is not simply a matter of God's grace revealed in the covenant. More is involved, and at least some of that 'more' appears to involve human works. (p. 382)

This statement by Carson and Moo already goes against Sanders in his generalisation of the Jewish soteriology. For Carson and Moo (2005):

[A]ny faith that emphasizes obedience, as Judaism undoubtedly did, is likely to produce some adherents who, perhaps through misunderstanding, or lack of education, turn their obedience into a meritorious service which they think God must reward. (p. 382)

In ancient times, a Jewish individual under the law might have been influenced by a form of retribution theology, motivating them to do good. This perspective can be inferred from the following sentiment: 'For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do' (Rm 7:15b).

However, Paul argues to the reader the impossibility of obeying the law perfectly and the inability to do 'good' (Rm 7:18b). Because the notion that, if grace 'gets you in', your 'perfect' obedience must 'keep you in', is exactly the notion that Paul argues is an impossibility. This would have undoubtedly awakened a 'lived experience' in the 1st-century Jewish and Gentile reader. Carson and Moo (2005) write that:

Paul takes the language from the Old Testament, but he moves it in a different direction by universalizing the human condition. Jews themselves, in the light of God's revelation in Christ, can no longer claim to be 'right' with God; they are 'out' and need to 'get in', just as much as Gentiles (Rm 1:16–17; Rm 3:22–24). (p. 385)

Because the principles are universal – we all fall short (Rm 3:22–24) and the inability to reflect God's righteousness (Rm 7:7–8; 13–14; 8:2–4), the aim is to arouse a 'lived experience' in all readers at all times. However, one must keep in mind that '[P]aul does believe that all people have sinned, but his supporting arguments use the rhetoric that was effective in his setting' (Keener 2014:423). Keener continues (2014):

Paul thus challenges not Jewish people or Jewish views as a whole but some Jewish attitudes and practices ... For Jewish people, observance of the law was a matter of culture regardless of views about salvation. (p. 423)

Much has been said on how the Jews viewed the law. Jews were probably in the minority within the Roman church (Rm 1:13; 16:4). So, what about the Gentile 'readers'? What was their disposition to the law and Paul's letter?

The church in Rome most probably stemmed from Jewish believers (Ac 2:10), but also reached beyond the Jews, calling those 'among all the gentiles' (Rm 1:5). Because of the diverse cultural orientations in congregations in Rome, it should be no surprise that misunderstandings arose between the groups that mainly had a Jewish ethos (Keener 2009:12). There were obviously some issues between the Jews and the Gentiles, and Paul addresses these in the letter (Rm 1:6; 2:9–10; 3:9; 9:24; 10:12). Jews believed they were chosen people in Abraham. For Keener (2009:13), 'Paul shows that God's sovereignty means that chosenness for salvation need not rest on ethnicity (ch. 9, especially vv. 6–13)'. However, Paul quickly challenges the Gentiles leaning toward viewing themselves as superior and he shows that God has not abandoned his plan for the Jewish people, but also include the Gentile converts as part of that plan; and they must not look down on those who follow the law and not Jesus (Rm 11). Believers are to serve one another, which is 'the heart of the law' (Rm 13:8–10). The Gentiles in the congregation must stop looking down on those believers who are attached to the kosher laws (Rm 14:1–15:7).

According to Keener (2009):

[I]n practical terms (highlighted in ch. 14), such unity would require a common understanding of the law that provided obedience to its spirit without constraining Gentiles to adopt its Israelite-specific details (2:14, 29; 3:27, 31; 8:2–4; 13:8–10). (p. 14)

This common understanding of the law is what allows Paul to use Scripture throughout the body of the letter for Jews and Gentiles – 'For everything that was written in the past was written – teach us, so that through endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope' (Rm 15:4). Being part of this Christian community – Gentiles that are converted to Christianity, and Jesus himself being of Jewish descent – a mutual understanding of Scripture was required. The language Paul uses, assumes that these Christians (Jew and Gentile) do have a mutual understanding. For Keener (2016b):

