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Paul, Sin and Satan: The Root of Evil according to Romans

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In this paper I will examine Paul’s personification of sin and his use of the term “Satan” in Romans.¹ I seek to understand the relationship between the two terms. Does Sin personified refer to Satan, or not? A comparison of two titles, one of an article, the other of a book, puts the question in relief. Davies’ classic study Paul and Rabbinic Judaism includes a chapter dealing with Paul’s understanding of σάρξ and πνεῦμα; it is entitled “The Old Enemy: The Flesh and Sin.”² This may be contrasted with the title of Forsyth’s impressive study of Satan: The Old Enemy: Satan and The Combat Myth.³ The titles show two conflicting views of what the original enemy is: sin or Satan. The first assumes ethical dualism, the second cosmological dualism; they may also be considered prophetic and apocalyptic interpretations of evil, respectively.⁴ The question is, which view does Paul have?⁵

There are difficulties inherent in studying any aspect of Paul’s theology. All of Paul’s writings are occasional letters, written in response to specific questions or to address specific situations. None is intended to be an exhaustive systematic theology. There are many things Paul does not mention in his letters, which are normally considered central to Christian teaching, such as information on Jesus’ life and teaching. How is Paul’s silence in these areas to be interpreted? Did he not know about these traditions, did he not care about them, or is it perhaps so that he believed his readers were sufficiently well grounded in these traditions that he did not need to remind them of them in his letters? In the case of the traditions

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Doc. Thomas Kazen and the anonymous reviewer of SEÅ for their constructive comments which have made this a better article, and to Prof. Donald Hagner for his encouragement over the years.
² Davies 1980, 17.
³ Forsyth 1987. Forsyth does not include Davies’ work in his bibliography. It seems the expression “the old enemy” goes back to Dante’s Divine Comedy, Purgatory, Canto XIV.
⁴ Forsyth 1987, 302–303.
⁵ This is one of a series of articles on Biblical and Qur’anic texts relating to Satan; see Löfstedt 2009 and references to other articles there.
about Jesus’ life and teaching, I believe the last answer is most plausible. But it is more difficult to judge which explanation for the paucity of material in the Pauline epistles regarding Satan is best. Another difficulty any study of Paul’s theology has to face is deciding which texts are actually authored by Paul and thus accurately represent his thought. I will focus on Romans, where Pauline authorship is virtually undisputed, but in trying to understand his thoughts in that letter I will occasionally make references not only to his undisputed letters, but also to other letters traditionally ascribed to Paul. I suspect that most of these letters were in some sense authored by Paul; he would be responsible for their general contents, while specific formulations would often be the work of a secretary (as is probably the case with many of the undisputed letters as well). But even if some of these letters were written after Paul’s death, as many scholars believe, they would have been written by Paul’s earliest interpreters, and can still cast light on Paul’s thoughts. The view of Satan that is developed in Ephesians differs so strongly from that in Romans, however, that I will leave a deeper analysis of it for another occasion.

In the Synoptic Gospels, the devil is referred to frequently under various names (devil, Satan, Beelsebul, the tempter, the evil one) and works through various people, including Peter (cf. Mark 8:33) and Judas (cf. Luke 22:3). He even gets to share the stage with Jesus in the desert (Matt 4; Luke 4). Paul refers to the devil on occasion, but not frequently. The word ὁ σατανᾶς occurs in Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 5:5; 7:5; 2 Cor 2:11; 11:14; 12:7; 1 Thess 2:18; 2 Thess 2:9. The word ὁ διάβολος (with probable reference to the devil) is found in Eph 4:27; 6:11; 1 Tim 3:6,7; 2 Tim 2:26. Βελιαρ is found in 2 Cor 6:15. ὁ πονηρός (the evil one) is found in Eph 6:16; 2 Thess 3:3. ὁ πειρατζων (the tempter) occurs in 1 Thess 3:5, where it probably has the same referent as Satan a few verses earlier (1 Thess 2:18). In addition Paul refers to “the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient” in Eph

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6 For evidence of Paul’s use of a secretary, see especially Rom 16:22. Differences in style, vocabulary, and theology between the letters may also be attributed to the occasion of the letter, the language of his addressee, and Paul’s own theological development. For a critical discussion of the authorship of the Pauline epistles and a strong defence of Paul’s authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy, see Johnson 2001, 55–90.

7 In 1 Cor 12:7 Paul does not use the definite article; in the other verses he does.

8 The authorship of both Ephesians and the pastorals has been questioned in part because of the use of this noun (Lincoln 1990, lxv). Paul also uses the word διάβολος in the plural, but then in reference to human slanderers (2 Tim 3:3, Tit 2:3).

9 In both cases these could grammatically be neutrers, but it is not the most likely interpretation.
2:2. Several of Paul’s letters do not include the word “Satan” or any of these equivalents; these include Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, Titus, and Philemon.¹⁰

In his longest letter, the epistle to the Romans, Paul writes extensively about sin and human nature, but curiously he does not explicitly bring Satan into the equation at all. In fact he mentions Satan only once in this letter, in the closing section (16:20). If Paul had a worldview characterized by cosmological dualism, where God is engaged in a battle with his evil counterpart for human souls, we would expect him to emphasize the role Satan has in causing people to sin. This is what he does not do in Romans.¹¹

Personification of sin

What Paul does in Romans is write about sin. He does not write much about specific sins (although he gives several examples of sins in Rom 1:18–32), more about sin in general. His language strikes the casual reader as odd. He writes about sin as though it were a person. For example, he writes: “sin (ἡ ἁμαρτία) came into the world through one man, and death came through sin” (διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας) (Rom 5:12);¹² “just as sin (ἡ ἁμαρτία) exercised dominion in death” (5:21); “do not let sin (ἡ ἁμαρτία) exercise dominion in your mortal bodies” (6:12); “sin (ἡ ἁμαρτία), seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness” (7:8); “apart from the law sin (ἁμαρτία) lies dead” (7:8); “when the commandment came, sin (ἡ ἁμαρτία) revived” (7:9); “For sin (ἡ ἁμαρτία), seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me” (7:11); “sold into slavery under sin (τὴν ἁμαρτίαν)” (7:14); and the classic line: “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin (ἡ ... ἁμαρτία) that dwells within me” (7:20). This personification of generic sin in the singular is unusual, and in Paul’s letters we find it almost exclusively in Romans.¹³

