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A Terminological Study of the Idea of Sin in the Old Testament

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The idea of sin is among the central themes of the Old Testament. It is the 'converse of the idea of God', says Gelin.¹ The Biblical writers took sin in dead seriousness and they were aware of its 'heinousness, culpability and tragedy'. They had only two theological concerns before them: man's sin and his salvation. This being so, the Old Testament is rich in its terminology for sin. The Old Testament writers were not interested in a theoretical or philosophical discussion of sin. As S. J. de Vries has pointed out, they only 'strove to reflect in their rich and vivid terminology the profundity and the widespread effects of sin as they experienced it'.²

Our word for 'sin' represents four different Hebrew roots, viz. *h'*, *pš'*, *'wh*, *šgh*; each with its nuance which is difficult for us to reproduce in English. There are several other words dealing with the idea of sin, each reflecting a different shade of meaning and translated differently in English. A study of these words is primary for a proper understanding of the Old Testament idea of sin.

I have attempted to classify these words under five headings, viz. (1) Words indicating intentional sins, (2) Words indicating unintentional sins, (3) Words indicating social and ethical sins, (4) Words indicating cultic sins and (5) Words indicating the sinner's inner state.

I

Words indicating Intentional Sins

(1) *PS'*: This means, in its verbal form, to rebel, to transgress; in its substantive form, it means rebellion, transgression, etc.

¹ Quoted in E. Jacob, *Theology of the O.T.* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), p. 281.

² *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. IV, p. 361.

This is the strongest word used for sin in the Old Testament. It indicates sin in its most active and dynamic form. It reveals the human responsibility for the deed committed.

In a secular context the word indicates the wilful breaking of a relationship of loyalty and peace; the breaking of a covenant bond. It is a breach of trust. Thus, Israel's breaking away from the house of David (1 Kgs. 12:19) and Edom's breaking away from the land of Judah (2 Kgs. 8:20) are *pšs*.

In a religious context it indicates sin as wanton defiance against the will of God. It exposes the human motivation behind the act. It is not simply a mistake; it is a rebellion, a wilful disobedience. This is just the opposite of the *hesed* of God:

'Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me' (Isa. 1:2).

This rebellion may involve social, political and cultic acts. Thus in Amos 1 brutalities in a time of war are treated as transgression against Yahweh. In Amos 5:12 afflicting the righteous, taking a bribe and turning aside the needy in the gate are also included in this category. Men who seek other gods are also guilty of this sin (Amos 2:4; Isa. 46:7-8).

This word may also indicate the guilt accompanying sin:

'You say, "I am clean, without *transgression*; I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me"' (Job 33:9).

'He who conceals his *transgression* will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy' (Prov. 28:13).

(2) *MRH*: The verb *marah* means to be contentious, refractory, rebellious, etc., and the substantive form *meri* means rebellion. This is also another root indicating wilful evil and rebellion against God (Pss. 5:10; 78:8; Jer. 5:23, etc.).

The word is used of sons who are stubborn and rebellious towards their father (Deut. 21:18-20). In other places it indicates man's wilful rebellions against God (Hos. 14:1), just as stubborn children rebel against their father (Hos. 11:1). Thus the word presupposes a cordial relationship that existed before such acts of rebellion took place. The Psalmist says:

'Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider thy wonderful works; they did not remember the abundance of thy *steadfast* love, but rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea' (Ps. 106:7).

'Many times he delivered them, but they were *rebellious* in their purposes' (Ps. 106:43).

Thus we see that *mrh* is very closely related to *Ps* and both these words bring out the part played by the *will* in the act of sin.

(3) *MRD*: This is a parallel word to *mrh* (Neh. 9:26). It is a late word, found mostly in the post-exilic literature (Num.

14:9; Josh. 22:16 f.; Dan. 9:9, etc.). It exposes the audacity with which the act of rebellion was committed. Thus God says to Ezekiel:

‘Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of *rebels*, who have *rebelled* against me; they and their fathers have transgressed (*pš*) against me to this very day’ (Ezek. 2:3; cf. Dan. 9:5; 9).

