

‘Sins’ in Paul

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A familiar feature in Pauline scholarship is the view that Sin as a power, and the concomitant forces of the flesh and death, are the dominant elements in Paul’s account of the human plight. The present article seeks not to deny the significance of these elements, but to argue that equally important are ‘sins’ or individual infractions of the divine will. It is argued here that recent developments in Pauline studies have, in combination, led to an unwarranted downplaying of sins plural. In a number of key passages, Paul includes such acts of transgression in his account of the human plight.

Keywords: Sin, sins, plight, transgression, pre-Pauline, tradition, Paul

Introduction

This article aims to draw attention to and analyse a particular tendency in contemporary Pauline scholarship. According to this tendency, scholars routinely argue that Paul does not really have much interest in ‘sins’ – that is to say, ‘particular infractions of God’s will’. On this view Paul has bigger fish to fry, namely the sinful condition of Adamic humanity, the flesh, and the hostile powers of death, the Law and Sin singular with a capital ‘S’.

There is some basis for this view in statistics provided by the concordance. James Dunn, for example, coming across the reference to ‘sins’ in Galatians 1, comments on the fact that it is unusual, noting its contrast with ‘the more characteristically Pauline singular’.¹ Otfried Hofius remarks in connection with 1 Cor 15.17 that ‘the plural “your sins” is untypical for Paul’.² Morna Hooker notes that ‘Paul normally uses this word in the singular’.³ These observations are undeniably true: in the Nestle–Aland text of the undisputed letters of Paul,

1 J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 43.

2 O. Hofius, ‘The Fourth Servant Song in the New Testament Letters’, *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (ed. B. Janowski and P. Stuhlmacher with D. P. Bailey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 163–88, at 180.

3 M. D. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 21.

the plural of ἁμαρτία appears only seven times, compared to fifty-two occurrences of the singular. One needs to be careful, however, in the conclusions one draws from these facts. Whether the predominance of the singular over the plural form means that Paul is not particularly interested in sins as human actions is what this article will investigate.

This study has two halves. The first part will draw attention to certain trends in Pauline scholarship (some overlapping) which have led to a downplaying of sins plural in the human plight, and of Christ's death as dealing with transgressions. The second will seek to critique this approach, and offer a 'positive' account of the place which sins occupy in Paul's theology. This article does not attempt to replace 'Sin' with 'sins'; indeed its latter part will also touch upon the question of how these two, both of which are very important, might be related.

1. The Lack of Emphasis on Sins in Current Pauline Scholarship

The first half of this article, then, will trace some of the developments within Pauline studies which have shaped what one might neutrally call this lack of emphasis on 'sins' in Paul. These developments include the emphasis on justification to the near-exclusion of forgiveness in Paul, or alternatively a tendency to prioritise participatory or cosmological categories at the expense of forensic elements. This latter tendency in particular has in certain scholarly circles resulted from distinguishing too sharply between pre-Pauline tradition and Paul's mature thought. The aim in this first part is merely to discuss the relevant currents in scholarship, while criticism and a positive account will come in the second half.

1.1 Stendahl's 'Justification vs Forgiveness' Contrast

A trend that is also rooted in an observation about Paul's vocabulary derives from Krister Stendahl's influential essay 'Paul among Jews and Gentiles'. This essay is structured around a series of antitheses in which Stendahl sets out his view of Paul in contrast to what he called the 'western' view but which has now become branded as the 'Lutheran' one:⁴ as is well known, in many ways therefore he was anticipating a number of aspects of the new perspective on Paul. Although his book *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and other Essays* was not published until 1976, the year before Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, it was actually based on lectures first given in English in 1961–3 as the Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological

4 K. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 12 notes Luther in particular and the importance of distinguishing between Paul and Luther. On Luther and Paul, see now J. B. Prothro, 'An Unhelpful Label: Reading the "Lutheran" Reading of Paul', *JSNT* 39 (2016) 119–40.

Seminary.⁵ The particular antitheses are 'call rather than conversion', 'weakness rather than sin', 'love rather than integrity', 'unique rather than universal', and the key one for our purposes here, 'justification rather than forgiveness'.

Stendahl insists on this justification/forgiveness contrast because he sees an obsession with forgiveness as arising out of 'our basic anthropocentric and psychologising tendencies',⁶ whereas Paul's concern in his justification discourse is the healing of human divisions. Stendahl notes correctly that forgiveness is relatively infrequent in Paul, even remarking: 'the word 'forgiveness' (*aphesis*) and the verb 'to forgive' (*aphienai*) are spectacularly absent from those works of Paul which are authentic and genuinely of his own writing'.⁷

This statement, with its apparent redundancy in speaking of 'those works of Paul which are authentic and genuinely of his own writing', needs some unpacking. By 'authentic' Stendahl presumably means to indicate the undisputed letters of Paul, given that Ephesians and Colossians both refer to forgiveness. The statement about what is 'genuinely of his own writing' probably gestures at quotations which appear in the undisputed letters. He views, for example, Paul's quotation of Psalm 32 in Romans 4 as presumably not 'genuinely of his own writing', because it is a quotation. The reference to God removing the sins of Jacob in Romans 11.27 (citing Isa 59.20) might belong in the same category.

1.2 Schweitzer, Sanders and the Participationist/Juridical Contrast

Another very familiar feature of the landscape of Pauline studies is the tendency over the past generation or so to regard participationist elements in Paul's letters and being 'in Christ' as the most important feature of his theology, or at least as closer to the centre than justification and related forensic motifs. This emphasis is often traced back to Albert Schweitzer's advocacy of the view that justification and Paul's forensic language were only secondary, in contrast to the central idea of Paul's 'eschatological mysticism', according to which the believer in the present shared in Christ's death and resurrection.⁸ As in the oft-quoted sentence, for Schweitzer 'the doctrine of righteousness by faith is therefore a subsidiary crater, which has formed within the rim of the main crater – the mystical doctrine of redemption through the being-in-Christ'.⁹

This subsidiary doctrine of righteousness by faith embraced what Schweitzer perhaps rather condescendingly calls 'the simple Early Christian teaching about

5 For a detailed account of the developments of the individual elements of *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, see P. H. Verduin, 'Praiseworthy Intentions, Unintended Consequences: Why Krister Stendahl's Quest for "Healthy Relations" between Jews and Christians Ended Tragically', *Zionism through Christian Lenses: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Promised Land* (ed. C. M. Burnett; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013) 132–61.