Paul first establishes what was probably not actually in dispute among believers in Jesus: that the Gentile world (i.e., unconverted non-Jews) did not know God (cf. Gl 4:8; 2 Th 4:5). This premise will prepare for Paul's argument that possession of the Torah, a revelation far superior to what Gentiles possessed, does not guarantee that Paul's own Jewish people know God adequately either (cf. Rm 2:1–29). (p. 2)

The initial attitude or disposition of the original readers has mostly been established, but what is the reader's attitude in receiving a letter from Paul who wants to persuade the first reader that, although the law is good and from God, it is neither able to 'save', nor has it the power to keep you 'saved', because of the readers inclination to sin? Paul was convinced he was an apostle like the other apostles (1 Cor 9:1), and the Lord himself called him to this position (Gl 1:1). Paul claimed an authority that was equal to Peter, James and John, and the rest of the apostles – of whom some demanded to be

'super-apostles' (2 Cor 11:5). He claimed that what he wrote was 'the Lord's command' (1 Cor 14:37). According to Carson and Moo (2005):

[W]hile not perhaps conscious of writing inspired Scripture, Paul's apostolic stance enables him to interpret the Old Testament Scriptures with sovereign freedom and to make demands on his people that he considered to be as binding as anything in Scripture. (p. 370)

It seems that when a letter arrived from Paul, it was taken seriously. Literacy in the Roman world was around 10% (higher for elite urban males). Many people in the congregation would be unable to read. Reading was done aloud, even in private. Churches receiving Paul's letters would read them publicly in the congregation's service, most likely by those who most often read Scripture in the meetings (for those who had Scripture scrolls). Keener (2014:420) points out that '[r]eaders might try to help communicate the thought with appropriate intonation and gestures'. Many epistles in the New Testament simply assumed that the entire local church or congregation or all the congregations of the city or the region would hear the text read aloud (Col 4:12; Th 1 5:27; Rv 1:3) (Dudrey 2003:235).

Keener (2009) writes:

His [*Paul's*] rhetoric, no less than his use of the Greek language, is constructed to appeal specifically within a particular setting. Such polemical rhetoric was expected and necessary for successful debate in Paul's day. Indeed, Paul fashions his polemic in such a way that even his detractors would have been forced to condemn the figure he caricatures. Today we can learn from Paul's message while aesthetically appreciating his plethora of figure of speech and rhetorical devices that displayed his brilliance while holding the original audience's attention. (p. 9)

Reading the same passage today, the 'reader', in a noticeably obvious way, approaches the passage very differently than that of the first readers of the pericope. According to Waaijman (2002), who writes about the way in which the 1st-century Christians viewed the Old Testament:

People spoke succinctly of 'Scripture', a usage taken over by Christians. (Jn 2:22; Ac 8:32; Tm 2 3:16; Mk 12:24; 1 Cor 15:34 – obviously referring to the Old Testament). In a literal sense of the word Scripture is prescription: written beforehand; recorded as example, imposed with the view to compliance or observance; prescribed as binding. Although the prescription arose from experience and aims at making this experience accessible, it has its own status: it institutes a spiritual architecture. The prescription precedes the experience. (p. 712)

Today a believer might view the New Testament as something that was experienced in the past, written down, and became Scripture for Christians by God's providence. Waaijman (2002:712) writes, '[o]n account of this priority and authority that attaches to those prescriptions, these texts are surrounded with special reverence and respect. They are called "holy Scripture".' In many other Christian communities (including my own) they often talk about the 'Word of God'

(Schneiders 1999:40). The 'law' (*νόμος*) is essentially prescriptions, and according to Waaijman (2002):

This designation brings to the fore an essential aspect of Scripture: the word in which God communicates himself to humankind to point out to it the way of life. Jews, and later Christians, expressed this reality with the word 'testament'. Scripture was understood as a covenant, that is, as God's self-obligation in relation to his people. (p. 713)

Paul, in alignment with the new covenant of Jesus Christ, points to Jesus as the way of life and not the law (Rm 7:25). Waaijman (2002:713) continues, 'Toward this the spiritual mode of reading advocated by Jews and Christians is directed: step-by-step the reader is led into Scripture so that God can fully express himself'.