(4) *WH*: This means to bend or twist, either literally or metaphorically. The verb is used in a physical sense in Isa. 24:1:

‘Behold, the LORD . . . will *twist* its surface and scatter its inhabitants.’

It refers to an overturning, distortion or ruin (Ezek. 21:27; Lam. 3:9). It may also indicate a state of psychological dismay:

‘I am *bowed down* so that I cannot hear, I am *dismayed* so that I cannot see’ (Isa. 21:3).

In religious usage this word brings out the emotional involvement of the person concerned in the act of sin. The evil act is the outcome of the ‘conscious and intentional badness’ of the sinner. A man of ‘*perverse* mind is despised’ (Prov. 12:8).

The noun *wn* occurs frequently and it indicates the iniquitous act and the guilt accompanying it.

5. *BR*: The root meaning is to pass over, pass along, etc. From this it came to be used figuratively to mean any act of arrogance or haughtiness, going beyond one’s freedom. Thus the word may mean the transgression of the command of an earthly king (Esther 3:3; Ps. 17:3). From this it came to be used of transgressions of divine commands. Thus Moses said:

‘Why now are you *transgressing* the command of the LORD, for that will not succeed?’ (Num. 14:41).

‘Israel has sinned; they have *transgressed* my covenant which I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things . . .’ (Josh. 7:11).

It is an act of taking things into one’s own hand, ignoring God’s will, even after having known it for a given situation. Thus its substantive form *ebrah* means excess or arrogance (Isa. 16:6; Jer. 48:30).

6. *MN*: In *piel* form this word means to refuse, especially refusing to obey Yahweh’s commands (Exod. 4:23; 7:14; 16:28; Hos. 11:5):

‘Let my son go that he may serve me; if you *refuse* to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son’ (Exod. 4:23).

‘Pharaoh’s heart is hardened, he *refuses* to let the people go’ (Exod. 7:14).

'They shall not return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have *refused* to return to me' (Hos. 11:5).

From these contexts we see that the word also points to a wanton defiance against the will of God. It indicates the aggressive and volitional nature of sin.

7. *M'S*: reject, refuse, despise . . .

Like *m'n* this also indicates man's wilful involvement in the act of sin. Both the words convey the idea of a contemptuous dismissal of God's claim upon man:

'And the LORD said to Samuel, hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have *rejected* me from being king over them' (1 Sam. 8:7).

8. *M'L*: to act unfaithfully, treacherously . . .

This is a priestly word, found mostly in the priestly writings (Ezekiel and Chronicles). In Num. 5:12; 27 it is used of marital infidelity. Elsewhere, it is used of treacherous acts against God:

'But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their *treachery* which they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me . . .' (Lev. 26:40).

'Behold, they caused the people of Israel, by the counsel of Balaam, to act *treacherously* against the LORD, in the matter of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD' (Num. 31:16).

II

Words indicating Unintentional Sins

(1) *ŠGH* and *ŠGG*: These two roots indicate sins of inadvertence; sins that are committed through ignorance. In the law concerning cities of refuge the noun *sh'ghagha* is used for unintentional manslaughter (Num. 35:11; Josh. 20:3).

Shagah or *shagag* is by no means a mild expression. It is much more weighty than the terms which indicate a formal missing of the mark or an emotional rebellion. It implies a right intention on the part of the one who goes astray; his mistake is to be attributed to circumstances. As the O.T. devotees saw God as the source of all things, good or evil, they thought that he was also responsible for such unintentional acts. Thus Job resolutely lays upon God the responsibility for man's fatal incapacity:

'With him are strength and wisdom,

The deceived and the deceiver are his' (Job 12:16).

The irrational factor in sin becomes explicit only in these words.

(2) *T'H*: to wander or stray. This word refers to going stray both physically and ethically:

'All we like sheep have *gone astray*; we have turned everyone to his way and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa. 53:6).

'My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have let them *astray*, turning them away on the mountains . . .'

(Jer. 50:6).