6 Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 25.

7 Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 23.

8 On this, see J. Carleton Paget, 'Schweitzer and Paul', *JSNT* 33 (2011) 223–56.

9 A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (London: A & C Black, 1931) 225.

the atoning death of Jesus'; Paul, by contrast, did not 'limit himself' to a doctrine of forgiveness of sins.¹⁰ The clear position of forgiveness and transgressions in the lower echelons of Paul's thought is evident from Schweitzer's remarks about baptism:

He never explains it [sc. baptism] as the appropriation, made by faith, of the forgiveness of sins which has been secured by Jesus' atoning sacrifice. That in itself would suffice to show that the doctrine of righteousness by faith is not the central point of his view of redemption.¹¹

Forgiveness of sins and atoning death, then, are not central; baptism, unconcerned with these elements, does belong to the centre. In fact, Schweitzer can even go on to say: 'The usual Primitive-Christian view of baptism as mediating the forgiveness of sins and the possession of the Spirit is for him something inadequate, which he can even treat with a certain irony.'¹²

At the time, Schweitzer's arguments fell to some extent on deaf ears, but at present scholarship is much more favourable to his conclusions.¹³ A significant impulse for this shift was E. P. Sanders' book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, which – whatever else it may have done – also propounded a view similar to that of Schweitzer. As Sanders puts it there, 'Paul's soteriology is basically cosmic and corporate or participatory'.¹⁴ The covenantal framework of early Judaism in which dealing with sins played a key role has given way in Paul to something quite different. In view of this assessment of the basic structure of Paul's thought, one can understand how an interest in transgressions of God's will might give way to a plight according to which humanity is part of the realm of sin, with the solution consisting in the transfer from one realm to another. For Sanders, 'the real plight of man ... was that men were under a different lordship'; by contrast, 'men's transgressions do have to be accounted for ... But they do not constitute the problem.'¹⁵ Sanders can even fault Paul for not really having an adequate account of transgression and guilt, or not having much of a response to them.¹⁶

10 Schweitzer, *Mysticism*, 63 and 64 respectively.

11 Schweitzer, *Mysticism*, 260.

12 Schweitzer, *Mysticism*, 261.

13 See Carleton Paget, 'Schweitzer and Paul', 245, noting that among reviewers of *Mysticism* 'many objected to the sidelining of Paul's preaching on justification in favour of eschatology'. Reviews of Schweitzer's *Geschichte der paulinischen Forschung* had been even more negative ('Schweitzer and Paul', 232).

14 E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977) 508.

15 Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 500. In all this, Sanders does maintain an expiatory role for the death of Christ. He also discusses the previous generation of scholarship's reflection on sin as transgression and sin as power in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 500–1.

16 Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 501.

Two manifestations of the participatory emphasis push this feature to extremes in different ways, though they are not merely the views of a lunatic fringe but part of the mainstream of debate in current scholarship. For Douglas Campbell, Paul's tongue-twisting gospel is 'pneumatologically participatory martyrological eschatology' rather than about justification by faith or salvation history;¹⁷ more recently he has contended that the plight of guilt incurred by sinning in Romans 1–4 is cast as Paul's explanation of a view with which he disagrees, and that the participationist eschatology of Romans 5–8 is really the core of Paul's thought.¹⁸ In Romans 6, justification is better understood as 'deliverance'. The second maximising of participation is the interest of recent Pauline theology in 'theosis'. Gorman, for example, has argued for 'Pauline theology as a theology of theosis – becoming like God by participating in the life of God'.¹⁹ Others, such as Ben Blackwell, have preferred to use the term 'christosis' for Paul's vision of the destiny of believers.²⁰

1.3 *The Influence of the 'Apocalyptic' School*

Related to this interest in participation as the core of Paul's thought and Romans 5–8 as expressive of Paul's principal interests is what has been called the 'apocalyptic' turn in Pauline theology.²¹ One important aspect of this view is that the prioritising of God's victory in the cross over the hostile powers of Sin, Death, Law and the like means the devaluing of other aspects of the plight: in this case, understanding the cross as dealing with discrete transgressions of God's will.

In recent years J. Louis Martyn has been one of the most eloquent advocates of this view. He articulates the key contrast in his definitions of two opposite systems: 'forensic apocalyptic eschatology' and 'cosmological apocalyptic eschatology', two systems which have 'a specific understanding of what is wrong, and a view of the future'. First, the one he disagrees with:

17 D. A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (LNTS; London/New York: Continuum, 2005) 4 *et passim*.

18 D. A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

19 M. J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 3.

20 B. C. Blackwell, *Christosis: Pauline Soteriology in Light of Deification in Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 5–13 has a very helpful discussion of the use of 'theosis' in recent Pauline scholarship. There are some helpful observations of the problems with 'theosis' as a category in current NT scholarship in G. Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 24–34.

21 I am indebted particularly to David Shaw for his insightful analysis of the apocalyptic school. See D. A. B. Shaw, 'Apocalyptic and Covenant: Perspectives on Paul or Antinomies at War?', *JSNT* 36 (2013) 155–71, and his thesis, 'The Apocalyptic Paul: An Analysis and Critique with Reference to Romans 5–8' (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2018).

