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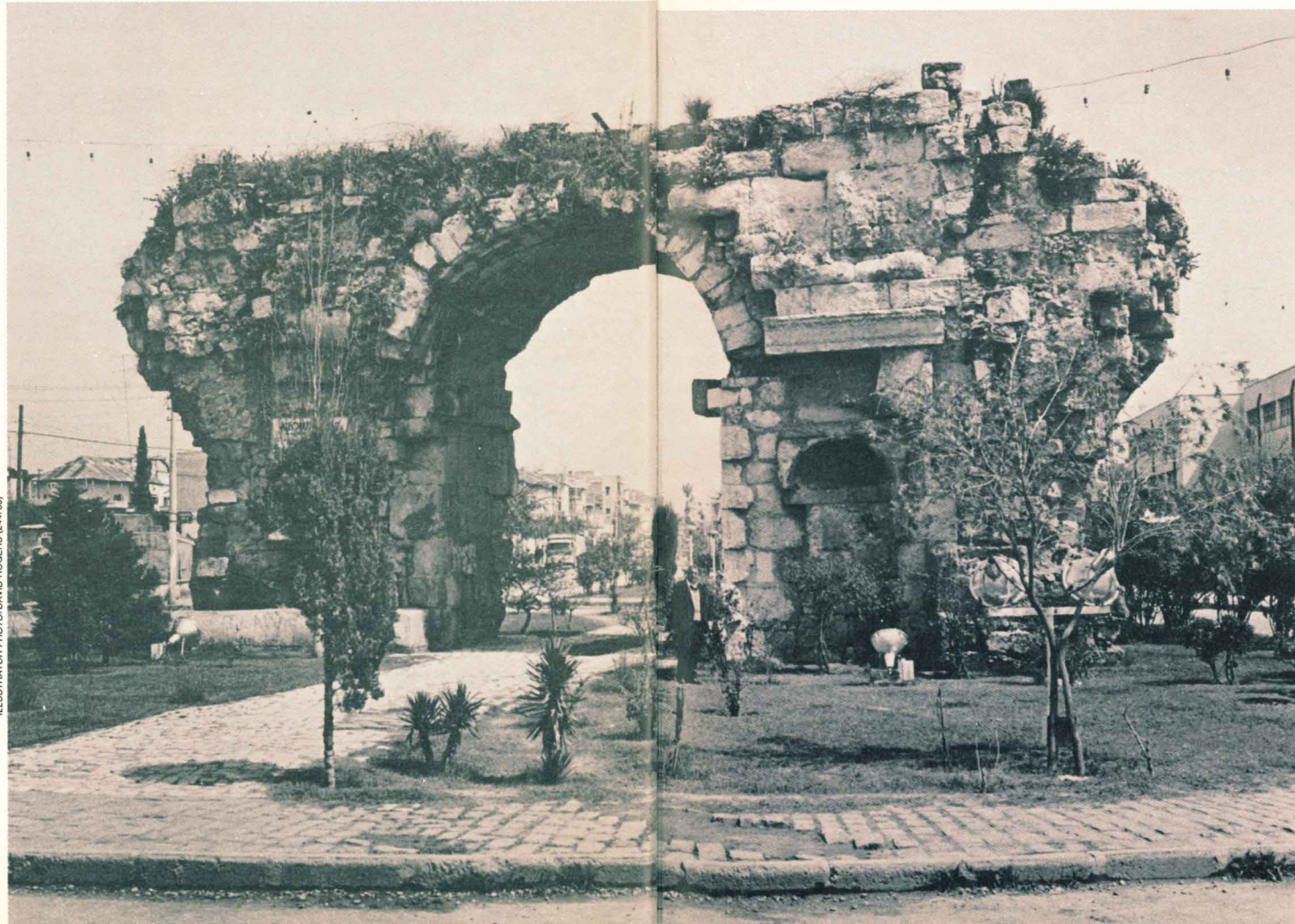
Sin and Evil in Paul's Theology

Paul's belief about the relationship between body and soul differed radically from that of Plato (above). However, neither did the apostle hold the extreme position of the Essene community at Qumran (right).

Paul's doctrine of sin did not arise, like Melchizedek, without father, mother, or genealogy. Its roots are deep in his biography. On every page of his letters we can see Paul's background. Nowhere is this clearer than in his treatment of sin. Many diverse influences shaped Paul's life, and these elements help us understand his view of sin.

