

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Third Sunday in Lent – Year B

RCL Readings – Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

ACNA Readings – Exodus 20:1-21; Psalm 19:7-14; Romans 7:12-25; John 2:13-22

Seasonal Introduction. Traditionally, Lent is a season of 6 weeks of preparation bringing us to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection.^{1 2} The early church felt that the celebration of the resurrection was something believers should diligently prepare for. Lent is a time of intention to deliberately walk deeper with the Lord in spiritual discipline involving prayer, acts of charity and fasting.

Common Theme. How does God make Himself known? Lent should be a time where we seek to grow closer to God—to know Him more and more. The readings give us a witness of who God is. Exodus clearly gives us direct knowledge of what God desires of His people, starting with “I am the LORD your God.” But it isn't simply the 10 commandments, rather it is the whole of God's revelatory guidance and desire in the Torah. And if that weren't enough, everytime we open our eyes, ears, or nose, everytime we taste or touch we can know that God is a great and glorious God as His handiwork declares His glory.

Will everyone listen? Unfortunately, no. Some will seek a greater sign than that which has already been given while others will seek wisdom other than what God has given us in Torah. But, as the writer of John states, we can remember all that God has done, all that the Holy Spirit wrote and, particular to John 2:22, what Jesus said, believe and obey.

Hebraic Context. Throughout the gospels it is recorded that Jesus and his disciples attended the various festivals of the Lord in Jerusalem. Passover is one of the three pilgrim festivals commanded by God in the Torah in which males are required to present themselves before God.³ John's Gospel puts Jesus in Jerusalem during three Passovers (John 2:13, 6:4, 11:55) while the Synoptics only have Jesus attending one Passover—the Last Supper. This is the

¹ The practice of communal fasting leading up to the Great Easter Vigil and Easter was common, as new believers (who had sometimes studied for a year or more in preparation) prepared themselves for baptism during Easter and their new communities joined them in the final days of preparation through fasting.

² While the early church did not immediately practice fasting for forty days before Easter, the practice of a forty day fast had fully developed by the 4th century. This came out of the examples in Scripture, most prominently Jesus' forty days in the wilderness as He approached His time of ministry. Moses' forty days on Mount Sinai and Elijah's journey to Mount Sinai are two additional forty day fasts.

³ The three pilgrimage feasts are Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, as required in Deuteronomy 16:16.

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reason for the tradition that the ministry of Jesus was over a period of three years.⁴ The Temple in Jerusalem was the centralized focal point for the sacrificial systems as, according to the Scriptures, sacrifices were only permitted to be offered at the Temple.⁵ Sacrifices aside, the Temple was not the only place for the Jewish community to gather and worship.

The concept of the synagogue had developed in diaspora since the destruction of Solomon's Temple and was well entrenched into Israelite society by the time of Jesus. Despite the rise of the synagogue, the Temple remained a powerful symbol of God's presence among his people—of His abiding covenant and promises to Israel. Jesus had a high appreciation of the Temple, calling it “His Father's house,” and would often be found teaching in the courtyards. Following his resurrection, the apostles continued in their Master's footsteps with daily meetings in the Temple (as recorded in Acts). However, the leadership of the Temple had become corrupt. Worship of the Lord became entangled with the corruption of the money changers, while the High Priesthood was bought and exchanged rather than following the line of Aaron and Zadok. Beyond that, while there were several great Jewish scholars, there was poor scholarship and instruction from the shepherds of Israel coming out of the Temple. This had all moved away from the original intention of the temple, which was to be a place of worship and a house of prayer for all nations.