Things have gone wrong because human beings have wilfully rejected God, thereby bringing about death and the corruption and perversion of the world. Given this self-caused plight, God has graciously provided the cursing and blessing Law as the remedy, thus placing before human beings the Two Ways, the way of death and the way of life ... [B]y one's own decision one can accept God's Law, repent of one's sins, receive nomistic forgiveness, and be assured of eternal life.²²

According to Martyn this forensic version of events is not only the view of the opponents in Galatia, but also how some scholars such as Dunn interpret Paul – for Martyn, they have got Paul so badly wrong that they attribute to him the view of his opponents.²³ Be that as it may, Martyn articulates his own view of the plight and solution in the cosmological understanding of Paul as follows:

Anti-God powers have managed to commence their own rule over the world, leading human beings into idolatry and thus into slavery, producing a wrong situation that was not intended by God and that will not be long tolerated by him. For in his own time, God will inaugurate a victorious and liberating apocalyptic war against these evil powers, delivering his elect from their grasp and thus making right that which has gone wrong because of the powers' malignant machinations. This kind of apocalyptic eschatology is fundamental to Paul's letters.²⁴

So here, the true plight which Paul identifies as the problem does not consist of sins, which have disappeared in the second account, but of enslavement. (The plight is not a 'self-caused plight', as it is in the Teachers' system.) In Martyn's commentary on Galatians, an individual sin is characterised more as a 'misstep' by someone within the church, rather than as a key element of the human condition.²⁵ In reality the fallen human situation is fundamentally one of being captive to hostile cosmic forces.

Correspondingly, then, the solution does not consist, for Martyn, so much in Christ's sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins; instead, 'human beings are not said to need forgiveness, but rather deliverance from a genuine slavery that involves the Law'.²⁶ The alternative emphasis on dealing with discrete sins is

22 J. L. Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) 299. This is spelled out further especially on pp. 142–4.

23 J. L. Martyn 'Events in Galatia', *Pauline Theology*, vol. 1: *1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (ed. J. M. Bassler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 160–79.

24 Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 298.

25 J. L. Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 97.

26 Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 153. Martyn can also say, however, that Paul may not have given up completely on a sacrificial understanding of the atonement for sins; Paul holds on to the traditional Jewish–Christian understanding of Christ's death (see section 4 on p. 144); for Paul's agreement, see 147, 148.

actually the view of Paul's *opponents* in Galatians, and is rooted in pre-Pauline tradition, to which we now turn.²⁷

1.4 'Sins' and Pre-Pauline Tradition

This leads us, then, into the wider discussion of pre-Pauline tradition and formulae.²⁸ This subject, as an influential factor in the history of New Testament scholarship, would merit a proper study, and there is only space here for a sketch of the most relevant material. The concentration in the summary of scholarship below is on those formulae relating to sins: other passages which have been identified as traditional, such as Rom 1.3–4 and 1 Cor 8.6, will not be the focus.²⁹

Two key pioneers in this project of identifying pre-Pauline statements were Alfred Seeberg and Johannes Weiss, although as we shall see shortly there were precedents already among the Tübingen school in the nineteenth century.³⁰ In 1903 Seeberg's *Katechismus der Urchristenheit* suggested that Gal 1.4 was a pre-Pauline statement because the expression is formulaic.³¹ Weiss's commentary on 1 Corinthians in 1909 made the same point about Gal 1.4 (and also 1 Thess 1.10), and in *Das Urchristentum* (1917) he expanded his collection of formulae to include Rom 4.25 and 1 Thess 5.10, because they too 'sound formulaic'.³² He remarked further: 'If one removes from these passages the specifically Pauline element, what is left amounts to the same thing as the statement in 1 Cor. 15:3, apparently derived from the primitive community.'³³

27 See Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 148, where he describes the view of the 'Teachers' in Galatians as follows: 'Jesus' death is the totally adequate sacrifice made by God himself, the sacrifice in which God accomplished the forgiveness of sins for Israel...'

28 For a brief introduction, see A. M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1940), tracing the history back to Weiss in 1917. For a recent comment criticising the quest for pre-Pauline formulae, see N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK, 2013) 419.

29 V. S. Poythress, 'Is Romans 1.3–4 a Pauline Confession After All?', *ExpT* 87 (1975–6) 182 n. 1 traces the theory of a pre-Pauline origin of Rom 1.3–4 to J. Weiss, *Das Urchristentum* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1917) 89. The first suggestion I have seen of 1 Cor 8.6 as a pre-Pauline fragment is H. Lietzmann, 'Symbolstudien (cont.)', *ZNW* 22 (1923) 257–79, at 268: 'Aber man darf nicht vergessen, daß die Formel auch ohne diesen Hintergrund, losgelöst aus der Umgebung der Gedanken von I Cor, guten Klang in griechischen Ohren hat.' Cf. the first edition of Cullmann's monograph: 'the very ancient two-part confession in I Cor. 8.6, which is probably even earlier than Paulinism' (O. Cullmann, *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1957) 267).

30 A. Seeberg, *Der Katechismus der Urchristenheit* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1903); J. Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909) 347.

31 Seeberg, *Katechismus der Urchristenheit*, 52: the verse is '[eine] Stelle, zu deren Tonart die Berücksichtigung einer Formel jedenfalls trefflich passt'.

32 Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief*, 347 and idem, *Urchristentum*, 75.

33 Weiss, *Urchristentum*, 75; trans. F. C. Grant: *The History of Primitive Christianity* (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1937) 104.

After these initial forays into the investigation of sources from the tunnel period, the task was renewed in the middle of the twentieth century by Rudolf Bultmann – who had of course been engaged in a related task in his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. In his *Theology of the New Testament*, his additional contribution was to see Rom 3.24–5 (along with 4.25) as containing the pre-Pauline idea that Christ deals with sins.³⁴ The parallelism of the latter suggested to Bultmann that Paul was quoting.³⁵ In both cases, Bultmann says of Paul that

he is visibly leaning on traditional formulations, perhaps even quoting them – at least in part. One of these sentences is Romans 3:24f., in which one only needs to set off the specifically Pauline expressions with parentheses as his additions: ‘... justified (by his grace as a gift) through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forwards as an expiation by his blood (to be received by faith); this was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins ... [Bultmann then remarks on the uncharacteristic language of ἱλαστήριον and ‘blood’.] Finally, the idea found here of the divine righteousness demanding expiation for former sins is otherwise foreign to him. Hence, what we are dealing with is evidently a traditional statement, which perhaps can be traced back to the earliest Church. It is the same with Rom. 4:25.’³⁶

The certainty of Bultmann’s conclusion is notable: Rom 3.24–5 is ‘evidently’ a traditional formula, the uncertainty only being about how much earlier than Paul it can be traced back. Käsemann around the same time published a longer discussion of Rom 3.24–6 as a case of Paul incorporating extraneous material.³⁷ One of the indications of this for Käsemann was the presence of ἀμόρημα, an unusual word in Paul, and therefore perhaps suggestive of a non-Pauline origin of Rom 3.25 (in a Jewish-Christian tradition).³⁸ Eduard Lohse later follows him in this.³⁹ More recently, Earl Richard has taken the plural ‘sins’ in 1 Thess 2.14–16 as an indication of the ‘formulaic’ character of this controverted passage, and hints at ‘the plural, a usage which is rare for Paul’ being evidence for its traditional character.⁴⁰

34 R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1948) 47. See most recently T. Carter, *The Forgiveness of Sins* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2016) 188 for Rom 3.25 as pre-Pauline, and see there reference to other recent advocates.