The literally minded reader may ask, How can sin come or go anywhere by itself? How can it spread from person to person? How can sin

¹¹Paul does mention angels, powers and rulers in Rom 8:38–39, but these terms are interspersed with abstract nouns such as life, death, height and depth, and the catch-all phrases “things present,” “things to come” and “anything else in all creation,” and his point is that these are all powerless in face of God’s love in Christ Jesus.
¹²Unless otherwise specified, all Biblical quotes are from the NRSV.
¹³Outside Romans we find this trope in 1 Cor 15:56, Gal 2:17, Gal 3:22 (Dunn 1998, 111).
exercise dominion? How can sin seize an opportunity? How can sin kill a
person? How can sin in fact do anything? How can sin have a body, and
how can this body be destroyed (Rom 6:6)? How can sin be dead if it was
never alive to begin with? And how can it come back to life? The literal
reader may notice that these things Paul says of sin are reminiscent of
what has been said of Satan elsewhere in the New Testament and Chris-
tian tradition: Paul said that sin exercised dominion in death (Rom 5:21),
while Heb 2:14 identifies the one who has power over death as the devil;
he used people’s fear of death to hold them in slavery (Heb 2:15). Paul
says that sin produced covetousness (Rom 7:8). Traditionally, Christians
consider Satan the source of temptation; it is presumably him that Paul
refers to in 1 Thess 3:5.\footnote{“I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted
you.”} It was Satan who tempted Christ (Matt 4:1, Luke 4:2), and according to
traditional Christian exegesis, it was Satan in the guise of a serpent that
caused Eve to covet the forbidden fruit. It was the serpent in the garden
that deceived Eve (Gen 3:13), while Paul says he was deceived by sin (Rom
7:11). Finally, unlike Paul, we do not normally blame Sin for our sins (Rom
7:20), but we might say, “The devil made me do it.”

Thus the reader may conclude that when Paul personifies “sin” he
really means Satan, in the same way as Swedes have referred to the devil
as Skam, “shame.”\footnote{Cf Svenska Akademins Ordbok, s.v. Skam: “Mer eller
mindre eupemistisk benämning på djävulen.”} Perhaps Paul is avoiding naming Satan, and calls him
“Sin” just as other devout Jews avoid naming God, but instead speak of
“the Lord,” “the heavenly Father” or even “the Name.” This is how Dio-
dore of Tarsus (d. ca. 390) interprets Paul’s words in Rom 7:8 (“sin, seiz-
ing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of cov-
etousness”):

By sin, Paul presumably means the devil. For just as Scripture sometimes
calls the Savior life and righteousness because he is the source of life and
righteousness, so it calls the oppressing power by what it causes - some-
times sin, sometimes lie, sometimes death.\footnote{Bray, ed., 1998, 183}

Didymus the Blind (ca. 313–398) interprets the word “sin” in Rom 7:11
(“For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and
through it killed me”) the same way: “Paul calls nothing sin except the
one who is the source and begetter of sin, viz., the devil.” The exegete
known to us as Ambrosiaster (fourth century) offers the same interpre-
tation of this verse: “Sin in this verse is to be understood as the devil, who is
the author of sin.” As Fitzmyer points out, Paul clearly alludes to the
paradise narrative in this verse. The same verb is used both here and in the
paradise narrative; “The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me
(ἡπατησέν με), and I ate’.” (Gen 3:13, LXX). If we accept the tradi-
tional identification of the serpent as Satan, Ambrosiaster’s and Didymus’
interpretation seems reasonable.

If Diodore of Tarsus, Didymus the Blind and Ambrosiaster are correct,
Paul assumes a form of cosmological dualism in Romans. It would be a
modified cosmological dualism; God is still ultimately in control, but sin
would have its ultimate cause outside of man. If Paul intended to speak of
Satan, however, why did he refer to him as “Sin,” thereby making his text

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17 Bray, ed., 1998, 186. Actually Didymus offers two contradictory interpretations of “sin”
in this passage; the first is this: “The word sin does not refer to a particular substance but
to the manner and life of one who has sinned.”
18 Bray, ed., 1998, 186. See also Ambrosiaster on Rom 6:2: “We died to sin, which is the
devil” (Bray, ed., 1998, 183).
19 Fitzmyer 1993, 468. In Rom 7:11 the verb is prefixed ἔξηπατησέν, but it is still recog-
nizable as the same verb.
20 Dunn (1998, 112) suggests that the personification of sin in Gen 4:7 may have inspired
Paul’s own personification of sin. The Hebrew text of this passage may support the above
mentioned interpretation of Paul’s language. The Lord says to Cain, “If you do well, will
you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for
you, but you must master it.” This verse is notoriously difficult; the Hebrew word for “sin”
(hattat) is feminine, but the participle and pronouns which it seems to govern are masu-
cline. Assuming that the manuscripts are not corrupt, the best explanation for the odd
grammar is that the author is personifying sin as a masculine figure. In the same way,
Qoheleth, a feminine particle, is used of the author of the book with the same name, in
which case it governs masculine participles and pronouns (Hamilton 1990, 227). In the
case of Gen 4:7, it is possible that the author wishes the reader to make a connection be-
tween sin and satan, a masculine noun, and this would explain why he uses masculine
participles and pronouns. In other words, the author (or final editor) intended for the reader
to interpret the personification of sin here as Satan. If this interpretation of Gen 4:6–7 is
correct, it would support Diodore’s interpretation of sin personified in Romans. To my
knowledge, no one has put forward this interpretation earlier, although some have come
close. Westermann (1994, 300) notes that several commentators have suggested that in
Gen 4:7 sin is described as a demon. He rejects this interpretation “because it is difficult to
imagine such a personification (demonizing) of sin in so early a text” and because “there is
nothing like it anywhere in the Old Testament.” Tractate Sanhedrin 91b comes close to
associating sin with Satan in Gen 4:7; in response to the question “From what time does
the Evil Tempter hold sway over man?” the Rabbi bases his answer on Gen 4:7; thereby in
effect identifying the evil tempter (or evil inclination) and sin as it is personified there (cf.
much more difficult to understand? Paul is of course never easy, and it is possible that he used this expression to show the close connection between Satan and the sins of the individual, just as he seems to use faith and Christ in whom faith is placed and from whom it comes as virtual synonyms in Gal 3:23 (see below). Other NT authors also closely connect Satan and sin. In John’s Gospel it is written “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34), and a little later it is said of the same people, “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44), suggesting that personified sin is equivalent to the devil for that author. But I would expect Paul to somewhere in Romans clarify his reference by using the term “Satan,” if that is what he refers to, for the equation is not self-evident. But this he does not do. In fact, the only time that Paul does identify sin with a person in his writings he identifies it with Christ (2 Cor 5:21), which shows that his personifications do not have the same referent everywhere, but have to be interpreted in the light of each context where they occur.