Exodus 20:1-17. The opening verse of this well known narrative, the giving of the 10 Commandments, lets the reader understand that these laws weren't invented at Mount Sinai by Moses or some other elder of Israel. It is God who spoke all these words.⁶ The Decalogue, as the 10 Commandments have come to be called, are the basis of many of the other 613 laws in the Torah (and even more laws in the New Testament) and serve as the foundation for the morality

⁴ In reality, we do not know how long the ministry of Jesus was for. The Synoptics only record one passover, although from John we understand there were at least three. However, just because John records three Passovers does not mean that there were not more. The most common dates scholars given for Jesus' crucifixion are 29/30 AD and 33 AD while His birth is commonly thought to be 4 BC or slightly earlier. This means, as Jesus started His ministry around 30, His ministry likely would have been between 3 and 7 years.

⁵ God required worshipers to go to the Temple in Jerusalem (the place where God would choose) to offer their sacrifices (Deuteronomy 12:4-7, 13-18; 14:22-27). In addition to these sacrifices, the Passover sacrifice was also specifically prohibited outside of the Temple (Deuteronomy 16:5-6) even though the first Passover sacrifice was seemingly offered by each household where they lived (Exodus 12:4-6).

⁶ According to tradition (based on the exegesis of the timing mentioned in Exodus 19:1-2), God delivered the commandments, called the עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים *Aseret HaDevarim* or the Ten Words, 50 days after the Passover and redemption from Egypt. Thus, the 10 commandments would have been given on Shavuot (or Pentecost).

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and ethical code of God's people.⁷ The sages note that this event occurs in the Torah portion, the Jewish lectionary reading cycle, known as Yitro (Jethro) containing Exodus 18:1-20:23, which is one of only two Torah portions named after Gentiles.⁸ The fact that the Decalogue is delivered in a portion of Scripture named after a Gentile is not lost on the rabbis. They also noted that Gentiles were present at Mount Sinai along with the emerging Hebrew nation. When Israel left Egypt it is recorded that a "mixed multitude" accompanied them and thus Jews and Gentiles stood before the mountain of God to hear the Words of God. For Jewish exegesis this implies that the morality and ethics contained in the Decalogue is universal in application.⁹

Exodus 20:18 is an interesting verse that states that while God was speaking His commandments, Israel saw several things. וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר, וְאֵת הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֵת הַלְפִידִם, is usually translated that Israel saw thunders and lightnings and heard a trumpet or shofar. However, that's not what the Hebrew text actually says: it reads that all the people both saw the voices וְאֵת הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֵת הַלְפִידִם (translated as thunder) and the torches of fire וְאֵת הַלְפִידִם (translated as lightning) and saw the voice of the shofar וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר. Several questions are

⁷ The Jewish sages state that God spoke 606 laws at Mt Sinai as 7 laws were previously given to Noah, known as the 7 Noahide laws שבע מצוות בני נח and given to all humanity. Nahum Sarna, a Jewish scholar noted for his work on Genesis and Exodus, described the Decalogue as the only example of a covenantal relationship between a deity and a people. That is, no other nation in history has an event in which the god speaks and forms a relationship with an entire community and not simply through a single prophet, ruler, or group of oracles. These words are unique in form and style. Anything that comes from God is, by definition, good and for the wellbeing of the people to whom it is given (even discipline). Paul reminds the community in Rome that: "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." (Romans 7:12).

⁸ The other Torah portion named after a Gentile is Balak the king of Moab (Numbers 22:2-25:9) and details his attempt to persuade the prophet Balaam to curse Israel (who, in the end, do fall prey to the charms of the daughter of Moab based on Balaam's suggestion.)

⁹ The presence of Gentiles at Mount Sinai raises the question: is the Mosaic Covenant applicable to Gentiles? Traditional exegesis acknowledges the Covenant at Sinai to be building upon the Covenant with Abraham in which the nations of the world will be blessed. Exodus 24:4 implies that only the 12 tribes of Israel enter the Sinai Covenant. This does not detract from the universal application of the 10 Commandments which were traditionally heard by the entire world. Israel was to reveal God to the world and be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 60:3; Psalm 67). The Covenant that God makes with them will be one of those signs to the nations. Moses and the prophets suggest that Gentiles will be attracted to the wisdom and truth of the Torah and may even embrace some aspects of the Torah (such as the Gentiles who choose to guard the Sabbath and other aspects of the covenant according to Isaiah 56:4-6). By the time of the New Testament the Gentiles who attended synagogue, embraced monotheism, worshipped in the Temple, and observed various elements of Torah were known as God-fearers (such as Cornelius in Acts 10). But neither the council of Jerusalem nor Paul require these God-fearers to follow the signs of the covenant.