35 Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 47: ‘Ebenso steht es mit Rm 4, 25, einem Satze, der in seiner Form (synthetischer Parallelismus membr.) den Eindruck eines Zitates macht.’

36 Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 47; trans. K. Grobel, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1952), 46.

37 E. Käsemann, ‘Zum Verständnis von Römer 3.24–26’, *ZNW* 43 (1950–1) 150–4.

38 Käsemann, ‘Zum Verständnis von Römer 3.24–26’, 150.

39 E. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht: Untersuchungen zur urchristlichen Verkündigung vom Sühntod Jesu Christi* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963) 150.

40 E. J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 122. On the language of ‘filling up the measure of their sins’, Richard comments: ‘the author borrows a

1.5 *Paul's Relation to Pre-Pauline Tradition*

At least three positions can be identified on how scholars view the status of pre-Pauline formulae.

First, many scholars have held view that these pre-Pauline fragments are to be taken just as seriously in Paul's theology as what (as far as we can tell) are distinctively Pauline theologoumena. Douglas Moo comments, for example, that 'methodologically, it is necessary at least to maintain that whatever Paul quotes, he himself affirms', and cites N. T. Wright in support.⁴¹ John Ziesler makes similar comments several times to the effect that 'even if Paul is quoting, he means what he quotes'.⁴² Or, again, Cilliers Breytenbach: 'Paul cites or alludes to tradition because he agrees to it.'⁴³

Secondly, some tend towards the view that, while not suspect, quoted formulae are not at the core of Paul's thought: what are more important are the distinctively Pauline motifs. This view can be found as long ago as 1868. One of the most widely cited instances of these formulae is of course Rom 1.3-4, where the two-part christological formula is taken by some scholars, because of some un-Pauline phraseology and ideas, to reflect an earlier formula. Carl Holsten, a disciple of F. C. Baur, stated that the reference to Jesus' descent from David in Rom 1.3-4 was an accommodation to Jewish-Christian views, and that these verses are 'therefore no pure expression of Pauline christology'.⁴⁴ One of the results of scholars identifying pre-Pauline formulae, then, can be that the ideas

traditional OT phrase', adding: 'The term *hamartia* ('sin') appears only here in 1 Thessalonians but in the plural, a usage which is rare for Paul, though its appearance in what might be classified a formulaic OT expression would conform to Pauline passages such as Rom 4:7 or 1 Cor 15:3.' Similarly, Furnish states that the reference to filling up sins 'derives from the tradition': V. P. Furnish, *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007) 71. On the other hand, Richard does not include 'sins' in his list of 'non-Pauline or not-frequently-employed terms and expressions' which constitute part of the evidence for the passage being an interpolation (*First and Second Thessalonians*, 125). F. C. Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1875) II.86, considered that the reference to the Jews filling up the measure of sins and receiving the wrath of God at last was a clear indication of the post-70 date of the epistle as a whole, but this was not because of the vocabulary.

41 D. J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 46 n. 31, citing N. T. Wright, 'The Messiah and the People of God' (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 1980) 51-5.

42 J. A. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM, 1989) 111; see also his comment on the alleged pre-Pauline formula in Rom 1.3-4: 'Even if he is quoting, it ought to be added, he means what he says' (*Romans*, 60).

43 C. Breytenbach, 'The "for Us" Phrases in Pauline Soteriology: Considering their Background and Use', *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology* (ed. J. van der Watt; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 163-85, at 177.

44 C. Holsten, *Zum Evangelium des Paulus und des Petrus* (Rostock: Stiller, 1868), 427: 'also zwar kein reiner ausdrück der christologie des Paulus' (lower case nouns original).

expressed in them are best seen as *background* to Paul's thought. What is more at the core of Paul's 'mature' thought is what is *distinctive* to him. Such language is used by Robert Jewett, in his discussion of atonement in Paul:

In view of Paul's other statements about atonement, moreover, it seems unlikely that he shared an expiatory theory, which concentrates so exclusively on the matter of forgiveness, a matter of decidedly secondary interest in his theology. Propitiation also seems far from Paul's intent. The likely alternative is found in 2 Cor 5:19, 21, reiterated in Rom 5.10, where we find a distinctively Pauline formulation of atonement as reconciliation: ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ ... τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ('Because in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ... For our sake he made him who knew no sin to be sin, in order that in him we might become the righteousness of God.')

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Of interest in this excerpt is how what is 'distinctively Pauline' is equated with what is of primary interest to him. The theme of forgiveness, which is of wider currency, is 'decidedly secondary' by comparison. Paul is approached via a kind of 'criterion of dissimilarity', according to which what is central to his thought lies in where he differs from everyone else.

Thirdly, others go further, and here we move to the most radical way in which pre-Pauline fragments are treated. This can be illustrated from how apocalyptically minded readers interpret Gal 1.4, with its reference to Christ ^{44a} who gave himself for our sins, ^{4b} in order to deliver us from the present evil age'.⁴⁶ For Martyn, Gal 1.4a is 'a quotation from an early Christian liturgy, a fragment of a confession in which the human plight is identified as "our sins," and Christ's death is seen as the sacrificial atonement by which God has addressed that plight'.⁴⁷ Although Paul might not explicitly disagree with the fragment, verse 4a is not a merely innocent formula: Martyn comments on the possible use of Gal 1.4a in 'the worship services now being conducted in [the Galatian] churches by the Teachers'.⁴⁸ In Martyn's account of the verse, the apocalyptic note of deliverance is introduced to 'correct' the Jewish-Christian formula's reference to Christ giving himself for our sins.⁴⁹ He writes:

[O]ne point is certain: The formula [sc. in 1.4a] is *to a significant degree foreign to Paul's own theology*, for it identifies discrete sins as humanity's (in the first

45 R. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 286.

46 The comment on Gal 1.4 in M. C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011) 30 emphasises that Christ gave himself for our sins 'to effect not forgiveness but deliverance from an evil realm'.