Paul personifies freely

To understand what Paul intends when he personifies sin in Romans, it helps to look at other personified nouns in his writings. In addition to personifying sin, Paul also personifies death in this letter. See for example Rom 5:12: “just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin”; Rom 5:14: “death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses”; Rom 6:9: “death no longer has dominion over him”; Rom 8:39: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” He personifies death in 1 Corinthians also: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor 15:26; see also 1 Cor 3:22; 15:55). Paul speaks of death being an enemy, exercising dominion and being destroyed, but few theologians argue that death is a cosmic power, in the same way as they argue that Satan is a cosmic power; Diodore constitutes an exception. There are precedents for personifying

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21 As is admitted in 2 Pet 3:16.
22 “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.”
23 For a more detailed study of personification in Romans, see Dodson 2008.
24 But see Fitzmyer (1993, 412): “Death is … a personified cosmic force.” Byrskog (2006, 140) disagrees with Fitzmyer: “Sin and death are not so much cosmic powers as destruc-
death in pre-Christian Jewish literature; compare Wis 1:16: “But the ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away and made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his company.” But this passage does not mean that the author believed death was a person, an independently acting being. We have to grant him poetic licence; his language in this verse is poetic in other respects as well. In Revelation death is also represented as something quite concrete, as it is thrown into the lake of fire together with Hades (Rev 20:14). Revelation is filled with symbolic language, and it would be foolhardy to interpret these symbols literally, and then read them into Romans. In short, we do not have sufficiently good reasons for interpreting death in Romans as a person.

In Romans, Paul also personifies the law; see for example, “But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied” (Rom 5:20). “The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came” (Gal 3:24). Although his readers may feel enslaved by the law, Paul does not intend for us to understand the law as a cosmic power. He explicitly rejects the equation of the law and sin (Rom 7:7), and specifies that the law is holy (Rom 7:12). The law does have power over people – but it is not a cosmic power. By the word “law” Paul means something quite concrete; in most contexts he is thinking of the Law of Moses.

Paul personifies the flesh in his letters, and contrasts it with the Spirit; see for example Gal 5:17: “What the flesh (ἡ σάρξ) desires is opposed to the Spirit”; Gal 5:19: “The works of the flesh (σάρξ) are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry”; Rom 8:9: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.” When Paul contrasts the Spirit and the flesh, he is developing a contrast that is found in the Markan narrative of Jesus speaking to his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane: “the Spirit is willing, but the flesh (σάρξ) is weak” (Mark 14:38). In Paul’s usage, σάρξ is usually not simply the human body, though it can have that meaning (1 Cor 15:39; cf. also Eph 5:29). When speaking of the physical body, Paul usually prefers the more...

tive forces in people’s reality.” (my translation) (“ Synden och döden är inte så mycket kosmiska makter som destruktiva krafter i människans verklighet.”)

26 But see Forsyth (1987, 274): “Like Satan, the Pauline law is the great accuser.”
27 But see 1 Cor 15:56: “the power of sin is the law.”
28 Cf. Dunn (1998, 133): “As a rule we can assume that when Paul spoke of nomos and ho nomos he was thinking of the Torah.”
neutral term σάρξ. What meaning does Paul then give σάρξ? Some interpreters argue that just as the (Holy) Spirit is a force whose origin is external to the individual, the parallelism between spirit and flesh requires us to conclude that for Paul the flesh too is a cosmic power originating outside the individual. For example Cousar writes, “For Paul Spirit and flesh are not components of a dualistic human nature, but cosmic realities external to individuals.” The flesh would then be a power on the par with Satan. Cousar’s interpretation is far-fetched and Dunn rightly rejects it: “there is no good reason to see in Paul’s usage a concept of flesh as a principle of sin or as a hostile cosmic power.” Cousar’s interpretation of σάρξ would be akin to the Gnostic disdain for physicality, which Paul does not share. Indeed, Paul rejects extreme asceticism (1 Cor 7:1–7; cf. also Col 2:20–23). Fitzmyer offers a better explanation of Paul’s use of the term σάρξ: it is “that aspect of the human person which is native and not oriented to God, but inclined toward limited, earthbound horizons. It is not evil in itself, but is powerless to do good.” Though Paul personifies flesh, he does not think of it as a cosmic power.

Among the “powers” hostile to Christ that Paul speaks of in his letters are sin and death. They are powers, but that does not mean they are spiritual beings. The fact that Paul uses personification so frequently suggests that we need not immediately look for spiritual beings behind every personification. Death is a reality, but calling it a person does not help us understand its power. The same holds true for sin. The flesh and the law may also exercise power over an individual, but unlike sin and death they are not inherently hostile powers.

In Romans Paul also personifies abstract nouns with purely positive connotations, for example grace: “just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 5:21). If we maintain that “sin” in this verse is a cosmic power, should we also interpret “grace” as a cosmic power? What in that case do we mean by the term cosmic power? In Galatians Paul personifies faith and uses it as a virtual equivalent of Christ: “Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded

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29 Cousar 1996, 153
30 Dunn 1998, 66
31 Fitzmyer 1993, 474. See also p 127. See Davies (1980, 19) for a similar interpretation of sarx.
32 Cf. Dunn 1998, 110
33 Contra Barrett (1962, 148), writing regarding Rom 7:20, “Evil behaviour is caused by sin, a personal power residing in and dominating the flesh.”
under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:23). “Faith” may seem equivalent to Christ here, but most likely Paul means that the way to justification through faith became revealed only after Christ had come. It seems more natural to assume that Paul enjoys using metaphors than to assume that he wants his readers to believe that the world is filled with all kinds of supernatural powers. Paul was more sophisticated in his use of language and literary tropes than some interpreters have wanted to credit him for. No one takes Paul literally when he says that Hagar is a mountain (Gal 4:25). So why should anyone feel forced to believe that Paul thought of everything he personified as independently existing and acting persons? It seems more reasonable to assume that in most cases, Paul uses personification mainly “to persuade the reader of the importance of the image personified.”

