THE FUNCTION OF THE LAW IN RELATION TO SIN: AN EVALUATION OF THE VIEW OF H. RÄISÄNEN

by

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Introduction

Perhaps no other topic in Pauline studies has aroused more discussion and frustration than that of "Paul and the law." The great effort expended on this subject, however, has been justly spent, for as Georg Eichholz rightly notes: "One can hardly understand his [Paul's] theology, if one does not grasp his theology of the Torah." But not only is this subject probably the most important one within Pauline studies, it is also almost certainly the most difficult. The problem arises from the differing and seemingly contradictory statements that Paul makes about the law. This is also true of Paul's comments regarding the function of the law in relation to sin. A straightforward reading of the pertinent texts indicates that the law sometimes reveals to man his sinful condition (Rom. 3:20; 7:7; Gal. 3:19?) in contrast to other passages where the law produces sin in man (Rom. 5:20; 7:5,8-13; 1 Cor. 15:56?). The statement that sin does not exist apart from the law (Rom. 4:15; cf. Rom. 7:8) appears to be in tension with the claim in the immediately following chapter that sin was in the world before the law was given (5:13a). Romans 2 declares judgment upon those who sin without the law (2:12) whereas Romans 5 states that "sin

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1 Georg Eichholz, Die Theologie des Paulus im Umriss (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), 178.
is not counted where there is no law” (5:13b). How, then, should these seemingly divergent statements concerning the relationship between the law and sin be understood?

One possible solution would be to avoid any attempt at harmonization and to accept the apparent differences and tensions at face value. This position has been recently championed by Heikki Räisänen in his challenging and influential monograph, Paul and the Law. Räisänen opens his study by “calling a spade a spade” and by proposing that “contradictions and tensions have to be accepted as constant features of Paul’s theology of the law” (p. 11). After bringing to the reader’s attention countless inconsistencies and vacillations in Paul’s statements about the law, Räisänen ends the major part of his study by stating: “The common view that Paul is the thinker in early Christianity is, I must conclude, misleading. On the contrary, the estimate of the philosopher von Hartmann at the beginning of this century has proved correct: ‘Paul moves in more severe contradictions than any other New Testament writer’ ” (p. 228).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe and evaluate all of Räisänen’s observations about Paul and the law. Instead, our concern will be more narrowly focused on just one of the pillars supporting his thesis, namely the contradictions which are claimed to exist in Paul’s statements about the relationship between the law and sin. We will begin our study by first presenting Räisänen’s justification for concluding that Paul is inconsistent and self-contradictory in his treatment of the law and sin. We will then subject this conclusion to critical scrutiny by examining in detail the various passages pertinent to this topic. In this way, it will be possible not only to evaluate the conclusions of Räisänen but also to comprehend more fully Paul’s understanding of the function of the law in relation to sin.

I. AN EXPOSITION OF RÄISÄNEN’S VIEW

A close connection between the law and sin can be found in several passages of Paul’s writings: Rom. 3:20; 4:15; 5:13; 5:20; 7:5; 7:7-11; Gal. 3:19; and 1 Cor. 15:56. Räisänen’s study of these

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5 All page numbers listed in the main text of this paper refer to the monograph of Räisänen cited above.