Why is the initial attitude of the 'reader' important? According to Schneiders (1999:39), the 'Word of God' is, metaphorically, God's self-gift of revelation and, like the sacraments (Baptism and the Eucharist), the sacred Scripture have to be received like these sacraments, which is sacred, and full of metaphorical meaning. Because Scripture is, in accordance with Schneiders (1999), God's self-disclosure, God invites us into his interior. Schneiders (1999) writes:

But unless the other accepts the invitation and reciprocates, revelation does not achieve itself ... the biblical text as meaningful is the sacrament of the word of God, that is, of the mystery of divine revelation. It is sacrament in the fully actualized sense of the word only when it is being read, when it is coming to event as meaning through interpretation. (pp. 34–43)

The point here is not whether there is an agreement on her way of viewing Scripture or not, but the initial attitude or stance. For the Roman congregation, receiving a letter from Paul would have been taken very seriously because of his apostolic authority. The way the reader today views Scripture will have an impact on how it is received. As Schneiders (1999) points out:

[T]he danger of magic (viewing Scripture as some kind of talisman) and idolatry (idolising the Bible as an object) is not to be underestimated, but neither should it lead to irrelevant casualness in our approach to this text that represents the permanent possibility of the event of revelation in our midst. (p. 43)

In agreement with Schneiders, the text is not to be elevated to 'god status' and be idolised, but neither should it be approached just by means of a casual reading and application, nor is the text just a historical and literary document. The attitude with which the text is approached, determines the way in which it is going to be received.

The performance of the text

A structural analysis is done to help view the specific units of the text (repeats, contrasts, explanations, results, and the solution), and to show how Paul constructed his argument. A diagram is constructed that visually support the units of the pericope or text (Figure 1).

