TRANSFORMATION OF THE MIND
AND MORAL DISCERNMENT IN PAUL

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In this essay I examine the possible connection between two kinds of language in Paul’s letters about the way human behavior is directed. The first kind of language is explicitly and obviously religious in character. It aligns human agency with a transcendental spiritual power. The second kind is moral or paraenetic in character.\(^1\) It advocates the practice of virtue and the avoidance of vice. Is there an intrinsic link between these two modes of discourse? Does Paul himself indicate such a link? Is a connection to be inferred from language that Paul himself does not explicate?

To put the question another way: Does Paul allow his readers (whether ancient or contemporary) to appreciate any role for the human ψυχή (“soul”) between the power of the πνεῦμα (“spirit”) that comes from God and the disposition of the σώμα (“body”) by human persons?\(^2\) The question concerns consistency in Paul’s thought, the way in which he did or did not think through his convictions concerning human relatedness to God (expressed in the symbols of Torah) and his directives concerning human moral behavior. The question is also critical to the appropriateness of speaking of “character ethics” in Paul.\(^3\)

As always when asking such questions of Paul, the shape of the Pauline corpus makes methodology an issue impossible to avoid. The occasional character of Paul’s correspondence means that we have in each composition only so much of his thinking on any subject as has been raised by the circumstances he considered himself to be addressing. The fact that many of the letters traditionally ascribed to Paul are

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\(^1\) No one in our generation has done more to make us aware of this dimension of Paul’s letters than Abraham J. Malherbe, among whose students I am proud to be included; see especially *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).


\(^3\) An earlier draft of this essay was delivered to the Character Ethics in the Bible Consultation of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Annual Meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 1996.
also regarded by the majority of contemporary scholars as pseudonymous means that discussions of “Paul’s thought” are bound to be either conventional or contentious. The best way to overcome the problem of fragmentation is to embrace it. In this essay I take a single letter and try to figure out its logic. Such a procedure allows other Pauline letters—and, as in the present case, other ancient compositions—to serve as intertexture that might inform both ancient and present day readers as they try to fill those gaps that might have “gone without saying” for Paul, but may not have to his first readers and certainly do not to us.

I argue a threefold thesis in this essay. First, Paul’s Letter to the Romans both presents the problem in the sharpest form and also provides clues to its solving. Second, placing Paul’s clues against the backdrop of Aristotle’s discussion of φρόνησις in the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a framework that makes them more coherent. Third, the hypothesis thus derived from Romans is supported by evidence drawn from other Pauline letters and is disconfirmed by none of them.

*A First Look at Romans*

How can we account for the fact that the language about the Holy Spirit, which dominates the theological argument in Romans 5–8, is virtually absent from the moral instruction in chapters 12–14? To appreciate the difficulty, it is helpful to review the language in some detail. The “spirit of holiness” (πνεῦμα ἁγιωσύνης) is introduced in 1:4 in connection with that power (δύναμις) designating Jesus as Son of God because of his resurrection from the dead. In 5:5 this Holy Spirit is given to those who have been made righteous, pouring out the love of God into their hearts. In chapter six, Paul shows the irreconcilability of “walking in newness of life” and continuing in sin (6:1–23). He does not speak here of the Holy Spirit, but, as we see in 7:6, the power of the Spirit in this newness of life has been assumed; for Paul states there that they are now able to serve God “in the newness of the Spirit and not the oldness of the letter.”

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4 My own position on these matters—that all letters ascribed to Paul could well have been written during his lifetime in a complex process of composition that already involved his “school”—is sketched in *Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (2nd enl. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 271–73; 393–95; 407–12; 423–31.