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raised by this verse such as: how do you see voices and why the inclusion of the element of fire? In Jewish tradition, when God speaks fire comes out of His mouth.¹⁰

Exodus 15:14 says that, “The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia.” Jewish exegesis suggests that when God spoke at Mount Sinai all the world heard His voice. According to Genesis 10, there are 70 nations of the world. So when God spoke at Mount Sinai fire departed from His mouth and split into 70 tongues of fire—each fire being the voice of a nation. In summation then, the Torah was given by God at Shavuot (Pentecost) with multiple voices and multiple fires being something visual and possible to see. In the New Testament, these images reappear in Acts 2 (also at Pentecost, this time on the Temple mount) where tongues of fire accompanied the great sound from heaven while people of all languages could see the divided tongues of fire and hear as God spoke in their own language.

Psalm 19. David spoke of two great witnesses in this Psalm that could help him (and us) be blameless before our redeemer. The first great witness is the heavens themselves—they declare the glory of God. In poetic form, the expanse of creation has a voice that sends forth a message of the greatness of God. Verse 2 says that, day after day they utter speech. The Hebrew word used is *yava* and gives an image of a continual forceful gushing spring (Proverbs 18:4) or the continuous gushing of a boasting fool (Psalm 94:4, Proverbs 15:2). Day by day and night by night the heavens give voice to evidence of a glorious God. In verse 4, David notes that the glory of God is evident to all the world and not only to the people of Israel.

In verse 7 we move from the witness of creation to the revelation of God's word. The heavens have declared the glory of God and so have the Scriptures. The glory of God is seen in the purity, holiness, goodness, and righteousness of the Torah. There is nothing contained in the sacred writings of other religions that can compare to the commandments that God gave. The law of the Lord is perfect and is of the highest value that people should seek to obtain. Hearing these two witnesses of God's greatness is of utmost importance, “by them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” For David, the Word of God is greater than all material wealth¹¹ and the experience of applying the words of God in our lives is better than any experience¹² that the world could provide. In listening to the warnings in the heavens and the Torah, David could be found acceptable in the Lord's sight.

I Corinthians 1:18-25. Ever since the crucifixion of Jesus the plain truth of His death and resurrection has been rejected by the majority of people who hear it, both Jews and Gentiles. To

¹⁰ Several Biblical passages make the connection between God's voice and fire, such as Psalm 18:8 and Jeremiah 23:29

¹¹ Gold is a precious metal that forms the basis of all economic wealth.

¹² Honey is delicious! Unfortunately, sugar is considered to be one of the most common addictions around the world.

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the believers the gospel is good news but to most it is, at best, no more than myths and legends. Paul calls it *moria* μωρία or absurdity to those who are perishing.¹³ While the ancient world was not irreligious as much of our modern secular society is (the Greco Roman world had a pantheon of deities), one major difference was that those deities demanded worship and adoration to provide protection for a city or a nation. The gods didn't die nor sacrificed themselves for the people who worshipped them. Meanwhile, the modern world does not hold to the concept of sin and therefore does not see the necessity of atonement.

Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 which describes the wisdom of the world as foolishness. Many times, we assume that the smartest and wisest minds on earth would know the most about God but this is not always the case. This is not to say there is no value in education or learning. Rather, Paul would argue that the message of the cross is not revealed through the philosophies of the world.¹⁴ Parents should not send their children to university with the expectation they will return with faith. Modern education has a purpose but that purpose is not in revealing the mystery of the cross.