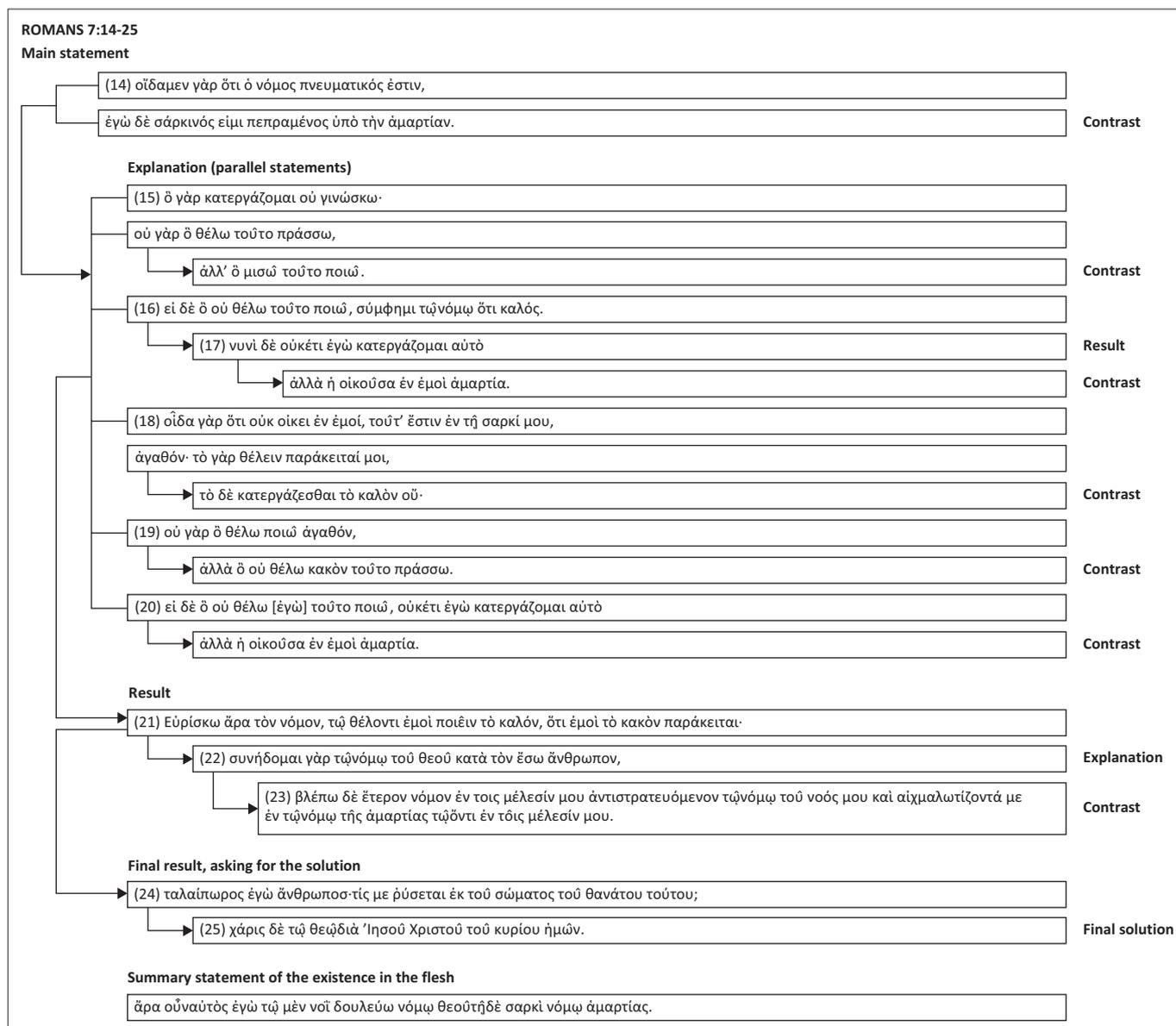


FIGURE 1: Analytical outline of the pericope.

The performance of the text engages the world of forms, sounds and character. It involves the senses and imagination of images within the text. For Waaijman (2002:730), '[t]he text cry out to be performed'. The text evokes a reading of participating – a performance that is understood somatically (Waaijman 2002:713). The 'I' used by Paul is not biographical, even though it is a first-person pronoun. Longenecker (2016) writes:

[K]ümmel's view of Paul's gnomic use of 'I' in 7:7–25 has been supported by such scholars as Günther Bornkamm, Ernst Fuchs, Karl Kertelge, Jan Lambercht, Ernst Käsemann, and Otto Kuss. (p. 653)

As mentioned earlier, the 'I' is a rhetorical Stilform. Longenecker (2016) points out that the 'I':

[W]as not always intended to portray the situation of the teacher himself who was giving the teaching, but was often meant to be understood in gnomic or general sense as including all people. (p. 653)

With this in mind, some scholars have carried the rhetorical analysis too far. But here Paul is creating a rhetorical imaginative image of struggle, contrast, and tension. Iser writes (1978):

The combined efforts of author and reader bring into being the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. Art exists only for and through other people. (p. 108)

According to Van der Merwe (2015):

[T]he physical images, material objects, attitudes or events described in the text are imaginatively experienced. The reading process then facilitates the passive fusion between meaning of a text and the experience of the text in the mind of the readers. (p. 6)

Similarly, Iser (1978) writes that:

[T]he reader is involved in composing images out of the multifarious aspects of the text by unfolding them into a sequence of ideation and by integrating the results products along the time axis of reading. Thus, the text and reader are linked together, the one permeating the other. (p. 150)

In other words, as the text is read, the readers' imagination creates images of what the text presents, and this is created subjectively and selectively. Iser (1978) continues:

Thus the meaning of the text can only be fulfilled in the reading subject and does not exist independently of him; just as important, though, is that the reader himself, in constituting the meaning, is also constituted. (p. 150)

Van der Merwe (2015) concurs:

The successive images again progressively constitute a certain configuration to generate both a field of meaning and experience. Such a configuration is then understood, interpreted and applied in the lives of readers. (p. 6)

Within the reading process, while the text is being performed, meaning and experience is found, awaking a spiritual reality. It could be that, while reading, the 'reader's' imagination creates images, because he or she relates or recognises the experience being read. In the process, the reader then seeks to understand what this text is saying, interpret what the text actually intends and then meaning is applied to the text and to the reader.