The figure of the sheep in these passages shows that this going astray is not intentional. It is due to stupidity or ignorance; people commit such acts because they do not know the consequences of them.

The weight of such sins is in no way lightened because they are committed inadvertently:

'But the Levites who went far from me, going *astray* from me after their idols, when Israel went astray, shall bear their punishment' (Ezek. 44:10).

Lack of right knowledge or understanding is itself a serious sin:

'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me . . .'

(Hos. 4:6).

III

Words indicating Social and Ethical Sins

(1) *RŠ'*: This is just the opposite of *tsedeq*. The denominative form of the verb means to be guilty or to be wicked. As substantive, it means one guilty of a crime deserving punishment. In a court of justice, where a suit is to be decided, the one who is acquitted is called the innocent party or the *tsaddiq*, and to the guilty person the word *raša'* is applied. Thus a murderer under sentence of death is named in this way (Deut. 25:2; Num. 35:31).

In the Psalms, the word is applied to all those who are thought to be hostile to God and to his will (Ps. 1:4; Isa. 57:20-21). The prophets used this word to refer to the social and ethical sins of the people:

'I will punish the world for its evil, and the *wicked* for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless' (Isa. 13:11).

'Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the *wicked*, and the scant measure that is accursed' (Mic. 6:10)?

'For *wicked* men are found among my people, they lurk like fowlers lying in wait, they set a trap, they catch men . . .'

(Jer. 5:26).

(2) *HMS* : violence.

The root refers to both physical and ethical wrongdoing. We come across this in the Flood Story:

‘The earth was full of wrong doing’ (Gen. 6:11).

In the prophetic books it is found more frequently:

‘They do not know how to do right,’ says the LORD, ‘Those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds’ (Amos 3:10).

‘Your rich men are full of *violence*, your inhabitants speak lies and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth’ (Mic. 6:12).

‘As a well keeps its water fresh, so she keeps fresh her wickedness; *violence* and destruction are heard within her; sickness and wounds are ever before me’ (Jer. 6:7; cf. Job 19:7; Zeph. 1:9).

(3) *WL* : The denominative verb means to do wrong, act perversely, etc. The noun *wlah* means injustice, unrighteousness, wrong, injustice of deeds, speech, etc. *wwal* means the unjust or the unrighteous one. All kinds of social evils are referred to by this term as acts of dishonesty:

‘You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small . . . For all who do such things, all who act *dishonestly* are an abomination to the LORD your God’ (Deut. 25:13-16).

‘Everyone given to injustice or *dishonesty* is detested by the LORD’ (Deut. 25:16).

(4) *ML* : This is a late word, similar in use to *rh*. It means trouble, labour, toil, etc. It is often used in the O.T. to refer to trouble or mischief done to others. Such mischief-makers have no fellowship with God. Thus the Psalmist asks:

‘Can wicked rulers be allied with thee,
Who frame mischief by statute?’ (Ps. 94:20).

The mischief-makers are brought under divine condemnation:

‘Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression’ (Isa. 10:1; cf. 59:4).

(5) *WN* : trouble, sorrow, wickedness . . .

The word refers to the trouble or sorrow caused by wicked men. In the Psalms it is often associated with deceit, lying. Originally, this word may have referred to the evil believed by superstitious minds to have been caused by magical spells. Phrases such as ‘workers of iniquity’ (Job 31:3), ‘evildoers’ (Ps. 5:5; Isa. 31:2; Hos. 6:8, etc.) may perhaps have originally

referred to those who perform magical spells. God hates all such evildoers:

‘The boastful may not stand before thy eyes ;
Thou hatest all evildoers’ (Ps. 5:6).

IV

Words indicating Cultic Sins

(1) *HNP*: to be profane, irreligious or godless.

It stands for ruthless violation of the holy ; it refers to all sorts of mistakes committed in the context of the cultic life.

Individuals as well as nations become godless (Isa. 9:16 ; 16:6).

As a result

‘The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant’ (Isa. 24:5).

‘Both prophet and priest are ungodly ; even in my house I have found their wickedness, says the LORD’ (Jer. 23:11).

