Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2026, Vol 12, No 1, 1–21
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2026.v12n1.at4
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459
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Eve, deception and the tragic moral imagination: Reconsidering 2 Corinthians 11:3 and Romans 7

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Abstract

Eve was well known in ancient literature as the deceiver and the source of trouble. Yet, Eve is barely mentioned in the New Testament. There are two instances in Pauline literature, explicitly in 2 Corinthians 11:3 and possibly in Romans 7:7–25 implicitly, where Eve is mentioned. Recent scholarship has proposed that the "I" of Romans 7 may draw on Eve traditions alongside tragic motifs associated with figures such as Medea. Building on these discussions, this article argues that Paul employs Eve as a paradigmatic figure of deception and vulnerability within a wider tragic moral imagination. In both texts, Eve functions not primarily as a figure of blame, but as an exemplar of human susceptibility to hostile powers. The recurring pattern of deception, bondage, and threatened destruction demonstrates that Paul appropriates familiar traditions concerning Eve to depict the human condition as vulnerable to forces beyond its control. Yet Paul does not remain within a tragic framework. By relocating the source of failure from individual moral weakness to cosmic powers such as Sin and Satan, Paul reframes tragedy within an apocalyptic vision in which deliverance is ultimately found in Christ. Eve therefore serves as a rhetorical exemplum through whom Paul exposes the depth of human vulnerability, while simultaneously directing his audiences toward divine redemption.

Keywords

Eve; Paul; Tragedy; moral exempla; 2 Corinthians 11; Romans 7

Introduction[1]

Eve is barely mentioned in the New Testament,[2] twice to be precise, with both explicit instances in "Pauline letters," namely 2 Corinthians 11:3 and 1 Tim 2:13. The latter is probably dependent on the former (and I do not consider 1 Tim 2:13 to be written by Paul). However, some argue that Eve features in Romans 7. This stems from Romans 7:11, "Sin deceived me," which is almost an exact citation of Gen 3:13 ^{LXX}. Sin using the commandment as a means of deceiving the "I" and prompting covetousness in Romans 7:8, 11 might refer to the serpent's tactics in Gen 3:1^{LXX}. Also, desire in Romans 7:7, 8 might allude to the desirable fruit in Gen 3:6 ^{LXX}.

It has also been suggested that the tragic figure of Medea forms the backdrop of Romans 7.[3] The implicit use of Eve along with Medea derives from the famous problematic "I" debate, which has considered many possibilities for the character of "I". Hildebrecht Hommel was the first to note that the "I" resembles the well-known theme of the split human existence and radical evil, tracing this theme back to Euripides' Medea and other ancient Greek literature.[4] Picking up on Hommel's collection of texts and combining them with Jewish portrayals of Adam, Gerd Theissen deems the "I" autobiographical from a psychological perspective, thus determining that both backgrounds were at play.[5] A. van den Beld continued the debate by questioning whether "lack of self-control" (ἀκρασία) should be understood in the intentions of the "I".[6] Seemingly unaware of both Hommel and van

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1 I would like to express gratitude to Khegan M. Delport for the invitation to the Theology and the Tragic Symposium and the Theology Faculty of Stellenbosch for the hospitality.

2 Although Eve is mentioned rarely, the figure played a pivotal role in traditional theology, with her fallen nature interpreted as representative of all women. M. V. Rienstra, "Eve," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Revised,* ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 205. It is noteworthy that all New Testament allusions or references to Eve (Gen 1–3) occur only in Pauline epistles. S. Krauter, "Eve §New Testament," in *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception,* eds. Sebastian Fuhrmann and Gary S. Heft (De Gruyter, 2014), 287.

3 I will not analyse Medea in detail in this essay, as I have done so in "Bodies of Grief: On Space and Affect in Corinthians 7:2–16," *Neotestamentica* (2025): 338–355.

4 H. Hommel, Das 7. Kapitel des Römerbriefs im Licht antiker Überlieferung, *ThViat* 8 (1961/1962): 90–116.

5 G. Theissen, *Psychologische Aspekte paulinischer Theologie* (FRLANT, 131) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 204–223.

6 A. van den Beld, Romans 7:14–25 and the problem of akrasia, *RelSt* 21 (1985): 495–515.

den Beld, Stanley Stowers in 1994 proposed that Romans 7 is steeped in προσωποποιία (speech-in-character).[7] His student, Emma Wasserman, argues similarly to Stowers for both Medea and the προσωποποιία figure, but adds that Paul is not reacting against a person characterised by being in a state of ἀκρασία, but against the extremely wicked; thus, ἀκολασία (intemperance) characterises the "I".[8] Antonio Pitta also detects ἀκρασία in Medea, developing the idea from Aristotle's *Poetics* that the "I" takes on a mimetic and tragic function.[9]