47 Martyn, *Galatians*, 95.

48 Martyn, *Galatians*, 95.

49 Martyn, *Galatians*, 90. There is a possible inconsistency in Martyn, however, as later he maintains that Paul does not give up the Jewish-Christian formula (*Galatians*, 269; cf. 273).

instance, Israel's) fundamental liability ... Paul, when he is formulating his own view, consistently speaks not of sins, but rather of Sin.⁵⁰

On Martyn's view, then, Paul absorbs the language of Gal 1.4a, but it cannot really be regarded as Paul's own language. Rather, it is 'a quotation from an early Christian liturgy'.⁵¹ Indeed, when Martyn comes to translate Gal 1.1–5 in his commentary, he encloses the words 'who gave up his very life for our sins' in quotation marks, indicating that it is language Paul is citing from elsewhere.⁵² Martyn, then, treats these quotations in a manner similar to Stendahl's treatment of Paul's Old Testament quotations 'not genuinely of his own writing' – only more negatively. One is reminded of William Wrede's strikingly critical assessment of the 'death for sins' formula in 1 Cor 15.3. The idea of Christ's sacrificial death for sins, Wrede says, may have been a part of pre-Pauline Christianity, '[b]ut that Paul also accepted from the tradition the "died for our sins" formula, can only be maintained by a very literalistic interpretation of his words'.⁵³

1.6 Conclusions

The lack of emphasis on 'sins' or 'transgressions' in Paul's theology, then, has resulted from a number of factors. The sharp distinction between justification and forgiveness proposed by Stendahl (section 1.1 above) has combined with the prioritising of participationist categories, according to which justification is either regarded as of subsidiary importance, or understood as transfer language instead of as a forensic term (section 1.2). In apocalyptic construals such as that of Martyn, 'sins' do not really feature in the plight, because that plight is not 'self-caused' or addressed by repentance: rather, the plight consists in enslavement and is addressed by liberation (section 1.3). Across a spectrum of views on Paul, a number of references to 'sins' are regarded as occurring in pre-Pauline formulae (section 1.4). This is not in itself detrimental to the importance of 'sins', but such downplaying does occur when these formulae are not regarded as integral to Paul's thought, but rather as background – or even as antithetical – to it (section 1.5).

2. The Place of 'Sins' in Paul's Theology

The second part of this article aims to offer a constructive alternative, in four stages. First, it will assert that Paul's language of individual transgressions is both extensive and varied. Secondly, it will be shown that 'sins' or transgressions are a

⁵⁰ Martyn, *Galatians* 90 (emphasis added).

⁵¹ Martyn, *Galatians*, 95.

⁵² Martyn, *Galatians*, 81.

⁵³ W. Wrede, *Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1907) 112 n. 9: 'Aber dass Paulus auch das "gestorben für unsere Sünden" aus der Überlieferung erhalten habe ist nur bei sehr buchstäblicher Auffassung seiner Worte verbürgt.'

key feature in Paul's account of the human plight, both Jewish and Gentile. Appended to this discussion is a treatment of some of the most salient points in the question of the relationship between 'sins' and Sin as a power. Thirdly, seeing how Paul's language of transgression is integrated into his soteriological statements will further highlight the importance of that language. Finally, we will see how two of those soteriological statements draw attention to the particular significance of 'sins' as an aspect of the plight which God addresses in Christ.

2.1 *The Abundance and Variety of Paul's 'Transgression' Language*

A first response to claims about the relative insignificance of 'sins' consists in showing the frequency and diversity of the language for individual acts of transgression in Paul, which constitute at least a prima facie case for Paul's interest in 'sins'.

First, there is Paul's usage of ἁμαρτία.⁵⁴ The seven plural references are not insignificant,⁵⁵ and beyond that there are a number of cases of the noun in the singular where the meaning is clearly a human act rather than a personification or a power.⁵⁶ Moreover, a number of other cases are ambiguous, and because there are within Romans 5–8 instances where ἁμαρτία in the singular clearly refers to a transgression, others should not by default be classified as references to 'Sin'.⁵⁷ Even in Romans 6, where there are some clear personifications, ἁμαρτία can equally be paralleled with both God on the one hand (e.g. 6.13) and ὑπακοή or δικαιοσύνη, on the other (6.16, 18, 20). Hence ἁμαρτία in some instances could mean not so much 'a sin' or 'Sin', but 'sin' in the sense of a pattern of life, just as ὑπακοή can refer to the opposite pattern of life. This is not the place to make an exegetical decision on each instance of ἁμαρτία, but it may be an exaggeration to say that Paul usually uses the singular to refer to a power.⁵⁸

Secondly, there are a great many other terms which Paul employs alongside ἁμαρτία to denote generic acts of sinful behaviour. These include in particular παράβασις and παράπτωμα, which appear four times and eleven times respectively,⁵⁹ as well as various other terms which appear once or twice, such as ἁμάρτημα, παρακοή and numerous others.⁶⁰

54 Paul also uses the cognate verb ἁμαρτάνω in the sense of committing particular offences (Rom 2.12 bis; 3.23; 5.14, 16; 6.15; 1 Cor 7.28 bis; 8.12; 15.34), as well as the rare word προσαμαρτάνω (2 Cor 13.2).

55 Rom 4.7; 7.5; 11.27; 1 Cor 15.3, 17; Gal 1.4; 1 Thess 2.16. In the disputed epistles this plural occurs in Eph 2.1; Col 1.14; 1 Tim 5.22, 24; 2 Tim 3.6.

56 Rom 4.8; 5.13b, 20; 14.23; 2 Cor 11.7.

57 Ambiguous cases include at least Rom 5.12a, 12b, 13a; 7.7; 2 Cor 5.21.

58 Pace Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, 21.

59 παράβασις: Rom 2.23; 4.15; 5.14; Gal 3.19; παράπτωμα: Rom 4.25; 5.15 bis, 16, 17, 18, 20; 11.11, 12; 2 Cor 5.19; Gal 6.1.