The noun *henuphah* means hypocrisy. Hypocrisy in religion is a sin.

(2) *HLL*: to pollute, defile, etc.

This word refers mainly to ritual defilement, such as contact with the dead (Lev. 21:4), sexual relations (Lev. 21:9), ceremonial defilements (Exod. 20:25), etc. It refers to any act that violates the honour of Yahweh (Lam. 2:2).

V

Words indicating the Sinner's Inner State

(1) *RCE*: A denominative verb which means to be evil, or bad ethically. The noun *reac* means badness, evil, etc. The root refers to the evil nature of the sinner. Thus David's elder brother accuses him saying, ‘I know your presumption and the *evil of your heart*’ (1 Sam. 17:28).

‘Wash yourselves ; make yourselves clean ; remove the *evil* of your doings from before my eyes ; cease to do evil’ (Isa. 1:16).

Here we see that the evil is part and parcel of the sinner's being. His evil actions are just the outcome of his evil nature.

(2) *BLYL*: B^eli-ya al=without worth, worthlessness.

The word points to the unwholesomeness of a base and godless fellow (1 Kgs. 21:10). The proper name Belial comes from this word.

(3, 4, 5) *QŠHN, RWM, GBH*: The wantonness and the sinful pride of man are expressed by these terms. *Qašah* refers to the stubbornness of the sinner's nature. It is often translated as 'stiffnecked':

'And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a *stiffnecked* people"' (Exod. 32:9; cf. 33:3; 34:9, etc.).

The root *rum* (whose root meaning is to be high, exalted, rise, etc.) is used in connection with the pride of the sinner:

'And the haughtiness (*gabhuth*) of man shall be humbled, and the *pride* (*rum*) of men shall be brought low; and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day' (Isa. 2:17; cf. 10:2; Prov. 6:17).

Gbh (to be high, exalted) is also used in this sense (Ezek. 16:49-50; 28:2, 5, 17).

(6) *SWG*: to move away, backslide.

It refers to backsliding from God and his right path:

'Then we will never *turn back* from thee,
Give us life, and we will call on thy name' (Ps. 80:18).

'They have all fallen away;
they are all alike depraved. There is none that does
good; no, not one' (Ps. 53:3).

(7) *SWR* or *SRH*: to turn aside.

The word is figuratively used of turning aside from the right path, from Yahweh and his commands:

'They have *turned aside* quickly out of the way which I
commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten
calf . . .' (Exod. 32:8; Judg. 2:17, etc.).

General Terms for Sin and Guilt

You will have noticed that I have left out from the above study two important words of the O.T. terminology for sin, viz. *ht'* and *'sm*. I have done this purposely because they are general terms for sin and guilt and do not belong to any one particular classification. *Ht'* = to miss the mark.

Ht' and its derivatives play the principal part in expressing the idea of sin. This word gains predominance over the other words in expressing the general idea of sin. As Gottfried Quell has pointed out (in Kittel's *Word Book*), this word is preferred to other words because 'this root conveyed a clear, objective picture to the mind, with no reference to motive, or to the inner quality of the sinful behaviour. Its pictorial character must have been obvious to all who used it'. Unlike the other roots, we can trace with some certainty the development of the meaning of this word from common secular usage to religious usage.

The root meaning of this word is 'to miss the mark'. In the O.T. we still find this word used in this ordinary sense in one or two places:

'Everyone could sling stones at an hairbreadth and not miss' (Judg. 20:16).

'You shall inspect your fold and miss nothing' (Job 5:24; cf. Prov. 8:36).

Thus we see that the commonest expression for sin in Hebrew originally lacked the deep religious quality which later developed.

From this idea of missing the mark, the word came to be used in legal contexts, to indicate breach of any civil law (Deut. 19:15-21). Thus in Deut. 21:22 the word *het* refers to an ordinary criminal case. In several other places it is used in connection with the ordinary laws of personal relationship (Isa. 29:21; 2 Kgs. 18:14; Judg. 11:27, etc.).