Interestingly, R. von Bendemann argues that Gen 2 and 3 played a role in Romans 7 and that the "I" takes the voice of Adam.[10] Austin Busch makes a case that Paul rhetorically assumes the identity of Eve in Romans 7:7–25 in light of the primaeval transgression, drawing attention to an element of "masculine" activity in her experience contrary to most Hellenistic biblical interpretations of Eve as "feminine" passivity.[11] Nicholas Elder posits that Paul intends Eve, and not Adam, as the individual in Paul's speech-in-character, recasting her in the role of a female lamenter who bemoans her tragic condition.[12] Accordingly, Paul integrates Eve with tragic motifs familiar within the Graeco-Roman environment.[13] In the same line of thought, Samuel Byrskog suggests that Paul blends Jewish and important Greek and Roman *topoi* in an epistolary process of communication from a Christ-believing Jew to Christ-believing non-Jewish people in Rome. He combines the motifs related to Adam and motifs of ἀκρασία related to Medea and proposes that concepts associated with Eve played a crucial role for Paul in making the Christ-believing Jew move from one to the other

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7 S.K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 258–284.

8 E. Wasserman, *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7: Sin, Death, and the Law in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology* (WUNT, II/256) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

9 A. Pitta, "The Poetics of Aristotle and the Hermeneutics of Romans 7,7–25: Towards a new interpretation?" in C. Breytenbach (ed.), *Paul's Graeco-Roman Context*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium. (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 301–329.

10 R. von Bendemann, Dir kritische Diastase von Wissen, Wollen und Handeln: Traditionsgeschichtliche Spurensuche eines hellenistischen Topos in Römer 7, *ZNW* 95 (2004): 35–63.

11 A. Busch "The figure of Eve in Romans 7:5–25," *Biblical Interpretation* 12 (2004): 1–36.

12 Nicholas Elder, ""Wretch I Am!" Eve's Tragic Speech-in-Character in Romans 7:7–25," *JBL 137*, no. 3 (2018): 743–763, 743.

13 Elder, "Wretch I Am!" 743.

and yet maintain a rhetorical purpose with the characterisation of the "I."[14] Accordingly, the figure of Eve and the tragic climaxes in Romans 7.

In light of the scholarship on Eve, if Eve is to be presupposed in the interpretation of Romans 7 (which I think it should be), I would like to explore Paul's explicit use of Eve in 2 Corinthians 11:3 in light of Paul's implicit use in Romans 7, as the arguments in Romans 7 and 2 Corinthians 11 both seem to draw on marriage (Rom 7:4)/betrothal (2 Cor 11:2–3) imagery.[15] Accordingly, this article reads 2 Corinthians 11:3 and Romans 7 alongside each other, investigating Eve within early Jewish interpretive traditions and the wider practice of exemplarity. In both cases, the figure of Eve forms part of the rhetoric in which Paul wants to persuade the audience of their vulnerability to the deceptive powers and their bondage and in both cases, Paul is not assigning blame to Eve but rather pointing out that there are dangerous forces at work.

I will argue that Paul employs Eve as a figure who functions as a tragic exemplum. *Exempla* functioned as moral instructions drawing on past narratives.[16] It could be positive or negative examples. In first-century

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14 S. Byrskog, "Adam and Medea – Eve: Revisiting Romans 7, 7–25" in C. Breytenbach (ed.), *Paul's Graeco-Roman Context*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium. (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 279.

15 Other possible mentions of Eve are seen in 1 Cor 11:7–9 and 1 Cor 14:33b-36. The former seems likely as Paul builds his argument for male superiority on Gen 1–2. Paul confines creation to the image of God (Gen 1:27) to Adam, the man, excluding Eve, the woman, in 1 Cor 11:7 (cf. e.g., Tob 8:6 over against, e.g., Wis 2:23; Sir 17:3. Similar to 1 Tim 2:13, 1 Cor 11:8 refers to Gen 2:21–22 and interprets the sequence of creation (Eve was created out of Adam's rib) as representing a hierarchical order. Paul corroborates this argument using Gen 2:18: Eve was made "for" Adam as his helper. He qualifies this androcentric view by pointing out that men are born by women (1 Cor 11:12) and that the "in the Lord" men and women belong together (1 Cor 11:11). The reference to the offspring of Eve crushing the head of the serpent's offspring (Gen 3:15) might be understood as an eschatological promise of victory over the satanic forces (cf. T. Levi 18:12; T. Sim 6:6. Accordingly, Romans 16:20 claims that the fulfilment is imminent (Krauter, "Eve," 288). In the case of 1 Cor 14:33b–36, it is disputed whether the text is a deutero-Pauline interpolation. Women are ordered to be silent in the congregation, which is incongruent with Paul's argument in 1 Cor 11:3–16, which presupposes women prophesying. 1 Cor 14:34 mentions the Law commends women to submit themselves to men, but as there is no such commandment in the Torah, the text might refer to God's curse against Eve in Gen 3:16 (Krauter, "Eve," 288). The scope of this article is limited to Paul's portrayal of Eve in 2 Cor 11:3 and Romans 7.