60 For tabulations of some of the data, see B. F. Westcott, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Macmillan, 1906) 165–6; S. J. Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015) 49.

In the undisputed letters alone, then, Paul refers to individual instances of transgressions on numerous occasions. Even if it were the case that every one of these cases could be traced back to pre-Pauline tradition, the frequency with which Paul would have been quoting would be sufficient to show that – as we have seen Ziesler and others remarking – even if Paul does include quotations, he means them.

2.2 ‘Sins’ in the Human Plight

These linguistic observations have a theological significance, namely that Paul regularly describes the human plight not just in terms of subjugation to hostile powers, or being subject to the condition of sin and death. It is therefore possible to give a ‘positive’ account of how Paul thinks of the role that individual infractions of the divine will played both before and after Christ.

In the first case, Paul thinks of the disobedience of Adam as a decisive event. Adam’s one transgression led to the entry of death into the world, indeed, to death’s reign over the world (Rom 5.12, 14, 17, cf. also 21). Thereafter, between Adam and Moses death reigned even though there were not individual infractions of the revealed divine will: as Paul says in generalising mode, those who sinned in the patriarchal period were not breaking revealed commandments as such (Rom 5.13–14). As Paul had already enunciated, ‘where there is no law, there is no transgression’ (Rom 4.15).

With the coming of the Law, the single transgression at the beginning of history against a revealed commandment is multiplied: this is the sense of the (individual) transgression (by Adam) ‘increasing’ in Rom 5.20. Paul says that the Law came not so that ‘transgressions might increase’, but so that ‘*the* transgression might increase/multiply’ (πλεονόση τὸ παράπτωμα).⁶¹ There can be little doubt why a definite transgression is referred to here: *the* transgression in question is the one referred to in verses 15, 17 and 18 – the one transgression that came through the one man. Hence Israel under the Law is labouring under a plight of *plural* sins.⁶² Unlike the one commandment given to the one man, which according to Romans 5 led to *the* trespass, the Law with its 613 commandments was given to thousands of Israelites, leading to many trespasses. David was guilty of plural sins and transgressions (Rom 4.7–8, citing Ps 32). Israel as whole heaps up an aggregate of sins (1 Thess 2.16), and laboured under the curse which resulted from not continuing to do everything written in the Law (Gal 3.10).

Despite Paul’s maxim in Rom 4.15 and his theologoumenon in 5.13b, it is not the case that sins are focused exclusively in the history of Israel. Although Gentiles are in the same position as those ‘between Adam and Moses’, because Moses did

61 I am grateful to Dr Will Timmins for pointing this out to me.

62 One of the glosses for πλεονάζω provided by LSJ s.v. III.7 is ‘partake of plurality’, in evidence for which they provide a passage from Proclus: ‘where it [*sc.* the unit or unity] multiplies, it is not one’ (ὃ μὲν ἐπλεόνασεν, οὐχ ἓν, *Inst.* 2).

not apply to them, nevertheless according to Rom 2.12 they also sin, even though they sin 'apart from the Law' (ἀνόμως) in contrast to Jews who sin 'in the Law' (ἐν νόμῳ), a distinction reinforced by the different standards of judgement applying in each case. Gentiles who do not have the Law 'will also perish apart from the Law' (ἀνόμως καὶ ἀπολοῦνται), while Jews who do 'will be judged by the Law' (διὰ νόμου κριθήσονται). The bald 'destruction' (ἀπολοῦνται) of Gentiles mentioned here, without a trial, so to speak (cf. διὰ νόμου κριθήσονται for the Jews), is tempered by the fact that the idolatry and social chaos in Romans 1 is caused by people who may not know the Law, but who do know that the vices catalogued in that chapter are punishable by death (Rom 1.32). So the gap between Jews and Gentiles on this score is not so wide after all, 'for all have sinned' (πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον, Rom 3.23a).

Excursus: 'Sins' and 'Sin'

This is perhaps an appropriate point at which to touch upon the relation between 'sins' and 'Sin'. To discuss this in detail would go far beyond the scope of this article, and would need to take in the different circumstances of Adam, Israel and the church.

The relationship is complex. Scholars often talk in terms of either a human condition of 'sin' or a power of 'Sin' being logically prior to, and causal of, *sins*: Martyn, for example, is clear that anti-God powers are responsible for 'leading human beings into idolatry'.⁶³ There is some appeal in such an account. The 'I' of Romans 7 can say that 'Sin deceived me', in a context suggestive of the Garden of Eden. As in the Garden of Eden, however, being deceived does not simply render the gull an innocent victim. (Eve was not found innocent, despite her blaming the serpent.) In Romans 1, Paul assigns responsibility for the primal sin at the root of humanity's plight to people, and so giving logical priority to Sin as a power might be problematic. There is – at least on the account in Romans 1 – no dark presence influencing the human act of refusing to glorify and thank God. According to Rom 5.12 sin/Sin entered the world through one man: that is to say, prior to the transgression of God's command by Adam, sin was not present in the cosmos. Paul's account here does not rule out an entry of Sin from outside the cosmos, but nor does it necessitate it, as the language could be personification of a metaphorical rather than mythologising kind.⁶⁴

There are perhaps two reasons why we should not expect Paul to provide an answer to the sins/Sin relation. First, given that Paul is a sophisticated thinker who believes in a sovereign God and considers people both responsible, and also

63 Martyn, *Theological Issues*, 298, s.vv. 'cosmological apocalyptic eschatology'.

64 For discussion of this topic in general, see J. R. Dodson, *The 'Powers' of Personification: Rhetorical Purpose in the Book of Wisdom and the Letter to the Romans* (BZNW 161; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2008).

denizens of a universe occupied by malevolent beings, seeking an answer to the sins/Sin relation is tantamount to expecting a solution to the *unde malum* problem in general. Secondly, perhaps Paul does not assign a priority to Sin as a power or to sin as human action because he assigns priority to a divine 'enclosing': 'God closed up (συνέκλεισεν) everyone to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all' (Rom 11.32). Or, as Paul puts it in Galatians, Scripture has closed up (συνέκλεισεν) everything under sin so that what was promised should be received by faith: before the coming of that faith, 'we were enclosed (συγκλειόμενοι) and kept under guard under the Law' (Gal 3.22–3). This is then paraphrased as the Law being a guardian for a time so that people, again, might be justified by faith (3.24). It is interesting that Paul can talk of this enclosing by God as either 'under sin' (ὕπὸ ἁμαρτίας) in Galatians 3, which sounds very much like 'under the power of sin' (thus the NRSV), or, in Romans 11, as 'in/into disobedience' (εἰς ἀπειθειαν). The former appears to place the stress upon Sin as a power, the latter talks of God consigning all to a particular pattern of behaviour.⁶⁵ Paul is not particularly interested in delineating the relationship between sin as a power and sin as behaviour. We neither need, nor are able, to choose between the two or prioritise one over the other.