Paul states that Greeks seek for wisdom and Jewish people look for signs of the Messiah. For Jewish people the death of the Messiah, however, was not one of the commonly expected signs, making it easy to dismiss His messianic candidacy.¹⁵ In comparison, the Greek world valued academic achievements and philosophical pursuits. The “wisdom” of a dead messiah held no value, was considered to be unreasonable, and thus also was rejected.¹⁶ The conclusion to Paul's argument here is that human reason alone cannot proclaim the good news. The truth of the gospel is not found in the halls of universities, secular philosophies or modern messianic figures, but only through the resurrection of Jesus after having first suffered at the cross. For Paul the nonsensical—the Messiah and Lord dying for people like us—has more wisdom and strength than our own wisdom.

¹³ The verb tenses of those who are perishing and those who are being saved are significant. They describe a process that is ongoing and there is movement in a direction that has not yet reached its conclusion—there is a direction but that direction can change, it is not necessarily final. There is always hope with the gospel.

¹⁴ Paul himself was incredibly learned. But Paul also did not come to know the power of God until the resurrected Jesus confronted him. Of course, Paul used his knowledge of Scripture, Jewish exegesis and tradition, along with his ability to speak as a skilled orator to preach Christ crucified and risen.

¹⁵ As we have noted before, there existed a two messiah theory that was somewhat prevalent in the first century. That is, there would be two messianic characters that would work together. One called messiah ben Joseph and the other messiah ben David. One would function as the warrior king and conquer the enemies of God and the other would suffer and die whilst proclaiming the truth. To only encounter one messiah embodying both functions was a stumbling block for many Jewish people.

¹⁶ The Greek word is skandalon σκάνδαλον from where we get the modern english word ‘scandal’. However, the word in Greek does infer some sort of impediment more than it does something that only causes public disgrace.

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John 2:13-22. The gospels are finely crafted texts. They are not in chronological order and, despite our heartfelt wishes, they do not record everything Jesus said or did.¹⁷ Because they are not chronological, some events occur earlier in the narrative in one gospel than in another. The story of Jesus cleansing the Temple may be one of these events, placed early here in John's gospel while occurring much later in the Synoptic gospels.¹⁸ In the Synoptics the cleansing of the temple occurs during the last week of Jesus' ministry and presents as one of the reasons for the plot to kill Him.

During the Maccabean period the temple had been rededicated following the defeat of the Seleucid Greeks, now celebrated as the Festival of Hanukkah. The Hasmonean dynasty had started well but, as is all too common, they ended poorly. They had taken the mantle of kingship, despite not being from the Davidic line, while also continuing in their role as priests. This, along with other factors, led to the onset of religious corruption that was rampant at the time of Jesus. The high priest was originally to have remained in that position until his death but, even as the Seleucids had appointed a puppet High Priest, namely Alcimus (I Maccabees 7:5-16), now the position and function of the High Priest could once more be obtained through bribery and changed hands regularly.¹⁹

Jesus went to Jerusalem when it was filling up with pilgrims for the coming Passover. The Temple would have been crowded with faithful worshippers who desired to obey God's instructions and come and worship, despite the corruption. Jesus was infuriated at the obvious corruption, which would have been occurring in the courts where Gentiles could go. It goes without saying that this would have been a poor witness to Gentiles who were attracted to the monotheistic faith of the Jewish people. Notice how the Temple guards were not mentioned in the text, they made no move to apprehend or stop Jesus—possibly because the crowd was

¹⁷ Many times the gospels simply state Jesus taught in their synagogues without actually informing us exactly what Jesus taught (Matthew 4:23; Luke 4:15). Jesus often prayed but we only have a few examples of how Jesus prayed to the Father. In Luke 24:25-27, Jesus interpreted all the Scriptures concerning himself from Moses and the prophets. But the Holy Spirit did not see fit to give us these precious words and we must believe that there is a reason we have some Scriptures (like the chronologies and the building of the tabernacle) and not others (an interpretation of all the Scripture concerning our Saviour).