16 The practice of employing the words and deeds of notable figures from the past as moral exemplars to be emulated or cautionary models to be avoided can be traced back at

exempla, women are typically portrayed as promoting male relatives, particularly in ways that contribute to Rome's strength and stability.[17] *Exempla* were, among other things, used as a rhetorical device.[18] For Paul, she serves as a warning of what may occur if a believer diverts from being in Christ.

1. Eve as tragic exemplar

The attempt to define terms such as "tragic" and "tragedy" is notoriously elusive.[19] A wide range of understandings exists, including, in particular, a specific understanding of the role of females within the tragic. Paul M. Blowers broadly defines tragedy in threefold terms:

> Firstly, the tragic may be understood as a pervasive condition of existence: a fundamental orientation shaped by finitude, vulnerability to change, instability, susceptibility to suffering, and the inevitability of death. This draws on an interpretive tradition reaching back to the earliest reflections on tragedy. Secondly, tragedy in a strict sense refers to its artistic and performative articulation. Emerging within the ritual and cultic contexts associated with Dionysian worship in ancient Greece, tragedy operated as a dramatic medium intended to unsettle, confront, or disclose meaning to its audience, whether individually or collectively and, through this process, question human identity, moral responsibility, and ultimate destiny from an ethical and religious vantage point. And thirdly, he describes a dimension that may be termed *tragic vision*. This involves an initial attempt to reconstruct the horizon of meaning inhabited by the

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least to classical Greek literature (Teresa Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 122.

17 Tom Stevenson, "Women of Early Rome as 'Exempla' in Livy, '*Ab Urbe Condita*', Book 1." *The Classical World* (2011): 175–189, 175. Stevenson (2011, 189) cites Livy as a countertype to the exempla pattern, promoting discord and change in a developing socio-political environment, arguing that men should not readily accept female advice if civil conflict is to be averted.

18 See e.g., Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria 5.11.1–2*. It was extensively used in rhetorical tradition and remained important in Roman times (Cilliers Breytenbach, "The Historical Example in 1 Clement," ZAC (2013): 22–33, 25.

19 See also Khegan M. Delport, *On Tragedy and Transcendence: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 18–23 for an in-depth discussion on "tragedy" and "tragic".

> tragedian and the dramatis personae, followed by the incorporation of new interpretive viewpoints as tragic texts continue to be reread, re-appropriated, and reimagined within their reception histories.[20]

Blowers' definition of the tragic can thus be summed up as 1) worldview; 2) literature; and 3) experience. It should be noted that it is difficult to establish that Paul uses tragic figures regarding Blowers' category of "literature". Although I find Paul's use of Euripides' Medea in Romans 7 convincing, it marks only one literary instance. There is not a sustained literary dependence beyond Romans 7 in my view. In this regard, Jeff Jay's notion that the tragic functions as a mode in Jewish literature is helpful.[21] He avers that the tragic may be interpreted as a mode instead of a genre. Accordingly, he identifies tragic patterns that can be traced: reversal, revenge, recognition, lamentation, emotions, and the supernatural.[22] For example, the supernatural may be traced in both 2 Corinthians 11 and Romans 7, as a hostile power is the deceiver. In the case of Romans 7, Sin is the power that "seizes opportunity, deceives and kills" (Rom 7:11), and in 2 Corinthians 11 the serpent or Satan is linked to the "super-apostles" as Satan's agents. Both lamentation and emotion may be gleaned in Romans 7, as the "I" does know the good, but cannot do it (Rom 7:18), and similarly in 2 Corinthians 10–13 Paul's fear and jealousy communicate an emotional warning.[23] Lastly, reversal may also be traced. The Corinthians are in a similar position to Eve, as a betrothed virgin about to be seduced, which may lead to enslavement and devouring as seen in 2 Corinthians 11:20. The reversal is anticipated as it is contingent on the reaction of the Corinthians and thus not yet completed. In the case of Romans 7, the reversal has occurred, as the "I" is captive and dead.

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20 Paul M. Blowers, *Visions and faces of the tragic – The mimesis of tragedy and the folly of salvation in early Christian literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.

21 He draws on examples ranging from Maccabean Literature, Josephus and Philo; J. Jay, *The Tragic in Mark – A Literary-Historical Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 107–176.

22 See Jay, *The tragic*, 79–105.

23 To add to the role of emotion, Gunderson draws on affect theory, in which she argues for the role that smell plays in Paul's depiction of the opponents in 2 Cor 11:2–4. She argues Paul "maligns the bodies of the other apostles as grotesque and morally repugnant, indexing them in a disgust-centred physiology overflowing with olfactory associations prevalent across the ancient world." Gunderson, Jaimie. "Disgust, and Stinky Affective Histories in 2 Cor. 11:2–4." Biblical Interpretation 30 (2022): 578–599, 578.