We can thus see how naturally this word from its legal context entered into religious usage, where it came to be used of spiritual and moral failures, either towards one's fellow-men (Gen. 20:9) or towards God. But this religious usage of the term is found mostly in the late literature of the O.T.—exilic or post-exilic.

In the O.T. the root is found about 223 times in its verbal forms and the substantive *hatta'th* (masculine only at Gen. 4:7) 289 times. *Hatta'th* is normally translated as 'sin', though in certain cases it may be rendered by a legal term such as 'crime' or 'negligence'. This indicated both intentional and unintentional sins:

'If a soul shall *sin* (*ht*) through ignorance . . .' (Lev. 4:2; cf. Num. 15:27, 28 . . .).

'If a man *sins* against a man, God will mediate for him; but if a man sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?' (1 Sam. 2:25).

In the prophets the root came to be used of all sorts of ethical and social sins (Amos 5:12; Mic. 1:5; Hos. 8:13; 9:9 . . .). Thus we see that in later times this word gained predominance in the O.T. terminology for sin, covering all shades of meaning indicated by the other terms. In a large number of cases, the term loses its primary meaning and denotes the means of putting away sin or its consequences, and indicates a particular kind of sacrifice, as described in Lev. 4:1-5, 13.

'*ŠM*: As a verb, to be guilty, condemned . . . As a noun, offence, guilt, guiltiness.

The Hebrews did not generally distinguish between sin and its resultant guilt. They attached little importance to such a distinction. Thus we see that all the leading words for sin also express the idea of guilt. However, like *ht'* for sin, '*sm* is a general word for guilt. In its usage it is almost confined to

matters of ritual law, which shows that this word also gained its importance during the later period of the O.T.

Guilt does not necessarily involve sin in the sense of wilful rebellion against God and his ordinances. It also includes sins committed unintentionally, by mistake, and loses much of its force in the field of casuistry.³ At the same time the consequences of such errors are regarded almost as seriously as those of other sins (Lev. 4:12, 13). The ritual for the removal of guilt is the same as that for the restoration of cleanness. Like *hatta'th*, 'sm is also the offering given for the removal of guilt (Lev. 5:6, 10, 14, 19, 21). This offering seems to have been confined to offences against God or man that could be estimated and so covered by compensation. The Servant of the LORD thus offers himself as an 'sm in compensation for the sins of his people, giving himself for them as their substitute (Isa. 53:10).

The primitive association of this word is clearly apparent in 1 Sam. 6:3, 4 . . ., where an 'sm consists of the golden tumours and the mice, the symbolic representation of the plagues that swept the Philistines, owing to the mighty influence of the Holy Ark. We shall come to this again later.

Origin of the Idea of Sin

We have seen that the idea of sin is central to the theological thinking of the O.T. writers. But the questions still remain as to when and how this idea developed. This is certainly not something that occurred to the Hebrew mind on the spur of the moment. We saw that as a theological concept it came to be developed only during the late O.T. period. Surely there must have been antecedents which helped such a theological development of the idea to take place. Are there any traces of such antecedents still to be found in the O.T.? If so, what are they? I have a conjecture which I am going to place before you now. I have had neither the time nor the necessary tools to probe more deeply into it; so you will kindly pardon me if you consider what I am going to say far-fetched.

Scholars agree that *hatta'th* is very ancient and that it had associations with primitive therapeutic sacrifice. It purifies and sanctifies objects (Exod. 29:36 f.; Lev. 8:15; 16:15 f. . .). *Hatta'th* was originally not a propitiatory sacrifice but an exorcizing sacrifice, directed toward the domain of evil and impurity. Its association with various sorts of maladies suggests also that in pre-Biblical times it had a role in priestly therapy, like Babylonian therapeutic sacrifices (1 Sam. 6:3).