¹⁸ While some scholars argue that there were either two separate times that Jesus cleansed the temple or even that the writers of John were mistaken, most scholars (including the early Church fathers) have not seen a problem with having non-chronological writings in the Bible. Today, we may be used to everything being chronological but the Biblical pattern is not always one of chronology. Books such as Judges, Jeremiah, and some of the Gospels were not written chronologically.

¹⁹ Some disgruntled priestly families who could not abide the corruption fled Jerusalem and relocated to the desert around the Dead Sea at a location now known as Qumran.

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actually on Jesus' side as they too recognized the corruption.²⁰ However, there were also some who questioned His authority to act in this way.²¹ They are simply referred to as 'The Jews'. This could be because Jesus was cleansing the area of the Temple known as the 'Court of the Gentiles' and His antagonists were not the obvious foreigners present but the Jerusalem locals.²²

The *raison d'être* for Jesus' wrath on the moneychangers is a 'zeal' for the House of God, a quote from Psalm 69:9. Jesus had a high appreciation for the Temple. He didn't hate the place or criticize the sacrificial system nor seek its destruction. Jesus' response to the question of authority isn't about the destruction of the Temple but rather about His own death and resurrection (which is completely lost on the hearers at this stage). The rebuttal that the present Temple was still undergoing constructing after 46 years reveals they did not understand what Jesus was actually saying. Herod the Great had started reconstruction of the Temple Mount around the year 20 BC, thus the comment that the work was in its 46th year would place this gospel narrative in the late 20's AD.²³ This incident adds to His popularity, though John notes that Jesus 'did not commit Himself to them'. Perhaps indicating that He understood their support for Him was largely superficial or misplaced.

Hebraic Perspective. Jewish exegesis almost always involves asking questions. There is a Jewish saying, "you are closer to God when you are asking questions than when you think you have the answers." In relation to the redemption from Egypt, the question is asked, "what was the purpose of the exodus?" If the object was to actually get the people of Israel into the promised land, then God would have given Moses better directions. It would have been easy, simply take a left and when you get to the Mediterranean you take a right and follow the coastline, you can't miss it! And while the making of the covenant with Israel and the giving of the Torah is also one of the most important moments of the exodus, this too was not the initial intention. It was at Mount Sinai that God was revealed to Israel and, in receiving the divine instructions from the Lord, they learned how to worship him. Worship of the Lord was the

²⁰ One of the instructions for preparing for Passover in the Torah is the removal of leaven from the house, a symbol of removing sin. Perhaps this cleansing event could be read as a 'removal of sin' from the House of God.

²¹ Note that Jesus took the time to calmly make a whip, He did not act impulsively nor did He immediately act in His anger.

²² The Temple of Herod had four courts separated from each other by walls and gates and designated for different purposes. They were the Court of the Gentiles, the Court of the Women, the Court of Israel (or the Court of Men), and the Court of Priests. The Court of the Gentiles is often referred to as "the outer court" and was the largest of the four. See picture below for a warning to Gentiles on the Temple Mount.

²³ The Greek Orthodox Church holds to an ancient tradition that Jesus was crucified in 29 AD, which seems plausible considering the internal dating of this narrative in John 2

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original stated purpose of the exodus in the text (Exodus 4:22-23).²⁴ The exodus was not about political freedom nor the ultimate possession of land, although those elements were certainly present and true. It was about worship, love, redemption, and adoration of God who is mighty to save.²⁵