A more compelling parallel to Paul’s personification of sin is his personification of darkness. It is reasonably clear that in Paul’s letters the law, the flesh and death do not refer to spiritual powers. But in Paul, darkness personified may well refer to a spiritual power. Paul also speaks of darkness as though it could act; compare Col 1:13: “he has rescued us from the power of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom of his Son.” Strictly speaking, darkness doesn’t have any power, or “executive authority” which the word ἐξουσία denotes according to Dunn. Should “darkness” therefore be equated with Satan in this verse? Is Paul saying that the devil’s power over a person is replaced by Jesus’ rule? In support of this interpretation we may compare Paul’s account of his conversion experience, as Luke tells it. The Lord announces to Paul, “I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:17–18). In these verses darkness and Satan are clearly associated. Another name for Satan in Jewish texts from the first century is Beliar, and Paul closely associates Beliar and darkness: “What partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement

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34 Cf. Betz (1979, 176): “Before Christ’s coming, faith existed only exceptionally in Abraham and in Scripture as a promise. It became a general possibility for mankind only when God sent his son and the Spirit of his son.”

35 Dodson 2008, 159. Dodson does identify several other important uses of personification in Romans as well.

36 Dunn 1996, 78
does Christ have with Beliar?” (2 Cor 6:14–16). There are then good reasons for interpreting “darkness” in these passages as referring to Satan.\(^{37}\) In describing Satan and his allies as darkness, Paul follows a well-established Jewish tradition. Lange finds a parallel to Paul’s personification of darkness in an incantation found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, where it is said, perhaps of Belial, “Who are you, [oh offspring of] man and of the seed of the ho[ly] ones? Your face is a face of [delus]ion, your horns are horns of illu[s]ion. You are darkness and not light, [injus]tice and not just-\(^{38}\) We find further examples of darkness being closely associated with evil in the Qumran Community Rule (1QS 1:9–10; 3:24–25 etc.) and War Scroll (1QM 1:1; 1:8–14; 13:5–16).

We cannot equate darkness with Satan everywhere in Paul’s letters. For example, Paul writes, “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light” (Eph 5:8). Here substituting “darkness” with “Satan” is less fitting. Paul clearly uses darkness as a metaphor for evil, but we don’t have to see it as evil incarnate in each instance. Just as disciples may be said to be light in so far as they are in the Lord, who is light (compare 1 Thess 5:5), so too they may be called darkness, in so far as they serve the prince of darkness. Nevertheless, in some contexts in Paul, most clearly Col 1:13, it is reasonable to see “darkness” as referring to Satan. Here we would then have a parallel that gives us support in interpreting Sin personified as Satan.

Are there other spiritual beings?

One reason that we hesitate in interpreting Pauline personifications in general and sin personified in particular as necessarily referring to spiritual beings is that Paul does not seem to share many of the preoccupations of his more apocalyptic contemporaries. Beker writes,

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\(^{37}\) Cf. Dunn (1996, 77), re. Col 1:13: “In this context it [i.e. the antithesis between ‘light’ and ‘darkness’] is not simply the obvious moral antithesis familiar in Jewish wisdom … but the eschatological dualism of apocalyptic.” Compare also Jesus’ words to the chief priests and temple officers as he is arrested: “This is your hour, and the power of darkness” (Luke 22:53). The Greek phrase translated “the power of darkness” is the same as in Col 1:13 (Luke 22:53: ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ σκότους; Col 1:13: ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους). See also Bruce (1988, 467), re. Acts 26:17–18: “The ‘dominion (ἐξουσία) of Satan’ is the ‘dominion (ἐξουσία) of darkness’ (Col 1:13).”

\(^{38}\) 11QapocrPs, Martinez and Tichelaar 1998, 1203. Lange (1997, 381) believes these verses refer to Beliar.
when we compare Paul’s writing to Jewish apocalyptic literature (4 Ezra; Apocalypse of Baruch; Qumran) and to, for example, the apocalyptic section of Ephesians, we notice that he uses little of the traditional apocalyptic terminology. … Paul does not engage in apocalyptic timetables, descriptions of the architecture of heaven, or accounts of demons and angels. … The major apocalyptic forces are, for him, those ontological powers that determine the human situation within the context of God’s created order and comprise the “field” of death, sin, the law, and the flesh.⁴⁹

Paul remains a staunch monotheist; he holds firmly to the creed that God is one. He not only believes that Israel is only to worship its God, but that this is the same God that all nations shall worship. He asks: “Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one” (Rom 3:29–30). There is only one God (Rom 16:27; 1 Cor 8:6; Gal 3:20).

On occasion Paul may seem to fudge, and to grant existence to foreign gods:

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be many so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor 8:4–6)

On a simple reading, Paul seems to grant that the gods the heathen worship may yet exist. But it is unlikely that Paul with his strong Pharisaic background believed in the existence of the heathen gods. He writes the way he does because he knows that some people experience these gods as quite real. Paul is telling his congregation in Corinth to refrain from eating food offered to idols, if eating this food may cause brethren in the faith who still believe in the existence of the pagan gods to stumble (1 Cor 8:7). Though these are not really gods, people can still be enslaved to them, if they act as though they could command obedience.⁴⁰ Paul makes a similar point in the following passage:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God,

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⁴⁹ Beker 1980, 145
⁴⁰ So also Dunn 1998, 37; Fee 1987, 379.
or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? (Gal 4:8–9)