2.3 'Sins' in Soteriological Contexts

Corresponding to the account of the plight discussed in section 2.2 above, sins often feature as remedied in Paul's statements about salvation. A number of Paul's terms for sins and transgressions appear in soteriological contexts as characterising the plight addressed by Christ. We will return in the following section to 1 Cor 15.3 and 2 Cor 5.19. For the moment, we can briefly sketch two sets of relevant passages: two of Paul's Old Testament quotations (Rom 4.7–8 and 11.26–7), and three possibly traditional passages (Rom 3.25; 4.25; Gal 1.4).

First, in two quotations from the Old Testament in Romans, Paul employs forgiveness language: the forgiveness of transgressions (ἀφέθησαν αἱ ἀνομία) in 4.7a, the covering over of sins (ἐπεκαλύφθησαν αἱ ἁμαρτία) in 4.7b, the 'non-reckoning' of sin (4.8), the dismissal of impieties (ἀποστρέψει ἄσεβείας) in 11.26 and the removal of sins (ἀφέλωμα τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν) in 11.27. These passages cannot merely be dismissed as Paul's passive absorption of language to which he is indifferent. Here we can return to Stendahl, and note the remarkable fashion in which he explains away reference to forgiveness in Rom 4.7–8:

A form of 'to forgive' occurs only once within the main epistles of Paul (Rom. 4:7) and in that case poor Paul could not avoid using a verbal form, 'were

⁶⁵ See further S. J. Gathercole, 'Sin in God's Economy: Agencies in Romans 1 and 7', *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and his Cultural Environment* (ed. J. M. G. Barclay and S. J. Gathercole; LNTS; London/New York: Continuum, 2006) 158–72.

forgiven,' because he had to quote Psalm 32:1 in which it occurs. He hastens on in this passage, however, avoiding the reference to forgiveness and using instead his favorite term [sc. justification].⁶⁶

'Poor Paul' here is on Stendahl's view, then, a mere scissors-and-paste man. It is hard to see, however, that Paul was constrained to refer to forgiveness because 'he had to quote Psalm 32:1'. Nor is it clear that Paul 'hastens on' afterwards to pastures new – it seems to be Stendahl who wants to hasten on, not Paul. These Old Testament citations by Paul are significant to him, and he was not especially constrained to include them.

Secondly, we can examine possible traditional passages employed by Paul (Rom 3.25; 4.25; Gal 1.4). As we saw in the first half of this article, some scholars consign a number of passages to 'tradition', even to tradition with which Paul might disagree. It is difficult to adopt such a sceptical attitude to these passages, however. Rom 3.25 appears in Paul's climactic description of how the death of Christ displays the righteousness of God in response to human guilt. Rom 4.25 marks the conclusion of a subsection of Paul's argument in Romans. Most controversial, however, has been Gal 1.4, according to which Christ 'gave himself for our sins'. As we saw above, Martyn claims that this is a pre-Pauline formula which Paul at least qualifies, and in fact even corrects.

Two problems with this approach can be identified. One is the sovereign confidence with which some commentators claim to be able to identify pre-Pauline formula, when in reality the enterprise can be fraught with difficulty.⁶⁷ The claim of Martyn that Gal 1.4a's status as a formula is simply 'certain' is hard to sustain. Indeed, since the reference to 'sins' even appears sometimes to be invoked as part of the evidence for a pre-Pauline formula (as in Käsemann's claim about ἀμάρτημα in Rom 4.25), such an approach can look dangerously circular.

Additionally, two analogies from the study of the Gospels can be adduced. We have already mentioned Jewett's downplaying of what in Paul is traditional in favour of what is distinctive to him, likening this to a dubious application of the criterion of dissimilarity. On this view, to find the 'authentic', *ipsissima verba* of the historical Paul, we need to filter out the views of others in the early church in order to see what is really Pauline. The application of a criterion such as this to Paul is obviously questionable, as Paul cannot merely have been a total eccentric with nothing in common with other Christians.⁶⁸

66 Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 23.

67 For doubts cast on Rom 1.3–4, perhaps the passage most commonly seen as a pre-Pauline formula, see Poythress, 'Is Romans 1:3–4 a Pauline Confession After All?', 180–3.

68 See the parallel criticisms in M. D. Hooker, 'Christology and Methodology', *NTS* 17 (1970–1) 480–7.

Another analogy is that of redaction criticism, where some scholars have seen the source material incorporated by the evangelists as not representing their own ideas; it is in their redaction (again, what is distinctive to them) that their *real* interests lie. Georg Strecker comments, for example, that the atonement in Mark 10.45 is 'not a genuine Markan idea' because it comes from pre-Markan tradition.⁶⁹ The analogy between identifying pre-Pauline material and identifying pre-Markan tradition is a useful one because in neither case do we have their sources (in contrast to the application of redaction criticism to Matthew and Luke). Moreover, Mark presumably took the traditional material over because he liked it. Paul did the same.⁷⁰

A fuller discussion of Paul's soteriology would also mention other passages, such as Rom 5.8 ('while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'), or the second half of Romans 5, where Christ's single act of righteousness reverses Adam's one transgression, which led on to many transgressions. In short, however, it is not helpful to minimise the place of sins in the human plight as it appears in the discourse of Paul's soteriology.