Concerning Paul's use of Eve as a literary figure, Eve was well known in ancient Jewish literature during Roman rule as the deceiver and the source of trouble, e.g., as seen in 2 Enoch,[24] the Life of Adam and Eve[25] and in Pseudo-Philo 13:8–9.[26] The Book of Ben Sira, dated to the early second century BCE is the oldest text in which Eve is blamed for the fall of humanity.[27] Eve becomes the scapegoat, as she is the one being held responsible, the cause of original sin on account of her desire,[28] vulnerable to deception and sexual enticement, solidifying her role as a cautionary moral exemplar.[29] Dunn postulates that Paul is not employing new ideas concerning Eve, but enters a well-developed debate that influenced his ideas.[30] Despite the overlaps, there is no demonstrable literary dependence between Paul, the Life of Adam and Eve, 2 Enoch and Pseudo-Philo. Rather, they appear to draw

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24 In 2 Enoch 31:6, Enoch absolves the man of responsibility, but sin is the consequence of a woman's inordinate desire.

25 In writings such as the Life of Adam and Eve 21:3–6, Eve is portrayed as both deceiver and catalyst of downfall, culminating in Adam's denunciation of her as the source of evil. Eve is described as deceiving Adam by offering him the option to become "as God" (21:3). Adam even throws her under the bus, exclaiming "O evil woman!" (21:5–6). James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol 2* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 281.

26 Eve is framed as the active agent to blame, as she lures her husband into disobedience.

27 Michael Scott Robertson, "Eve in the New Testament," in Caroline Blyth and Emily Colgan (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Eve* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 28–29.

28 She was synonymous with being responsible for bringing sin and death to the world in the early Roman period. Julie Galambush, "Eve," in David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (eds.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 436. See Sir. 25:24; cf. 2 En. 30:17; Apoc. Mos. 7.1; 21.

29 In the first-century *exempla*, the ideal of women is typically portrayed as promoting male relatives, particularly in ways that contribute to the strength and stability of Rome (Stevenson, *Women of Early Rome*, 175).

30 James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids-Cambridge: Eerdmans/Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1998), 82–84 and 84–90. This is a contentious point, as de Jonge argues that the assumption is that Paul draws on the reception of the figure of Eve. He continues that although there are striking parallels between The Life of Adam and Eve and Paul, there is simply no way in which it can be convincingly argued that there is a relationship between the New Testament and the extra-biblical texts. Martin de Jonge. *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament as part of Christian Literature – the case of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 228–229. However, when looking at the context of φθείρω, for example, it does seem that Paul draws from more than just Gen LXX in his portrayal of Eve (See Robertson, "Eve and the New Testament," 32). I will elaborate more on this in section 3.

independently on early Jewish interpretive traditions concerning Adam and Eve. Accordingly, trying to apply Blowers' lens of tragic literature on Pauline texts is a thin argument. Therefore, this article does not argue that Paul is using Greek tragedy in Romans 7 or 2 Corinthians 11. Rather, I would like to argue that Paul employs tragic patterns in his use of Eve to convince his audience to steer clear of deceptive forces.[31]

Blowers' lenses of worldview and experience might prove more productive. The tragic played an important part in the first century; Marrou notes that in first-century Greek education, the tragic was already incorporated into school syllabi, with Euripides being even more prominent than Sophocles.[32] As a Diaspora Jew writing to mixed communities, Paul participated in a shared pedagogical world[33] in which the use of past narratives as moral paradigms was repeatedly mobilised within educational practices aimed at shaping virtuous character, and this was already established in ancient Greek literature in the first century. [34] As James Kugel[35] has observed, Second Temple Judaism was marked by a "reified nostalgia" that elevated patriarchal and pre-exilic past narratives as authoritative moral paradigms, a practice that resonates with wider Graeco-Roman traditions of exemplarity.[36] In both Jewish and Graeco-Roman contexts, figures from the past were not merely remembered but rhetorically employed to warn, instruct and persuade.

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31 I elaborate on this in section 5.

32 Henri Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 163.

33 Paul's education is a contentious subject. It requires assumptions concerning Paul's wealth and socio-political status to assess whether Paul would have been able to access rhetorical education. If Paul completed his studies in Jerusalem, he would have had the opportunity to study basic Greek literacy. However, it remains speculative. See Andrew Pitts. "Hellenistic Schools in Jerusalem and Paul's Rhetorical Education," in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), Paul's World (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 19–50.

34 Annette Yoshiko Reed, "The Construction and Subversion of Patriarchal Perfection: Abraham and Exemplarity in Philo, Josephus, and the *Testament of Abraham*," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (2009): 185–212, 189.

35 James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4–14.

36 Reed, *Construction and subversion of Patriarchal perfection*, 189. The historical example in deliberative rhetoric relates things that have happened before, making use of the known individual cases to induce a general principle that can be used to give advice in an analogous case (Breytenbach, *Historical Example*, 24).

2. 2 Corinthians 11:3

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians has been strained. Paul defends his apostolicity against the Corinthian super-apostles in 2 Corinthians 11:1–15, underscoring what a danger they are in by referring to Eve. He addresses the Corinthians' complaints against him, namely that he lacks rhetorical skill as well as that he refuses to take money from them. Paul even admits to not being as skilled in speaking as these other missionaries (2 Cor 11:6), but does not concede to being inferior to these other missionaries. Paul's concern is not that the Corinthians have already fallen, but that they occupy the same vulnerable position as Eve.