What more do we see occurring at Mount Sinai? God had redeemed His people with an outstretched arm and a mighty hand. He had taken a people who had been in Egypt for 400 years and been enslaved and brought them to Sinai and introduced Himself. What did the Israelites know about God while in captivity under Egyptian taskmasters? The answer is likely, not very much. They had no Bible, no Temple, no Prophet, no Priests. They had a very limited view of God involving some creation stories, a guy with a boat and a rainbow, and a wandering nomad called Abraham. Yet it was when they didn't know God that He saved them. Notice that the Torah doesn't get them out of Egypt. Israel was redeemed from Egypt and then given the Torah. We see the same theme in Romans 5:8 with Paul confessing that, "while we were yet sinners, the Messiah died for us". We were saved when we didn't know Jesus just as the Israelites were saved from Egypt without really knowing who God was. But God wants to be known by His people and so we will see that Redemption always leads to Revelation.

Further a king cannot be a king unless He has a kingdom, and kingdoms are made up of people. God redeemed His people from under the Egyptians while they didn't know Him. Then He brought them to Mt Sinai and introduced Himself. The first words of the Ten Commandments are actually an introduction, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt" (Exodus 20:1). In Exodus 19, we see God declaring the Israelites to be His people, a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation. The people respond in the affirmative and, according to Jewish tradition, God then became king. God had redeemed His people, brought them to Mt Sinai, and then revealed Himself to them. So begins the Kingdom of Heaven. As we can see, there is plenty to learn from asking even one question, "what was the purpose of the exodus?".

ACNA Readings

Romans 7:12-25. Both Jesus and Paul share a high appreciation of the Temple and of the Torah. Here, Paul plainly states that the Torah (the Law) is holy. God is holy and anything that is attached to God is holy. His Temple is holy, His Word is holy, the Land is holy, His name is holy, and His people are called to be holy. The Law, or better said, the teaching and instructions of the Lord, reveal the sinful nature of the fallen world. The problem isn't with the Torah, it's with

²⁴ The ESV translated Exodus 4:23 as, "Let my son go that he may serve me." This is a correct translation, but עבד, while most often translated as work (or service) also can have a connotation of worship—also seen in Exodus 3:12.

²⁵ From God's perspective, the purpose of the Exodus was also that God might dwell among His people (Exodus 29:45-46).

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fallen humanity. It's important to note that the community in Rome contained both Jewish and Gentile believers. This is important because, from the worldview of the Jewish people, the Gentiles were never 'under the Law'. This makes it difficult for some scholars to understand who or what Paul is referencing when he says, "you also have died to the Law" (Romans 7:4).

Perhaps Paul is referring to the "law of sin and death" (Romans 7:23, 8:2), which affects everyone, both Jews and Gentiles.²⁶ Or, perhaps, Paul reflects on the historic tradition that the whole world heard the voice of God at Mount Sinai and thus have some aspect of the 10 Commandments that applies to everyone.²⁷ Paul himself desired to do good but struggled with being obedient to the Lord.²⁸ His conclusion is he is a slave 'sold to sin' and the Torah cannot save him. This does not imply that the Torah is evil, just that it lacks redemptive power. Paul says he still, "delights in God's Law" even though there is another law working against him.