2.4 *Solution to the Plight of Sins as of Prime Importance*

In this final section, we will explore the implications of two passages which talk about God's solution to the human plight of sins.

2.4.1 *1 Cor 15.3*

One particular passage draws attention to the way in which Paul sees it as of crucial importance that *Christ's death deals with transgressions*: 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor 15.3). In the section in which this statement appears, Paul states that (a) his gospel consisted of announcing this, together with the resurrection (15.1a) and (b) this gospel is what the Corinthians believed and is the basis of their 'standing' (15.1b) and their salvation (15.2), (c) which Paul himself received, and (d) passed on to the Corinthians 'as of first importance'. Moreover, as he goes on to say, it is also the common apostolic gospel: 'So then, whether it is I or they, this is what we preached and this is what you have believed' (15.11).

Here Paul is explicitly summarising his own gospel in terms not of participation or cosmic liberation, but in a more expiatory or sacrificial sense as 'Christ died for our sins'. So it is far from clear that Paul reinterpreted the pre-Pauline gospel in such a way that some elements – atonement for transgressions, for

69 G. Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 362. For criticism of this kind of approach (not specifically in reference to Strecker), see G. N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002²) 29–30.

70 On Gal. 1.4, so Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1069: 'The idea of the Messiah "giving himself for our sins" is every bit as central for Paul himself as the "rescue from the present evil age" as is clear from the repetition of the idea of the Messiah "giving himself for me" in the climactic and decisive 2.20. The two go together, as always in Paul...'

example – were left behind in the course of Paul’s radically new understanding of it. Paul maintains that what he passed on to the Corinthians was ‘*of first importance*’. This is not to say that other aspects of the atonement and soteriology of a participatory nature might not also be of first importance, but it is to say that it is impossible to marginalise the sacrificial or expiatory elements of Christ’s death.

Hofius, for example, claims that Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 15 is indebted to Isaiah 53, but has to argue that the meaning of that suffering-servant language must be radically changed, because Paul could not possibly think that Christ carried our sins away.⁷¹ Again, Campbell has scarcely any discussion of the passage. Of the three references to 1 Cor 15.3–4 in his 2005 monograph, one notes that the atoning death of Christ apparently occupies a ‘marginal role’,⁷² and he remarks that Christ’s death is ‘mentioned briefly’ in the passage and so for this reason perhaps is not very significant.⁷³ But the reason it is mentioned briefly is that Paul is expressing the gospel in summary or shorthand form. This line of thinking in fact goes back to Wrede in 1907, who says that for Paul the death of Christ is not about sins but about the redemption of the world.⁷⁴ This, however, is surely a false antithesis.

2.4.2 2 Cor. 5.19

A second passage of crucial significance is 2 Cor 5.18–19:

All this is from the God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Here, analogously to what we saw with 1 Cor 15.3, we see Paul (a) talking in terms of dealing with sins as God’s activity in Christ, and (b) assigning a particular status to this idea, in this case that it is the content of Paul’s ‘ministry of reconciliation’.

We are now in a position to interact with two more scholars mentioned in the first part of this article. First, 2 Corinthians 5 is a smoking-gun proof of the falsehood of Stendahl’s assumption that Paul is not interested in forgiveness of sins. It is true that the standard forgiveness lexicon is not prominent in Paul, but Stendahl’s overly dramatic statement about the language being ‘spectacularly absent’ from Paul has the consequence of relativising the importance of what would be forgiven – namely sins.⁷⁵ This is apparent also in the section entitled,

71 Hofius, ‘The Fourth Servant Song’, 179–80, contrasting what he sees as Paul’s view with the pre-Pauline view.

72 Campbell, *Quest for Paul’s Gospel*, 198.

73 Campbell, *Quest for Paul’s Gospel*, 183.

74 Wrede, *Paulus*, 96–7.

75 See Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 23.

in one of his other antitheses, 'Weakness Rather Than Sin'.⁷⁶ 2 Cor 5.19 shows that forgiveness of sins is spectacularly present in the 'ministry of reconciliation' Paul received from God.

Secondly, we can return to a point made by Jewett about this passage. According to him, in 2 Cor 5.19, 'we find a distinctively Pauline formulation of atonement as reconciliation: ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ ... τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ'.⁷⁷ In Jewett's citation, however, the devil is in the dots. Jewett notes that the key distinctive formulation lies in '2 Cor. 5.19, 21', and his quotation therefore contains an ellipsis in the middle. What Jewett has left out is not only verse 20, however, but also verse 19b: 'not counting people's sins against them'. Jewett actually leaves out the content of the ministry of reconciliation.

In sum, these two passages, despite efforts to the contrary, maintain not only that the plight of transgressions is addressed in Christ, but also – at least as far as Paul himself claims – that this has an important position in his theology.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the main points here are clear enough to excuse a brief conclusion. Paul is not only or predominantly concerned about Sin, singular with a capital S. The concept of forgiveness is not 'spectacularly absent' from the epistles. If Paul does advocate a participationist eschatology, and a view of the death of Christ as a liberation of humanity from hostile powers, he does not regard them as frameworks that determine discrete infractions of God's will as insignificant. If Paul derived some of his statements about Christ's death dealing with sins from existing church tradition, it is impossible to show that this is the case for all of them, or that – even if so – Paul therefore held such views lightly. Still less is it clear that he disagreed with some of the formulations he incorporated. Rather, for him – as indeed according to 1 Corinthians 15 for all the apostles – Christ's death for sins according to the Scriptures was 'of first importance'. Or – as per 2 Corinthians 5 – Paul's 'ministry of reconciliation' consisted of God reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning people's sins against them.⁷⁸

76 These two criticisms are actually related, because – as is not often noticed – Paul's language in 2 Corinthians may even be influenced by the language of Psalm 32: both talk of God 'not reckoning' sins or transgressions.

77 Jewett, *Romans*, 286.

78 I take the opportunity here to express thanks to the Biblical Studies and New Testament seminars at Edinburgh, King's College London, Oxford and St Andrews for invitations to present earlier versions of this material, and for their critical feedback. I am particularly grateful to my colleagues Dr James Carleton Paget and Dr Jonathan Linebaugh for reading and making detailed comments on the manuscript.