Paul denies that the pagan gods are really gods; there is no god to compete with God. But while he is convinced that pagan gods are not gods, might Paul nevertheless believe they exist, but only as demons? In the passage above, as translated by the NRSV, Paul seems to redefine these gods as elemental spirits, which would support this interpretation. It is questionable whether that is the best translation of στοιχεῖα however. Betz translates it instead “elements of the world” and Longenecker renders it “basic principles,” arguing that what Paul is referring to here is primarily “Torah observance,” and that “Paul lumped the pre-Christian religious experiences of both Jews and Gentiles under the same epithet.” 41 Contrary to Betz who interprets Paul as saying of the pagan gods that they “do have an existence, but only as inferior demonic entities,” Longenecker argues “Paul’s words here … seem to imply quite clearly that he saw no reality to the claimed existence of the pagan deities.” 42 Perhaps Longenecker is too quick to demythologize Paul, however. Paul elsewhere seems to assume the existence of demons. Compare for example 1 Cor 10:20, where Paul writes: “I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons.” 43 If, as we shall see is the case, there is room for angels of various kinds in Paul’s worldview, it is hard to understand why demons could have no place there. In short, for Paul, demons may exist, but his point is that they cannot command obedience. 44

Considering that Paul believes that there is only one God, we may ask whether the existence of an independently existing evil counterpart to God fits in his worldview. Is it reasonable to interpret sin personified as Satan, or to take Paul’s language about Satan literally? Paul is a Pharisee, and one of the distinguishing characteristics of Pharisees according to Luke is that they believe in angels (Acts 23:8). Paul does not say much about angels in his letters, but he does not question their existence. He reminds his readers in Galatia that the law was given “through angels by a mediator”

41 Betz 1979, 213; Longenecker 1990, 180, 181.
42 Betz 1979, 215; Longenecker 1990, 179.
43 Fee (1987, 771) interprets this: “The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to a being who might rightly be termed God.”
44 Compare Betz 1979, 215: “those beings do have an existence, but only as inferior demonic entities.”
(Gal 3:19). He proclaims that Christ was seen by angels (1 Tim 3:16). He insists that women cover their head for the sake of the angels (1 Cor 11:10). If Paul did not believe in the existence of angels, his argument would have no force. He believes he himself stands “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels” (1 Tim 5:21). In Paul’s worldview, angels are part of God’s creation (Rom 8:38–39), but they are not all good. He reminds his readers in Corinth that those who are in Christ will one day judge angels (1 Cor 6:3); he takes the factuality of this assertion for granted. Clearly, the angels that will be judged are guilty of something. He raises the possibility that angels may try to separate believers from the love of God (Rom 8:38–39). There is room then in Paul’s worldview for angels, both good and evil, and if there is room for evil angels, there is also room for the leader of the rebellious angels, Satan.

As was mentioned earlier, Paul does refer to Satan (using different names) in several of his letters, although he does not say that much about him. Like other NT authors, Paul associates Satan with angels, speaking of a messenger (or angel) of Satan (2 Cor 12:7), and saying, “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). Satan tempts people (1 Cor 7:5; 1 Thess 3:5), and he causes them trouble (1 Thess 2:18), but Paul says nothing of Satan accusing people before God, or of rebelling against God. This does not mean he did not subscribe to these standard descriptions of Satan’s roles, but it does suggest that for Paul the traditional picture of Satan was not all that important.

In his letters, Paul takes it for granted that Satan exists, but he does not give Satan a central place in his theology. Satan is not a counterpart to God. He is not all-powerful; like all other powers and forces named in Rom 8:38–39, like everything else in creation, Satan cannot “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Paul assumes that Satan is under God’s control. This is made most clear in 2 Cor 12:7: “To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me.” In the context, we can assume that the verb ἐδόθη ("was given") is intended as a divine passive; God allowed this messenger of Satan to torment Paul. Furthermore, Paul is sure that if it were his will, the Lord could also free him from that “thorn in the flesh”

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45 Forsyth (1987, 260) notes, “Every time Paul uses the word Satan he is referring to the opponent of human salvation, not to the figure that does battle with Michael in the Book of Revelation.”
46 See also 2 Thess 3:3.
that is tormenting him (2 Cor 12:7). Satan’s subservience to God is also suggested by Paul’s use of the article. Dunn notes that when Paul uses the word σατάνας in his letters he almost always uses the definite article. Dunn takes this as evidence that Paul shares the Old Testament view of Satan as “a force hostile to God but permitted so to act by God to serve his will.” Dunn is implying that the presence of the article means “satan” is not being used as a personal name, but more as a job designation. Although he is singularly unpleasant, Satan is still in God’s employ.

Satan in Romans

Paul writes very little about Satan in his letters. In Romans, Paul is even more careful; he refers to Satan only once, even where referring to him more often may have made his argument easier to follow. It is only toward the end of Romans that Paul refers directly to “Satan”: “The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet” (Rom 16:20). Paul seems to be alluding to a known tradition. It is debated which tradition this is. Paul may be borrowing the imagery from Gen 3:15, as expressed in the MT (“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel”). If this is correct, he may be referring to the snake in the paradise narrative as Satan. Or he may simply be saying, in the same way as Eve’s offspring crush snakes underfoot, so God will crush Satan under your feet. It is not certain that Paul is alluding to Gen 3:15, however; he may equally well be alluding to Ps 110:1 (“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool”). Paul may also be referring to Ps 8:6 (“You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet”), or to two or more of these verses. Whatever the source of Paul’s allusion, this passage does not say much about the origin and nature of evil. When Paul is speaking of the Satan here, he most likely has in mind those people “who cause dissentions and offenses” (Rom 16:17) for members of the congregations in Rome. In a similar manner Jesus referred to Peter as Satan, when Peter tried to dissuade him from following the

48 The exception is 2 Cor 12:7. The synoptic Gospels sometimes use the article with this noun, and sometimes they do not (cf. Mark 3:23, Luke 22:3).
49 Dunn 1998, 37–38
50 Scholer (1990, 53) finds this connection more plausible.
path God had chosen for him.\textsuperscript{51} Rom 16:20 may be compared to James 4:17 (“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”), where the devil is also referred to in what seems to be stereotyped formula. It is good rhetoric, but not necessarily more than that.