Hatta'th is both the malady (sin) and the remedy for that malady. Does this suggest anything to us? In the desert when the Israelites were afflicted by serpent bites, the serpent itself became the remedy. Moses made a bronze serpent and set it

³ Kittel's Bible Key-word *Sin* (London, A. & C. Black, 1951), p. 11.

on a pole ; all those who looked at it lived (Num. 21:4-9). Owing to the presence of the Ark in their midst, the Philistines were afflicted by plagues. As a remedy they made images of their tumours and images of the mice that ravaged the land and sent them as a guilt offering to Yahweh (1 Sam. 6:1-9). Similarly, could it be that *hatta'th*, also, was an agent of evil, bringing among men the malady of sin ; and that then *hatta'th* was offered symbolically as a remedy for sin ? We know that this kind of sympathetic magic was prevalent among the early Israelites.

At least in one place in the O.T. *hatta'th* is clearly represented as a demonic being lying in wait to seduce man :

'If you do well, will you not be accepted ? And if you do not do well *hatta'th* is couching at the door ; its desire is for you, but you must master it' (Gen. 4:7).

In the first theological account of the origin of sin, the J. narrator explicitly connects sin with the serpent, the common demonic being of the Ancient Near East, where it was associated with the representatives of chaos and death. The general tendency among O.T. scholars is to take this serpent of Gen. 3 merely as a literary creation, having nothing to do with this ANE mythological being. This interpretation does not, I think, do justice to the passage. What the serpent does here is exactly what the Hebrews later thought sin to be doing. The serpent causes Adam and Eve to 'miss the mark', miss the way of life. He deceives them. This reminds us of what Job said : 'The deceived and the deceiver are his' (Job 12:16). Commenting on Gen. 3, E. Jacob writes, 'Sin comes from outside, it is an objective reality, it is the incarnation of forces which are hostile to Yahweh.'⁴ We also know that late Jewish thinking connected this serpent, the incarnation of forces hostile to God, with Satan.

In Lev. 16 we come across another demonic being, Azazel, for which an offering of a goat is made on the Day of Atonement.

The above references point to the fact that the origin of sin was associated with some kind of a demonic being, whose name and function are now forgotten beyond recovery. Perhaps *hatta'th*, the serpent, Azazel, etc., retain some elements of this original belief, our knowledge of which is insufficient to formulate any theory. Perhaps we may say that the idea of Satan that later developed was not entirely new, but a recapitulation of this old belief.

CONCLUSION

In summary we may say :

- (i) In the early stage all kinds of human maladies were believed to be the effect of sin, and the origin of sin was associated with some kind of a demonic

⁴ E. Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

being (perhaps known as *Hatta'th*). In later Hebrew theological thinking, when belief in one God became the creed of the people, this demonic element receded to the background, leaving only some traces in the O.T. Sin now became part of human activity.

- (ii) Sin is something for which man bears full responsibility. It is conceived in and brought forth from his own heart. It is the outward expression of man's pride, haughtiness and arrogance ; the presumptuous action of the choice of his own will, as against God's will. It is the result of the temptation to become Godlike, by which man takes things into his own hands, and rebels against the fatherly will of God. This is, of course, to his own detriment. Speaking in N.T. language, this is the sin of the Prodigal Son.
- (iii) Sin includes also wrong that is committed inadvertently. Going astray from God and his way of life through lack of understanding, or ignorance, is also a serious matter. The consequences of inadvertent sins are the same as for sins committed wilfully, because, in either case, man has gone away from God. In both cases the sinner is lost, either of his own accord, or because of some irrational factor in him. It is this irrational element in sin that our Lord brought out in his parables of 'The Lost Sheep' and 'The Lost Coin'.
- (iv) Sin pervades man's whole life—personal, social, political and religious. Man's deliberations, his thoughts, words, deeds, etc., if they are not in accordance with the will of God, can become sin for him. For the Israelites, the Torah is the repository of the revealed will of God, and anything that goes against it, whether it be personal, social, political or religious, is sin.
- (v) Sin affects not only man's relationships with God and his neighbours, but also his relationship with himself. It affects his whole personality, making him base, haughty, irreligious and worthless, incapable of doing anything good. This is what St. Paul means when he says, '. . . but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not what I want, but I do the very thing I hate' (Rom. 7:14, 15).