Paul's reference to Eve in 2 Corinthians 11:3 materialises within a larger argument concerning allegiance, deception and apostolic authority. 2 Corinthians 10–13 is notoriously emotional, as Paul reacts to rival missionaries whose influence threatens his relationship with the Corinthian community. Paul describes these missionaries as agents of Satan (2 Cor 11:13–14). Nowhere else does Paul speak so often of Satan as in 2 Corinthians,[37] and 2 Corinthians 11:20 mentions that the Corinthians are ὑμᾶς καταδουλοῖ "reduced to slavery", showcasing the negative impact of these missionaries. For Paul, these rival missionaries are not just a threat to him but also a threat to the Corinthians' exclusive allegiance to Christ.

Paul starts the argument with a rhetorical ploy in which he pretends to be a fool to feign understanding of the Corinthians' position without compromising his own views.[38] It should be noted that Paul is addressing the

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37 For Paul, the opponents are like the snake and are performing satanic work as they seduce and destroy the Corinthians' relationship with Christ, which Paul had put in place. Schmeller, Thomas. *Der Zweite Brief an die Korinther (2 Kor 7,5–13,13)*. EKK. (Neukirchener Theologie/Patmos Verlag, Göttingen, 2015), 202. Satan's presence and activity in Corinth constitute a serious concern (see also 2:11; 11:14; 1 Cor 7:5, and cf. 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 12:7). Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary,* vol. 32A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 486–487.

38 Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of the Corinthians.* International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 657. The full impact of Paul's description as a "fool" is seen in 2 Cor 11:16–18. Fools organise their loves according to the flesh and not according to the lord. This is in contrast with 2 Cor 10:17, as one should boast in the lord. It is also preparing the audience for Paul's allegation that they are not of sound minds "sie sind nicht bei Verstand" (2 Cor 10:12) (Schmeller, *Der zweite Korinther*, 198).

whole of the church in Corinth and not just the faction that is in strife with him.[39] He draws on an analogy of betrothal in 2 Corinthians 11:2–3 to voice his concerns. He places himself in the role of a marriage broker between the Corinthians and Christ. This derives from Paul's own understanding of himself as a father figure to the Corinthians.[40] Paul understands his role as that of a guardian charged with preserving the Corinthians' purity until the consummation of their union with Christ, which will happen at the Parousia.[41] After all, he is the founder of the community.[42] He even draws on covenantal exclusive language describing himself as ζηλῶ "jealous" on God's behalf.[43] This imagery strongly echoes Isaianic depictions of Jerusalem as Yahweh's bride and the broader prophetic tradition that presents God as a devoted husband whose covenant partner, Israel, repeatedly proves unfaithful through idolatry, as exemplified in Hosea.[44] Within the ancient customs of marriage, betrothal constituted a legally binding agreement whereby the woman was already recognised as the man's wife, although she remained a virgin until the marriage ceremony.[45] Violations of the betrothal contract were considered adulterous offences and were punished accordingly.[46] Against this backdrop, the use of παρθένον ἁγνήν "pure

39 Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians.* International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 1915), 294.

40 For more detail on this, see Christine Gerber, *Paulus und seine, Kinder' – Studien zur Beziehungsmetaphorik der paulinischen Briefe* (Berlin/New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

41 H. Lietzmann, *An die Korinther I/II,* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [HNT 9], 1969), 144–145; Colin G. Kruse, 2 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 178. This is typical technical language to describe being engaged (Lietzmann, *2 Korinther*, 145).

42 Paul's use of this imagery excludes the super-apostles as it draws on a relationship between Paul and the Corinthians before them (Schmeller, *Der zweite Korinther*, 200)

43 Thrall, *Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, 660.

44 Mark A. Seifrid, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Second Letter to the Corinthians,* ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2014), 403.

45 Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, 178.

46 Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, 178. A family is in control of a virgin, and virginity carries the threat of the loss of control, as well as the need for external control. Mary F. Foskett, "Virgin," in Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (ed.), *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible S-Z Volume 5* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 785–786, 786.

virgin" highlights Paul's paternal role and his fear (φοβοῦμαι δὲ) that the Corinthians φθαρῇ τὰ νοήματα ὑμῶν "minds might be seduced," as these other apostles are a threat to the purity of their belief.[47]

Paul elaborates on the betrothal image by invoking the memory of Eve's deception in the garden. Combining the betrothal image with Eve's garden scene, Paul places the narrative in a new context,[48] and it functions as a biblical exemplum.[49] The Corinthian believers are compared with Eve. They are just as vulnerable. Paul likens his opponents to this serpent, in other words, Satan.[50] This is the only instance in Paul's letters where he refers to the serpent (ὁ ὄφις). The compound verb ἐξαπατάω intensifies the meaning, as *quite deceived*.[51] A significant verb in the passage is φθείρω "destroy, ruin, corrupt or spoil".[52] BDAG[53] notes the verb can also be understood specifically in the sense of seducing or violating a virgin. [54] This sense fits Paul's analogy. The verb φθείρω usually appears with ὑπό.[55] Here, it is constructed with ἀπό ("from") in a manner analogous to πλανάω ἀπό ("to lead astray from").[56] This deception is linked to seduction.