One place where we might expect Paul to refer to Satan is in connection with the fall of man. Paul alludes to the narrative of the fall of man in Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:21–22; 2 Cor 11:3 and 1 Tim 2:13–14. Unlike later theologians, he does not use this as a proof text documenting Satan’s involvement in causing sin. In the Paradise narrative, Satan is not identified as the tempter. The Genesis text speaks merely of a cunning snake, one of the animals God created. Later Christian theologians have identified the serpent in Paradise as Satan or at least Satan’s agent; it is possible that the author of Rev 12:9 did so, Irenaeus clearly does so.\textsuperscript{52} Whether Paul had made this equation, we do not know. But in his letters he nowhere explicitly refers to Satan as the one who tempted Adam and Eve. In one place he writes of the serpent deceiving Eve (2 Cor 11:3), in another he writes that she was simply “deceived” (1 Tim 2:14); who deceived her, Paul leaves unsaid. What Paul does say is that sin came into the world through one man (Rom 5:12); he does not say it came into the world through the devil. Paul’s view of sin is consistent with his learned Jewish background, and is comparable to that of James.

No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. (Jas 2:13–15).

In this dogmatic statement James does not allow the reader to blame anyone but himself and his own desires for his sin. Yet this conviction does not keep him from personifying desire, sin and death.

Paul writes, “we were enemies to God” (Rom 5:10; compare Rom 11:28). It is worth taking those words seriously – according to Paul we humans were God’s enemies, we were not just a battlefield in a cosmic fight between God and the devil. Nowhere does Paul absolve people of responsibility for their actions, not even in Rom 7:20. Paul is aware that

\textsuperscript{51} According to Fitzmyer (1993, 746), Paul “interprets the serpent of Genesis as Satan, the personification of all evil, disorder, dissention and scandal in the community.”

\textsuperscript{52} Forsyth 1987, 346-347; see Adv. Haer. 4.40.3 (?) and 5.21.1.
the sin that keeps him from doing what he knows to be right is partly his own product, although he would rather blame his “flesh” than his mind (Rom 7:18).

If Sin personified does not refer to Satan, what does it refer to?

I believe that while Paul does not question Satan’s existence, he does not use the personification of sin simply as another way to refer to Satan, contrary to Diodore, Didymus and Ambrosiaster. Paul chooses to speak of sin for a reason. When Paul speaks of sin in Romans 5–8, he is speaking of all sins and every sin. Every sin helps separate man from God; every sin makes this world a little worse; every sin encourages more sin.

But evidently, in Paul’s usage sin does not only refer to individual acts that violate God’s will. Sin is not just an individual isolated act; were sin only individual acts, the individual would in theory be able to rid himself of sin. But Paul maintains with the Psalter, “There is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10, quoting Ps 53:3), and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Fitzmyer puts it well: “Harmatia is the personified malevolent force, Sin (with capital S) hostile to God and alienating human beings from him.”

Sin is a force. When Paul says “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me” (Rom 7:20), he is describing the same experience of being led into temptation that others attribute to Satan; one experiences a persuasion that is contrary to one’s own ideal self, but which one cannot plausibly claim has a physical source.

Paul tells his readers to withstand temptations to sin. “Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies” (Rom 6:12). Still, he believes that left to our own devices we are incapable of freeing ourselves from sin. In this sense sin is a power much larger than any individual, it is a power that controls the whole human race. It is a power that keeps people from turning to God. It is a power that only God can defeat. But it is not an independently acting supernatural being.

Does Paul’s personification of sin correspond to the Hebrew yetzer ha-ra, variously translated “evil impulse” or “evil inclination,” that which “urge[s] or incline[s] man to all sorts of sins”? Davies is certain that Paul was acquainted with the doctrine of the two impulses. He notes that there

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53 Fitzmyer 1993, 411
54 Davies (1980, 21): “We can be sure… that in contemporary Rabbinic circles Paul would be familiar with the doctrine of the yetzer ha-ra and yetzer ha-tob.”
is no single generally accepted Greek equivalent to yetzer ha-ra, and is convinced that Paul uses several terms as equivalents to yetzer ha-ra, including “the old man,” “the sinful body,” “the body of this death,” “the mind of the flesh” – and “sin.” Later commentators seem less persuaded. Thus, while he notes the similarity between the rabbinic doctrine of yetzer ha-ra and Paul’s pessimistic view of human nature, Dunn does not equate Sin personified with yetzer ha-ra. Porter is also sceptical of Davies’ interpretation, noting the difficulties in dating the rabbinic doctrine of the two inclinations and the differences in substance between the teaching of Paul and the rabbis.

The rabbinic doctrine of the evil inclination is in part based on verses such as Gen 8:21 which reads, “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth,” and Gen 6:5, where it is said of humankind before the flood, “every inclination of their hearts was only evil continually.” While these two verses sound exceedingly pessimistic about people’s possibility to do good, the rabbinic doctrine is also influenced by Ben Sira, who offers a more optimistic view of human nature, suggesting that man is completely capable of controlling the evil impulse:

Do not say “It was the Lord’s doing that I fell away”; for he does not do what he hates. Do not say, “It was he who led me astray”; for he has no need of the sinful. The Lord hates all abominations; such things are not loved by those who fear him. It was he who created humankind in the beginning, and he left them in the power of their free choice [yetzer]. If you choose you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. (Sir 15:11–15)

According to some descriptions of rabbinical Jewish thought, the doctrine of the two impulses in effect replaces cosmic dualism, which had characterized the thought of Jewish groups such as the Essenes, with psychological dualism. But this is an oversimplification; just as Sin personified has many characteristics in common with Satan in Romans, so too some rabbis tended to see the evil impulse as a cosmic power. In b. B. Bat. 16a, commenting on the book of Job, it is written,

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55 Davies 1980, 26
56 Dunn 1998, 81, 84
57 Porter 1990
59 Compare RSV: “It was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination” (Sir 15:14).
60 Cf. Werblowsky and Wigoder 1997 (s.v.Yetser ha-ra and yetser ha-tov), 742–743.
Resh Lakish said: Satan, the evil prompter, and the Angel of Death are all one. He is called Satan, as it is written, And Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord. He is called the evil prompter (FN: Heb. Yezer Hará’). [We know this because] it is written in another place, [Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart] was only evil continually61