The fact is that the 'I' character of the written discourse was constructed rhetorically to have a particular effect on a reader. Paul intended to engage the reader – there is a noetic component to the literature. In this vein, Schneiders (1999:148) writes that '[t]he iconic text intends to open before the reader a world of possibility, a way of being, that the reader must assess and either accept or reject'.

Paul's argument starts with something the original readers would be quite familiar with, namely 'the law is spiritual' (Rm 7:14a). This is a positive statement, but is contrasted immediately with a negative: 'but I am of the flesh, sold under sin' (Rm 7:14b). Iser (1978) writes:

What is known as the "eye-voice span", when applied to the literary text will designate that span of the text which can be encompassed during each phrase of reading and from which we anticipate the next phrase: ... decoding proceeds in "chunks" rather than in units of single words, and ... these "chunks" correspond to syntactic units of a sentence. (p. 110)

The eye-voice span is the distance that the eye is ahead of the voice when one is reading out loud. What Iser is saying, is that, while reading, these 'chunks' out loud, anticipation and interpretation is already identifying meaning even before the words are read out loud.

In the structural analysis, specific units are clearly identified: it starts with the main statement in Romans 7:14, followed by two parallel statements of explanation (vv. 15–20). These statements are contrasted by undesirable outcomes (Iser 1978):

[B]ecause each sentence can achieve its end only by aiming at something beyond itself ... all the sentences in a literary text, the correlates constantly intersect, giving rise ultimately to semantic fulfilment at which they had aimed. The fulfilment, however, takes place not in the text, but in the reader. (p. 110)

Paul wants the virtuous reader to experience and imagine ultimate hopelessness in that 'I' knows the law, but is unable to practice it, no matter what he does (Rm 7:24). According to Keener (2009):

[E]ssentially Paul already outlined this contrast before depicting it: the past life 'in the [sphere of] the flesh', when the law stirred the body for death (7:5), differs from current freedom from the law in living by the Spirit (7:6). (p. 93)

Although Paul already outlined the contrast earlier in Romans 7, it is only here that he is depicting the hopelessness through a vivid image of struggle or contrast and inability to do what is good. Iser (1978:110) writes, 'In brief, the sentences set in motion a process which will lead to the formation of the aesthetic object as correlative in the mind of the reader'. The statements and assertions Paul makes in his argument serve to point the way towards what is to come, which is then experienced or imagined by the reader as he or she is reading. The text fashions a world with its own dynamics, and the reader or interpreter is drawn into that world and discovers an identity in a reality that challenges or replaces the reality of the reader's world. If the reader is successfully drawn into that world of the text, the text is doing what the author intended it to do.

The continuing impact

Jerome (347–420) (is an '[e]arly church father and translator of the Latin Vulgate') compares the reading of Scripture to 'the hoisting of our sails for the Holy Spirit without knowing at which shore we will land ...'. There is first of all the hoisting of the sails. Every skipper knows all the planning that needed to rig up a ship, certainly when it concerns a seaworthy vessel. Then there is the blowing of the Spirit: one can hoist all the sails one wishes, but when there is no wind, the ship will not move forward. (Waaïjman 2002:709)

What impact should this pericope have on the original reader and the reader today? Is there any relation? According to Thiselton (1980:11), '[h]istorical conditioning is two sided: the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition'. Thiselton (1980) continues:

[T]he biblical text comes alive as 'speech-act' ... when some kind of correspondence or inter-relation occurs between the situation addressed by the biblical writer and the situation of the modern reader or hearer. (p. 436)

The text impacts both the original and contemporary readers by showing us that 'trying our best' can neither transform nor deliver.

According to Keener (2016a:10): 'Scripture already holds authority and is true, but it is experienced as authoritative, for example on matters of forgiveness, when one personally embraces its truth'. When reading the pericope something happens to the reader's personal collection of experience. It cannot remain unaffected, as Iser (1978) states:

[B]ecause our presence in the text does not come about merely through recognition of what we already know. Of course, the text does contain a good deal of familiar material, but this usually serves not as confirmation, but as a basis out of which new experience is to be forged. (p. 132)

In other words, deliverance and renewed thinking already starts with the reading of Paul's rhetoric.