Paul's stops short of naming sexual impropriety, but draws on other traditions available to him to arguably hint that Eve's deception by the serpent was sexual in nature.[57] This sexual connotation with Eve's narrative

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47 Seifrid, *Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, 403.

48 Seifrid, *Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, 404.

49 Schmeller, *Der zweite Korinther*, 201.

50 The serpent of Gen 3 is associated with the figure of Satan, in Wis. 2:24 and in later Jewish literature such as Apoc. Mos. 16. Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 486–487.

51 Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 487. Robertson ("Eve in the New Testament," 31) puts it: Paul is stating that Eve was "really deceived."

52 William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1054.

53 BDAG 2000, 1054.

54 BDAG 2000, 1054. As seen, e.g. Jos., Ant. 4, 252 (BDAG 2000, 1054).

55 In other examples, such as *PEnteux.* 26.11, E.Fr.485, D.Chr.11.153 φθείρω is used with ὑπό Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1928.

56 The expression πλανάω with ἀπό is an established idiom of moral/doctrinal straying as seen in James 5:19, ἐάν τις ἐν ὑμῖν πλανηθῇ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας ("if anyone among you strays *from the truth*") —Ps 118(119):110LXX (οὐκ ἐπλανήθην ἀπὸ τῶν δικαιωμάτων σου) and Wis 5:6 (ἐπλανήθημεν ἀπὸ ὁδοῦ ἀληθείας).

57 Robertson, "Eve in the New Testament," 31.

was a typical interpretation in Paul's day, as seen in 1 Enoch 69:6; 2 Enoch 31:6; *Apoc Abr* 23, 4 Mac 18:7–8 and in Philo *Op. Mund.* 151f.157.[58] The verb φθείρω is seen in a similar context of virginity, marriage and betrothal in Josephus *Antiquities* 4.252, connoting to seduce a virgin.[59] This is also particularly echoed in 4 Macc 18:7–8, which is, according to Krauter, the closest parallel to 2 Corinthians 11.[60] The mother of the seven martyrs describes an exemplary Jewish family life which includes her own sexual purity, namely preserving her virginity before marriage.[61]

For Paul, Eve is not a figure of blame as the serpent beguiled her through his trickery (ἐν τῇ πανουργίᾳ αὐτοῦ). This functions to convey the notion of separation, and it reinforces the betrothal image itself: the Corinthians' minds (φθαρῇ τὰ νοήματα ὑμῶν) risk being led, like a seduced virgin, away from their sincere, single-hearted devotion (ἀπὸ τῆς ἁπλότητος καὶ τῆς ἁγνότητος) to Christ.

It is against this backdrop that the reference to Eve becomes significant, as she is not utilised by Paul as a figure to blame for the fall of creation or a statement on sin. Rather, she represents an example of vulnerability, a tragic figure, as she is susceptible to being corrupted and deceived by external forces. The opponents are the implied unnamed forces that are revealed in this use of Eve's narrative.[62] They are the external powers that exert a dangerous influence that may cause the Corinthians' ruin. Eve is a paradigmatic figure through whom Paul communicates the danger of deception and the repercussions of said deception. She serves as part of a rhetorical ploy to warn against any corrupted allegiance. The situation with the rival missionaries is dire in Paul's view and may risk the integrity of the gospel. The audience, whether Gentile or Jew, would have picked up on the risk of Eve's seduction and being led away from their sincere and

58 Schmeller, *Der zweite Korinther,* 202; Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 487. This motif reflects rabbinic tradition in which the serpent is said to have sexually seduced Eve in the garden (b. *Yebam.* 103b; b. ʾ *Abod. Zar.* 22b; *b. Šabb.* 146a), although variants exist in earlier Jewish apocalypses. Martin, Ralph P. *2 Corinthians*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 518–519.

59 Robertson, "Eve in the New Testament," 31.

60 Stefan Krauter, "Eva in Röm 7," ZNW 99 (2008): 1–18, 8.

61 Krauter, "Eva in Röm 7," 8.

62 Seifrid, *Second Epistle of the Corinthians*, 404.

pure devotion to Christ. It was morally vile in the ancient world to seduce a virgin.[63] The opponents are clearly vilified and characterised as exhibiting morally despicable behaviour. In 2 Corinthians 11:20, Paul implies that the super apostles make slaves of the Corinthians (ὑμᾶς καταδουλοῖ), eat them (κατεσθίει), which in this regard implies devouring them and bringing them under their control (λαμβάνει).

