THE RELATIONSHIP OF DEATH, SIN, AND LAW
IN 1 COR 15:56

by

H.W. HOLLANDER AND J. HOLLEMAN

Leiden

One of the most problematic verses in the epistles of Paul is perhaps 1 Cor 15:56. This verse stands almost at the end of the long and well-known passage in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians dealing with the issue of the resurrection of believers at the end of time.

After two quotations of OT passages, introduced to describe the future destiny of death at the end of time (vv. 54-55), and before a doxology expressing gratitude to God for the victory over death through Jesus Christ (v. 57), the apostle makes a statement about the relation between death, sin, and law: ‘The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law’ (v. 56).

This verse has given rise to a variety of interpretations in the history of exegesis. The most radical solution with regard to the seeming dissonance of these words in the whole of Paul’s argumentation is the assumption of a gloss or interpolation, either by the apostle himself at a later time or by a redactor or editor of (some of) the Pauline letters. The critical apparatus of Nestle-Aland refers to the Dutch scholar J.W. Straatman as the one who was the first to conjecture verse 56 to be an interpolation. In his book on the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians Straatman underlines on the one hand the Pauline character of the verse but stresses on the other hand its dissonance in the context, which does not deal with sin or law at all. Consequently, he argues that the verse is an interpolation, a dogmatic note, inserted by someone who knew the corpus paulinum quite well.

* We wish to thank Dr. A.J. Malherbe who was so kind to read the manuscript and make many helpful suggestions with regard to content and style.

1 See J.W. Straatman, *Kritische Studiën over den 1en Brief van Paulus aan de Korin-tiërs I-II* (Groningen: Van Giffen, 1863-1865) II, 284.
Many scholars agreed with his conjecture of a gloss, among whom Von Soden, Johannes Weiss, Bousset, and Moffatt.\(^2\) In the course of time, however, students of the New Testament have become more sceptical towards the results of the *Konjekturalkritik* of the nineteenth century. And nowadays there is an almost general agreement about the authenticity of verse 56.\(^3\)

But that does not mean that the problems with regard to this statement and its position in chapter fifteen have been solved. Quite the contrary. The verse remains a puzzler\(^4\) and can be classified among 'the things that are hard to understand' in Paul's letters (2 Pet 3:16).\(^5\) One problem is, for instance, the question of how the statement about death, sin, and law functions in the whole of Paul's argumentation in chapter fifteen. Interpreters usually leave this question open and confine themselves to the interpretation of the statement itself. They often refer to Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans, especially to Rom 5-8, where the triad death-sin-law recurs, and attempt to interpret 1 Cor 15:56 from what is said in those letters about the relation between death, sin, and law.

This procedure is followed in almost all modern commentaries on 1 Corinthians\(^6\) and in a number of monographs on Paul's attitude towards the (Jewish) law.\(^7\) His attitude towards the Torah

---


\(^3\) F.W. Horn himself is still in favour of the idea that verse 56 is a gloss, inserted by 'a pupil of Paul' (Stachel, 104-105).