Thus, in the third century some rabbis clearly identified yetzer ha-ra with Satan.62 Davies writes that the rabbis taught “it was wise to adjure the evil impulse by an oath in the name of the Lord,”63 in other words treating it in the same way as one might a demon, or Satan himself. Rabbi Judah (150 CE) spoke of the ultimate defeat of the evil impulse in words reminiscent of Christian teaching about Satan: “In the world to come God will bring the Evil Impulse and slay it in the presence of the righteous and the wicked” (b. Sukkah 52a).64 In the medieval Jewish Kabbalah the yetzer ha-ra is also identified with Satan.65 Thus, what is sometimes understood as an impersonal urge has also been understood as a personal tempter in Judaism. If these rabbinic quotes are consistent with Pharisaic Jewish teaching from the first half of the first century, it is possible that Paul’s personification of sin was intended to correspond to yetzer ha-ra. Both expressions could serve as rough equivalents of the term “Satan,” but without the immediate associations of cosmological dualism. Yet while these rabbinic parallels are intriguing, Classical Greek and Roman literature offer a closer parallel to Paul’s language, as we shall shortly see.

Why does Paul refer to Satan less often in Romans than in other letters?

Why does Paul say so little about Satan in Romans in comparison with his other letters? It is likely that Paul adjusts his language to his audience. Paul accommodates his behavior to the people he is ministering to. He is a Jew to Jews, and a Greek to Greeks (1 Cor 9:20–22). He will not eat meat offered to pagan gods, not because those gods have real existence, but

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63 Davies 1980, 22–23
64 Quoted in Davies 1980, 23.
65 Werblowsky and Wigoder 1997 (s.v. Yetser ha-ra and yetser ha-tov), 742–743
because it may cause those who have believed in those gods to stumble. In the same way, Paul also accommodates his words to his audience. Where his brothers and sisters in the faith experience the temptation to sin as coming from an exterior power, Paul will identify that power as Satan, and assure his readers that Christ has defeated it. Where his brothers in Christ do not have as dualistic a worldview, as the congregation in Rome, Paul downplays the cosmological dualism. When he writes to congregations where traditional folk belief is strong, he speaks in terms of angelic forces (principalities, powers, rulers and authorities); this is the case in his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians and his first letter to the Corinthians. When, as in Romans, he writes to an urbane, largely Jewish congregation, he speaks rather of sin. He does on one occasion in Romans (8:38–39) mention angels and demons, and rulers and powers and a host of abstract nouns, but only to show their relative weakness.

Nowhere in his letters does Paul speculate about the nature of spiritual beings. In his writings he wants to address specific needs. Dunn writes,

> It would seem that Paul refers to such heavenly beings as opposed to God’s purposes, not so much because he had clear beliefs about them himself, but because he needed terms to speak of the all too real supraindividual, suprasocial forces of evil which he experienced and saw at work, and because these were the terms which expressed widely held current beliefs.  

I suggest that in writing to the more sophisticated and urbane congregation in Rome, whom he has not yet met, and taking into consideration its vulnerable Jewish minority, Paul is more cautious in his language than he is in other letters. In writing to the sophisticated, largely Jewish congregation in Rome, whom he has not yet met, Paul is more cautious in his language than he is in other letters. He is more hopeful about the fate of his fellow Jews, avoids the confusing allegory of Sarah and Hagar he used in Galatians (compare Gal 4:22–31 and Rom 9:7–9), and his presentation of the origin of evil is firmly orthodox: he lays all the blame on humans, none on spiritual powers that may threaten the notion of monotheism.  

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66 Reid 1993. For carefully constructed and well documented arguments for understanding terms relating to powers in Ephesians and Colossians in terms of folk belief, see Arnold 1989, 1996.  
67 Dunn 1998, 109  
69 Dodson (2008, 210) suggests that one reason Paul preferred to personify sin rather than attribute evil to the devil was to stress “humankind’s responsibility for evil.”
Paul largely avoids speaking of Satan in Romans, because Satan can be a problematic term. The term conjures up an evil spiritual being, a counterpart to God; when this term is used in theology, difficult questions inevitably arise. Why did God create Satan, when did he become evil, why is he allowed to continue to exist? Nowhere in the Bible are these questions answered. When Paul uses the abstract noun “sin” instead, these questions do not arise. Some of Paul’s Roman readers may not have believed in the existence of Satan, while it was easier for them to accept the ubiquity of sin. The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, a contemporary of Paul, wrote about the ubiquity of sin in language very similar to Paul’s; he writes, for example,

We have all sinned, some more, some less, some with determination, some by accident or induced by the depravity of others. Some of us had good intentions but lacked the firmness to stick to them and lost their innocence against their will and resistance. And we did not only fail in the past but will continue to do so until the end of our lives. (Clem. I 6:3)

Human nature produces deceitful characters, ungrateful ones, covetous ones, impious ones. When you have to judge the behaviour of one individual, consider what is common. (Ira II 31:5) 70

We do not know whether Paul had read Seneca, although it is not unlikely. 71 According to Acts 18:12ff., Paul did meet Gallio, who was Seneca’s brother. 72 Whether Paul had read Seneca or not, Paul’s pessimistic view of human nature would have been understood by his Roman readers, while a text saturated with apocalyptic imagery may have been misconstrued. Paul’s personification of sin echoes not only the few verses in the Hebrew Scriptures mentioned above, but also works of classical literature, including Euripides’ works Medea (1076–1080) and Hippolytus (377–383) and Ovid’s Metamorphoses 7.17–21, as Byrskog has pointed out. 73

Paul has several good reasons for writing about Sin personified rather than Satan. It is a concept that he can assume his urbane readers know

70 Seneca, quoted in Haacker 2003, 128–130.
71 An unknown theologian in the early Church saw the similarities in their thought, and expressed it in the form of a fictitious exchange of letters between Paul and Seneca. For an insightful reading of Paul in the light of contemporary Stoic philosophy, see Engberg-Pedersen 2000.
72 Haacker 2003, 130
73 Byrskog 2006, 185–186
well. It allows him to remind his readers of their responsibility for their sins, and does not encourage speculations about why God would allow a supernatural adversary to exercise authority.\(^7^4\) In some respects personification is the ideal solution to a theological problem. When Paul personifies sin he is can present sin as a force that the reader must seriously contend with. But since personification is a transparent rhetorical device, Paul does not have to commit to the reality of its personhood.\(^7^5\) Nevertheless, personifying sin is not without its problems.