Paul's use of Eve in 2 Corinthians 11:3 participates in a first-century tragic moral imagination in which the seduction of a virgin functions as an exemplum of deception, divided agency, and moral failure. The tragedy lies not in a completed downfall, but in the anticipation of one. Paul is warning a community that is on the precipice of catastrophe. In this regard, Paul's use of Eve as a warning to the Corinthians may be interpreted as tragic.

3. Eve and Romans 7

At the centre of Romans 7:7–25 stands a fractured subject who knows what is good yet fails to do it. The repeated contrast between willing and acting, knowing and doing, culminates in the anguished cry, "Wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:24). This pattern closely resembles Graeco-Roman reflections on ἀκρασία, especially as dramatized in tragedy. Euripides' Medea[64] famously articulates the paradox of knowing the good while being overpowered by a competing force, a tension that becomes emblematic of failed moral agency. Paul's language resonates with this tragic framework. In Romans 7:15 and 7:19, the "I" confesses an inability to enact what it desires, employing the phrase οὐ γινώσκω (7:15) to describe the gap between intention and action. At the same time, Paul intensifies the paradox by

63 In Paul's time, a bride is unmarriable if she lost her virginity before the marriage (Robertson, "Eve in the New Testament," 31). In terms of Graeco-Roman social norms, virginity was a topic of medical, moral, legal, and historical discussion as well as the focus of many ancient narratives (Foskett, "Virgin," 786).

64 Medea, in particular, became a symbol through which Roman anxieties about foreignness, emotional excess, and boundary transgression were articulated. Female figures were also increasingly employed in the first century as a moral warning. In the aftermath of Actium (31 BCE), figures such as Cleopatra were framed as embodiments of dangerous foreign femininity, corrupting Roman masculinity and political order. Augustus' moral legislation, e.g. the *Lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BCE) and the *Lex Papia Poppaea* (9 CE), sought to regulate marriage, reproduction, and elite sexual behaviour, reinforcing anxieties about moral and ethnic purity.

insisting that the subject does, in fact, know the good, as indicated by the repeated use of οἶδα in Romans 7:14 and 7:18. The problem, then, is not ignorance but captivity. This is where Paul's argument diverges decisively from classical tragic ethics. Whereas figures such as Medea are portrayed as overwhelmed by passion or deficient in self-mastery, Paul relocates the source of failure to an external power: Sin.

The connection to Eve is made with the use of deceive (ἐξαπατάω) in Romans 7:11, as the same verb is used in 2 Corinthians 11:3. In Romans 7:11, Paul uses the intensive form for sin, which "finding opportunity in the commandment, quite deceived me and by it killed me." [65] It is an allusion to Gen 3:13^{LXX}, which reads: "And the woman said, The serpent deceived me, and I ate (καὶ εἶπεν ἡ γυνή Ὁ ὄφις ἠπάτησέν με, καὶ ἔφαγον)". The logic of deception that characterises Romans 7 closely parallels Paul's explicit depiction of Eve in 2 Corinthians 11:3, where she is also deceived by a hostile power. In both cases, deception does not arise from feminine weakness per se, but from vulnerability within an environment where others want to seduce you away from the correct relationship. Eve, like the "I" of Romans 7, becomes emblematic of human susceptibility under conditions of domination. She is alone when the snake deceives her, emphasising her vulnerability. Sin appears in Romans 7 as an active, deceptive agent that seizes opportunity (ἁμαρτία ἀφορμὴν λαβοῦσα), deceives (ἐξηπάτησεν), and kills (ἀπέκτεινεν) (Rom 7:11).[66] The subject's divided agency is the result of enslavement to Sin.

Romans 7 thus reflects a tragic pattern without reproducing tragic blame. Tragedy is not denied, but it is reframed: the human subject is not condemned for failing to master the self; rather, it is revealed as captive and in need of deliverance. In 2 Corinthians 11:3, it is the missionaries, as agents of Satan, who serve as the external forces that present a problem to the Corinthians' believers. In Romans 7, believers are under the dominion

65 Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 487. If Romans 7:7–11 alludes to Gen 3, then it points to the story of Eve rather than Adam's fall. In contrast to 1 Tim 2:14 (Eve was deceived and transgressed), Eve's role seems to be clearly distinguished from Adam's as the victim of a deceit; she is a role model for the separate sinner, whereas he is a transgressor and the origin of sin (Rom 5:12-21) (Krauter, "Eve," 288).

66 See Annette Potgieter, *Contested Body: Metaphors of Dominion in Romans 5–8*. (Durbanville: AOSIS, 2020).

of God when they are baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ (see Rom 6:4).