Paul was born in Tarsus, capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia. Antiochus Epiphanes had settled Jews there as colonists in 171 BC. These Jews would have organized a synagogue, which Paul would have attended with his parents. Tarsus was also a significant center of Greek learning. The Greek influence on Paul would have been strong. Indeed, the language used in the synagogue was probably Greek. This explains Paul's ease with the Greek language, his preference for the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and his use of imagery and analogy drawn from Greek culture. From this Hellenistic background comes his vocabulary for sin—the concepts themselves came from elsewhere.

Although Paul had a Greek background, he was not a Greek; he was a Jew, and his Hellenism was filtered through the greater influence of Judaism. At some point, exactly when is unknown to us, Paul and his family



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moved to Jerusalem (Acts 26:4) where Jewish culture was strong. There Paul was educated at the feet of Gamaliel, who later intervened in Paul's behalf before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34-39). Under Gamaliel Paul became a true pharisee (Phil. 3:5; Acts 26:5). Gamaliel was a highly respected pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin and was, in fact, a grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel.

Thus, Paul not only was an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, but was trained by the most respected pharisee of his day (Phil. 3:5; Acts 23:6). The Torah became the decisive center of his life. By Torah alone a man could attain righteousness. Paul's goal in life was to succeed in reaching that righteousness (Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:6). The Law thus would play an important role in Paul's development of Christian theology. Sin is "falling short" of that goal.

How did this dual background affect Paul's doctrine of sin? In a capsule, he rejected the concepts of sin found in Hellenism while keeping the Greek vocabulary. On the other hand, he used and applied the Jewish concepts of sin, modified by his experience with Christ. The language

Paul's hometown of Tarsus was one of the leading educational centers in the first century. Cleopatra's gate (below) is one of the few remaining structures there from his day.

is Greek, the concepts are Hebrew. Paul read a Greek Bible, wrote in Greek, and ministered primarily among Gentile/Greek people. When he talked about sin, he seemed to use a device that both Greek and Hebrew cultures have in common, namely dualism.

Paul recognized a radical difference between good and evil. He knew the dualism that distinguishes a person in Christ from one out of Christ. What he did not recognize was a dualism that poses body against soul as evil against good. Such was the dualism of the Greeks.

Platonic philosophy said that life happens when a preexistent soul is forcibly united with a body. From this point man's struggle is with that body. Plato expressed this best by his play on the Greek words *soma* (body) and *sema* (tomb): "I have heard a philosopher say that the body (*soma*) is our tomb (*sema*)."¹ So the good soul is trapped in an evil body.

Two separate levels of reality are posed: the material and the immaterial, the imperfect and the ideal, the transitory and the eternal, the physical and the spiritual. Sin, for the Greeks, resulted from that lesser, lower half of man. It was an inevitable result of physical nature, and the soul was only an unwilling partner. Escape from sin was by way of knowledge or philosophy, freeing the soul of the body and its limitations.

Is this dual nature what occasions sin in man? In the early part of Romans Paul addressed the question "How does sin get to man? What is its door?"

Had Paul intended to continue the dualism of the Greeks, he no doubt would have kept their vocabulary. That he used a different set of words and concepts shows his intent to express a different antithesis. Paul did not counterpose soul and body, but flesh and spirit (especially Rom. 8:5-14 and Gal. 5:16-25). In fact, when he listed works of the flesh in Galatians 5, only six of the seventeen were sins of the body; the rest had nothing to do with anything physical. According to Paul and Jesus alike, the worst sins were not bodily.

Paul did not say that the body is evil since it is flesh and not spirit. Flesh does not equal sin. It only means the possibility of sin—a seat and site for sin to begin its work. Even Christ was flesh (Rom. 8:3), and man is not bound to live according to the flesh.

Rather than using Greek dualism to explain the occasion of sin in man, he used the Hebrew concept and its corresponding Greek word. The Hebrew Bible was filled with the word "flesh" (*basar* [bah-SAHR]). Two hundred seventy-three times it occurs in the Old Testament. There it refers primarily to man's physical life. Occasionally it

Lesson reference:

L & W: Romans 7:17,21; 8:10; 13:3

refers to man in his opposition to God (Jer. 17:5). Often in the Old Testament flesh is "what distinguishes man qualitatively from God, not in the sense of matter-spirit dualism, but of a contrast between strength and weakness" (note Gen. 6:3; Isa. 31:3; Jer. 12:12; Ezek. 21:4).² From Genesis 3 on, the weakness of the flesh is a ready base for sin.