Context

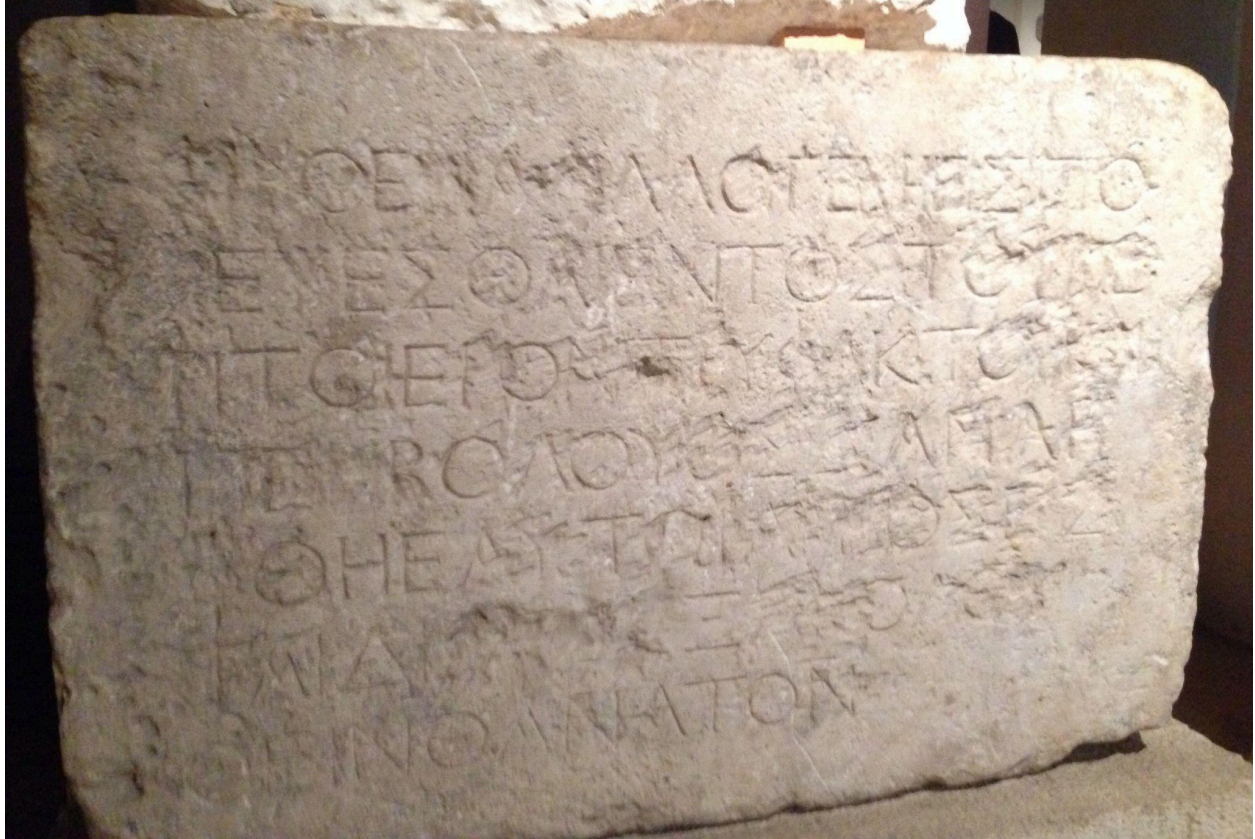
²⁶ Paul uses the term Law (*nomos*) 74 times in Romans, including 23 times here in Romans 7.

Unfortunately, the same term is used for both the Torah, which Paul loves, and the law of sin and death, which Paul loathes. Context helps alleviate some of the confusion but sadly not all of the confusion. This confusion opens up various interpretations of Paul's meaning here in Romans. What we can be sure of is that Paul loves the Torah and hates sin. Paul greatly desires to serve the law of God, in which he delights, but finds himself sinning.

²⁷ Even apart from the Torah, the law of God, we are without excuse for our ungodliness and unrighteousness. Paul, in the beginning of his letter to Jews and Gentiles of Rome, states this clearly in Romans 1:18-42. The paradox between Romans 1 and Romans 7 should not be ignored or dismissed.

²⁸ There is a rabbinic tradition that everyone is born with a good inclination (*yetzer hatov*) and an evil inclination (*yetzer hara*). Thus the rabbis taught that everyone has the inclination to do both good and evil with a person becoming responsible for their own actions around the age of 12 or 13.

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A limestone slab, discovered in 1871 and currently exhibited in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, was found near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem stating, "No stranger is to enter within the balustrade round the temple and enclosure. Whoever is caught will be himself responsible for his ensuing death." Josephus described warnings, such as this, which were placed between the Gentile court and Jewish court. Picture from wiki commons user: *onceinawhile*.