4. Eve in Paul's arguments

In both Paul's arguments in 2 Corinthians 11 and Romans 7, there are some conceptual similarities. Firstly, in both arguments, Paul draws on marriage/betrothal imagery. In the case of Romans 7, Romans 7:1–6 serves as a transitional argument restating themes of lordship seen in Romans 6:12–23 as Paul's marriage analogy highlights the bounded situation of a married woman.[67] Romans 7:2–3 is interpreted as referring to Mosaic law, as the woman cannot divorce. Paul has been continually arguing within the argument of Romans 5–7 that Christ frees believers from the forces of Death and Sin. Paul again in Romans 7:1–6 emphasises that believers can enter a new bondage situation, as Christ is a worthy Lord to be bound to, as believers are also subjected to a power.[68] In 2 Corinthians 11:3, Paul similarly uses betrothal imagery. By using this imagery, he inserts his own role in the relationship between the Corinthians and God. However, the imagery, just as in Romans 7:1–6, is effective, as it would have been easily recognised by either a Jewish or non-Jewish audience, as well as the social implications of these betrothal/marriage contracts.

Secondly, in both arguments, Paul does not allocate blame to Eve. In Romans 7, the figure of Eve is implicit, suggested by the allusion to Gen 3^{LXX}, but it becomes clear that Sin is the outside force that deceives and even kills. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul similarly mentions the snake as the source of deception. But what is more, the snake becomes a symbol or type for the so-called super apostles that threaten the Corinthians' relationship with Christ as their bridegroom, specifically the purity of this relationship. They are likened to Satanic agents in 2 Corinthians 11, just as Sin is an agent in Romans 7. These are descriptions of external influences that may corrupt and deceive believers.

Thirdly, in Romans 7, it is clear that enslavement is a problem. Paul makes it explicit in Romans 7:5 that captivity leads to death and being under Christ

67 Potgieter, *Contested Body*, 136

68 Potgieter, *Contested Body,* 137.

leads to the newness in spirit. In 2 Corinthians 11:20, Paul also describes the influence of the super apostles as enslaving. The same verb that is used to describe how Sin takes an opportunity (λαμβάνω) is used in 2 Corinthians 11:20 to also indicate how these other missionaries may take advantage. Paul also employs a metaphor drawing on κατεσθίω "to eat up/consume," describing that the Corinthians will be devoured. Again, this is similar to the destruction that is depicted in Romans 7. These are outside forces that only lead to ruin and enslavement. Paul adds in 2 Corinthians 11:20 that the super apostles will put on airs and strike them in the face, underscoring that they are not like Paul and not the good they claim to be.

Moreover, I understand Paul to have an apocalyptic worldview. He draws on cosmological frameworks to articulate the human predicament and God's redemptive action. This is evident in his use of creation narratives in his arguments, e.g. in the Adam–Christ typology of Romans 5:12–21 and Eve as the deceived one in 2 Corinthians 11:3.[69] Paul's use of Adam and Eve is not incidental but plays a vital role in his arguments in which he frames both human experience and cosmic disorder. For Paul, humans are in dire need of saving. Christ appears as the victorious power who overcomes these cosmic forces. Paul does not describe where Sin or Satan comes from. He does not need to clarify these forces, as it is the tragedy of the cosmos. Sin, Death and other powers are at play. For Paul, the struggle is not abstract or distant: the body becomes the primary site where these powers contend. This tragic dimension is not limited to the human subject but extends to Paul's vision of the cosmos itself. Throughout Romans, Paul repeatedly frames the problem in cosmic terms. In Romans 3:23, all have fallen short of God's glory. In Romans 5:12–21, Adam functions as a representative figure through whom Sin and Death enter the world, while Christ is presented as the counterfigure whose obedience overcomes these forces. Notably, Eve is absent here; Adam stands as a type for humanity, underscoring the universal scope of the problem. Both humanity and the creation are subjected to forces beyond their control, as marked by frustration and futility (Rom 8:20), and by not doing what one wants to do (Rom 7). However, for Paul, tragedy is not terminal. Unlike classical tragedy,

69 Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–), 17.

which sometimes (not always) ends in irreversible catastrophe, Paul's tragic diagnosis is enveloped within an apocalyptic narrative of divine intervention. The tragic condition is fully acknowledged, experienced in the body, inscribed in the cosmos, but it is ultimately reoriented toward hope through Christ's victory over Sin and Death.

5. Conclusion

The image of Eve would have already functioned within a wider first-century moral imagination as an exemplar of being deceived and disastrous misjudgment.[70] However, Paul does not assert blame on Eve in both Romans 7 and 2 Corinthians 11. Paul redeploys tragedy to focus on cosmic bondage. In both Romans 7 and 2 Corinthians 11, Paul draws on the figure of Eve as a rhetorical exemplum. By using Eve, Paul effectively illustrates the devious and disastrous influence of Sin in Romans 7 and the super-apostles, also known to Paul as the agents of Satan, in 2 Corinthians 11. Paul emphasises the dangers of powers outside of God as enslaving powers that result in ruin and destruction.

Humans are in the tragic position, just like Eve, vulnerable to being enslaved to Sin or other forces when they are not under the lordship of Christ. Eve becomes a familiar tragic figure through whom Paul exposes the depth of human vulnerability while simultaneously redirecting failure toward a cosmic horizon that only divine intervention can resolve. It becomes clear in Paul's reasoning that only Christ can liberate humans.

70 Similar to what would have been seen with Medea, for example.

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