How is sin transferred from one person to another?

According to Paul’s account, sin came into the world through the first humans. He does not say anything about Satan playing a part. As long as we assume that Satan is the ultimate source of temptation, it is relatively easy to understand how it is that everyone succumbs to sin; we are all continually being lured to sin by a ubiquitous supernatural opponent. But Paul does not appeal to Satan to explain the ubiquity of sin in Romans. Instead he tries to develop another explanation for the spread of sin:

> Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned – sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not yet reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. … For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to the justification and life for all. (Romans 5:12–14, 19)

These verses are notoriously difficult, but Paul’s main intent is reasonably clear. He wants to present Jesus as the second Adam, the human who stayed obedient to the Father, and so fulfilled God’s plan for humanity. But in the process Paul says something about how sin spread to mankind. Most difficult is the proper translation of the phrase “and so death spread to all because all have sinned.” On the basis of the usage of the prepositional phrase in contemporary Greek texts outside the Bible, Fitzmyer argues that the proper translation of the problematic phrase \(\varepsilon \phi \ ο \ παντες\)

\(^7^4\) So Dodson (2008, 147): Paul personifies Sin “to distance God from the origin of evil in the world.”

\(^7^5\) Dodson (2008, 150) suggests that Paul often uses personification “to get around difficult issues.”
And so death spread to all human beings, with the result that all have sinned.” If Fitzmyer’s translation is correct, Paul is saying that people sin because they are mortal. Indeed, Paul considers death (not sin) the final enemy; see 1 Cor 15:26: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” But Fitzmyer’s interpretation is rather counterintuitive – why should mortality cause sin? Does he mean that the fear of death is the ultimate reason for the selfishness that gives rise to sin, as the author of Hebrews seems to claim? Or does Fitzmyer mean that mortality is an example of man’s imperfection, an imperfection that also leads them to sin? Perhaps what Paul wishes to say is that to be mortal is to be sinful – Jesus being the notable exception (cf. “God, by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” Rom 8:3) – and that it is because of his limitations that man sins. Man is no longer the good creation he once was. He is defective.

Fitzmyer argues his interpretation well, but not all have been persuaded. It is significant that no early Christian commentator seems to have understood Rom 5:12 in the way Fitzmyer does. The traditional translation, “And so death spread to all, because all have sinned,” is consistent with what Paul writes elsewhere in Romans, for example, “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23; see also Rom 1:32; 8:13). Additional evidence that Jews in the first century believed that sin causes death, not the other way around, may be found in 2 Esdr/4 Ezra 7:48, dating from the end of the first century CE: “For an evil heart has grown up in us, which has alienated us from God, and has brought us into corruption and the ways of death.” The traditional translation of Rom 5:12 is problematic primarily because it can be taken to imply that even stillborn children, for example, have sinned, which is counterintuitive. Perhaps Paul expresses himself unclearly because he had not fully developed his understanding of how sin became ubiquitous. He knew that it was ubiquitous,

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76 Fitzmyer 1993, 405
77 "Since then, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb 2:14–15)
78 Moo (1996, 322) finds “because” to be the best interpretation of this phrase in this context, although he grants “the evidence in its favor is not nearly as strong as some suggest.” See also Dunn 1987, 273.
80 See also 2 Bar 54:15–19 (ref. in Davies 1980, 32-33).
81 See Cranfield (1975, 279): “those who die in infancy are a special case, and Paul must surely be assumed to be thinking in terms of adults.”
just as his contemporary Seneca did, and he knew it was somehow connected with human mortality. He knew that Christ had broken the bonds of death and that he had broken the power of sin by offering forgiveness, by fulfilling God’s plan for humanity through his perfect obedience, and by giving the Holy Spirit to his followers. But he is struggling over how best to explain this propensity to sin. Psychological terminology was not well-developed yet. The notion of the conscience was being developed by Seneca, Paul himself, and others writing at this time.\textsuperscript{82} Perhaps he had no better recourse than to personification to describe the conflicting feelings people have regarding the things they do.

Conclusion

Paul’s teaching regarding the cause of moral evil in Romans corresponds closely in my view to that of James and is also close to that of contemporary Roman Stoic philosophy. It may also have had much in common with contemporary learned Jewish theology, although Paul was more pessimistic regarding the innate goodness of humankind. Like James, the Stoic philosophers, and many early rabbis, in Romans Paul traces the cause of sin to human urges, rather than to Satan. Satan is mentioned once in Romans, but he does not play a necessary role in the theology of this letter.

Has Paul demythologized Satan and replaced him with Sin? In Romans he has taken steps in that direction. As Dunn writes:

> Perhaps we have to say that Paul himself engaged in his own demythologization ... For he did believe in spiritual powers and treated the subject with immense seriousness. But the spiritual powers he focused his theological and pastoral concern on were not the “rulers and authorities,” but the powers of sin and death.\textsuperscript{83}

But this demythologizing is not taken to its logical conclusion, Satan is never reduced to the impulse to sin, and Paul never questions Satan’s existence; he presumably continues to take it for granted.

While Paul does not equate Sin and Satan, we have seen how some Christian theologians and Jewish rabbis have made such equations. Is there any significant difference between Sin personified and Satan? Both refer to a power that induces people to do evil, and neither can be defeated

\textsuperscript{82} Cf. Haacker 2003, 130.
\textsuperscript{83} Dunn 1998, 110
by the individual’s own efforts. Perhaps Sin personified and Satan are two ways of looking at the same thing. In writing to the congregations in Rome Paul avoids using much mythological language, in part to avoid alienating his readers, and focuses on the human experience of unsuccessfully withstanding temptation. When Paul personifies sin he is describing the real power that the continual sinning of humans exerts over human-kind. Whether this power corresponds to an independently acting spiritual being is a question he does not raise in this letter. Satan’s existence is not the object of his concern here. He is writing to help the Christian congregations to keep fighting the vicious cycle of sin that is their enemy within. He is not trying to determine once and for all what came first, Satan or the individual sin.

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