By the time Paul took up the term, it had been colored by its use at Qumran, the site of that group of Essene Jews who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls. There, the second sense of this word "flesh" became more prominent. Flesh not only is man as physical, it has moral connotations as well. When the Qumran community says "I belong to the company of the flesh of evil" (1QS xi), it sounds much like Paul's "I am fleshly, sold, under sin" (Rom. 7:14, writer's translation).³

Paul used the Greek word for flesh, *sarx*, over ninety times in his letters. Some thirty-five of these occurrences connect flesh with sin, usually citing flesh as the opportunity for sin to enter life. Other passages use flesh in a neutral sense, referring to the physical life (2 Cor. 12:7), to family kinship (Rom. 1:3), or to the present life (Gal. 2:20). In Romans, especially in chapters 7 and 8, the term is used to describe that which occasions sin. When Paul talked about man in Romans, the noun "flesh," with its adjective and adverb, was used more than any other word group. In all, the noun was used twenty-four times in Romans, with seventeen of these occurring in chapters 1 through 8, where Paul built his case for man as sinner in need of a savior.

If there is a dualism, it is flesh and spirit (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 3:3; 5:13,17; 6:8; see also John 3:6). It is because he is fleshly that man rebels against the Law, which is spiritual (Rom. 7:14). Sin uses the weakness of the flesh and the spirituality of the Law to create a conflict in which man is decimated and destroyed.

So, as Paul saw it, the flesh is the vehicle for sin. By flesh "Paul means what we mean to-day when we speak of the natural impulses and instincts which, while they are not sinful in themselves, master us and become occasions of sin unless we master them."⁴ By this term Paul designated man's capacity for sin as opposed to man's capacity for the spirit. It is man as creature, and man as creature is destined to sin and its destruction. It is because he is fleshly that man rebels against the Law, which is spiritual. So sin uses the weakness of the flesh and the spirituality of the Law to create a conflict in which man is deceived and destroyed.

For Paul then, it was not flesh that is sinful. The flesh becomes sinful when it is allowed to reign supreme, when man's values and actions are determined by his flesh, rather than by God. Flesh is the vehicle, the conductor,

the opening for sin.

What is sin, anyway? What was Paul's understanding of sin? It seems that Paul almost personified sin. In expressive, rhetorical language he said that sin entered the world (Rom. 5:12) and reigns there (5:21), that man serves sin (6:6) and in fact is enslaved to it (6:17-20), and can be sold into sin (7:14). It dwells in man (7:17,20), deceives man, and kills him (7:11). Wherever there is flesh, there is sin (7:18). When one yields himself (his flesh) to sin, then sin dwells in him and even when he wants to do right, sin is close by to destroy him.

Thus, for Paul, sin was not simply "doing bad things." Although it results in wrong, sin itself is more. It is man apart from God "falling short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). It is not merely breaking the Law, falling short of Torah, it is violating the purpose of the Lawgiver.

This concept of sin is the reason Paul's primary word for sin is *hamartia* [hah-mahr-TEA-ah]. Although he used thirteen different words for sin, it is this word which is most characteristic, and its roots are deep in the Old Testament. The Hebrew is *chatah* [kah-TAH], and its basic meaning is "missing the right point." It is exactly matched by the New Testament word *hamartia*. The normal and nontheological sense of *hamartia* can be seen in the verse about the Benjaminites in Judges 20:16, "Every one could sling a stone at a hair, and not miss" (RSV). From Homer on, the Greeks had used it in this secular sense. The Septuagint translators of the Old Testament used *hamartia* to render at least fifteen different Old Testament words for sin. Thus, it was ready-made for Paul.

From the secular use of this word in everyday Greek, and especially from its regular use in Paul's Greek Old Testament, sin for Paul was "missing the mark" in the sense of failure to be what we were created to be, falling short of a God-given potential (Rom. 3:23). Both in the Old Testament and in Paul, the idea is not so much an act of sin as the state of sin. It is not a disease some get and some do not.

The decisive, catalytic event in Paul's background was his Damascus road conversion. There a new, dynamic center for his life appeared, Jesus the Christ. From that conversion Paul learned the good news, there is a victory over sin . . . thanks be to God! ○

1. Plato *Gorgias* (*Great Books of the Western World*, p.276).

2. Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 158.

3. Karl Georg Kuhn, "New Light on Temptation, Sin, and Flesh in the New Testament," in Krister Stendahl, ed., *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (New York: Hayes and Brother, 1957), p. 102.

4. L. H. Marshall, *The Challenge of New Testament Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1946), p. 268.

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