According to Iser (1978):

[W]hat actually happens during this process can again only be experienced when past feelings, views, and values have been evoked and then made to merge with new experiences. The old conditions form part of the new, and the new selectively restructures the old. The reader's reception of the text is not based on identifying two different experiences (old versus new), but on the interaction between the two. (p. 132)

In Romans 7:23, Paul refers to a depraved mind, an old way of thinking, a mind under the flesh (v. 25). Just a few chapters later Paul refers to a renewed mind (Rm 12:2) that involves recognising and affirming the 'newness' initiated in Christ (7:6), which is contrasted by the old way of thinking. This does not mean that old experiences are totally erased and replaced; they are, in fact, evoked, but, as the mind is renewed, it conforms to the image of Christ (Rm 8:29) (internally transformed and delivered) – a new way of thinking that is very hopeful. According to Van der Merwe (2015):

[t]he familiar experiences are only momentary; their significance changes during the course of reading. The higher the frequency of these moments, the clearer will be the interaction between the present text and past experience. New experiences then emerge when the experiences that have been stored are reconstructed. Such reconstruction is what provides to new experiences their forms. (p. 8)

This makes reading the text a 'lived experience', but we can only embrace Paul's message when we recognise (this is Paul's aim) our need for the agency of God, the Holy Spirit (Rm 8:1–17). Keener (2016b) writes:

[M]ost of us thus find ourselves in a predicament similar to that of the ancient philosophers, trying (at best) to transform ourselves by new beliefs without acknowledging dependence on God's Spirit ... Contrary to what all of our training leads us to expect, this experience comes not through wrestling with the idea of Spirit intellectually but simply by entrusting (faith – accepting God's truth) ourselves to the one who gives the Spirit. (p. 259)

Waaijman (2002) in addition writes:

The reading must allow itself to be inwardly moved by the Spirit: the speech of the Inexpressible. And finally, there is the place of arrival: reading Scripture touches the shoreline of life just as a ship reaches the seashore. The ongoing effect of reading in ordinary life belongs essentially to the reading of Scripture. The Word of God is not pondered with phrases but fulfilling it after having grasped it. (p. 709)

Meaning is fulfilled, because Paul's argument in its context makes sense. It makes sense, because it reaches into the reality of truth. When an argument makes sense and the truth, claims within the pericope, is true, then there is meaning. When Paul's argument is grasped, it brings the appropriate meaning to life in the world of the reader – meaning that is properly understood, impacts, because it embraces the truth of God's gift of righteousness, rather than struggle to achieve it. This is the process of the renewal of the mind (Rm 12:2). The new approach can actually fulfil God's will, because the Spirit knows it, motivates it, and empowers the believer.

Conclusion

Reading, negotiating, and participating with the text is a way of bringing together Paul's fundamental idea of the text into the world of the reader, and by a spiritual reading a 'lived experience' is discovered that is able to transform or deliver. The quest starts by reading the text, and not just reading at face value, but an intentional reading of the text that involves the attitude of the reader, the performance of the text and, most vital, God in the text that reaches into the reality of truth. Without God, the text is neither sacred nor is the lived experience spiritual. God is central within the pericope, being the hope in despair. Amid 'I's' lament (Rm 7:24), comes a sudden answer of thanksgiving (v. 25). The law is impotent to deliver 'I' from sin, but the struggle is necessary to point 'I' to the answer by grace: 'Thanks (χαρις) be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!' The act of spiritual reading becomes a 'lived experience'. As the reader actively thinks, contemplates, and participates in the text, something happens within the reader. The writer captures and holds the attention of the reader. This attention is not held by just relating to the text somehow, but by recognising the experience and by challenging or undermining certain beliefs. In this moment, the 'old way' of thinking in the act of reading, becomes intertwined with a 'new way' of thinking or with the renewal of the mind. Is there a relation between the 'I' of Romans 7:14–25 and a 'lived experience'? There is, because the experience and a spiritual reality is created by the reading of the text.

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The author declares that no competing interest exists.

Author's contributions

J.L.d.P. is the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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