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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

PAUL AND SENECA ON THE IMMANENCE OF GOD

HONORS THESIS

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BY

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APRIL 19, 2023

Introduction

Paul and Seneca give us two vastly different perspectives of the first century world. One came from a traditional Jewish context, while the other was an influential member of the Roman elite. In doing a comparative study of the two, the first question that must be answered is why this study is important and relevant to both Pauline and Senecan studies today. In his introduction to the book *“Paul and the Giants of Philosophy,”* David E. Briones said that comparative studies like this are important because, “comparison brings clarity.”¹ By reading Paul in conversation with the philosophies of his day, one can better understand how Paul’s ideas fit within the culture that surrounded him. It also helps the reader to understand why Paul framed arguments the way that he did. Likewise, by reading Seneca in connection with Paul’s letters, one can better understand how first-century Stoicism compares with the development of first-century Christianity.

Seneca has a unique relationship with the Christian tradition. Due to both the presence of a pseudo-correspondence between Paul and Seneca and the overlap between Seneca and Christianity’s views concerning morality, several figures throughout church history have either claimed a Christian Seneca or that Seneca was in line with Christian doctrine.² Early church fathers such as Tertullian cited Seneca as “one of ours.”³ Church Fathers such as Arnobius and Lactantius often cited Seneca’s writings on moral issues in order to support their theological

¹ David E. Briones and Joseph R. Dodson, *Paul and the Giants of Philosophy: Reading the Apostle in Greco-Roman Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 3.

² Chiara Torre, “Seneca and the Christian Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 267-269.

³ Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul* 20.1.

views.⁴ Given Seneca's consistent comparison with Christian thought, many people throughout the centuries have argued that Seneca and the Apostle Paul are closely related philosophically. While there are many superficial similarities between the two, such as a focus on virtue ethics, it is important that they are read as two completely different and competing philosophies. As this thesis will show, Paul and Seneca had completely different views on God, humanity, and how one should live one's life. Both Paul and Seneca had "all or nothing" philosophies that they taught and promoted; one cannot live as both a Christian and a Stoic.⁵ Given this understanding of the relationship between these two ways of life, some important works of the two philosophers can now be compared and analyzed in order to understand them better in their larger social, philosophical, and theological framework.

Before their works can be compared, a brief introduction of each of these philosophers is necessary. Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born in 4 B.C.E. to a wealthy Roman family. He was given an education in rhetoric and philosophy, with one of his teachers being Attalus, a Stoic. Seneca prioritized building strong relationships within the Roman court. This led to him being appointed as the tutor for Nero, putting Seneca into an influential position within the empire. Seneca served as Nero's advisor for many years, holding a great deal of political power for much of his life. In his later years, Seneca sought to withdraw from most aspects of public life. It was during this time that he composed much of his writings that are available today, including his letters to Lucilius. After an assassination attempt on Nero's life, Seneca was forced to commit suicide by Nero in 65 C.E. While Seneca lived a life full of political intrigue, he is best remembered for his contributions to Stoic philosophy. Most of his writings focus on how to live

⁴ Torre, 270.

⁵ See *One True Life* by C. Kavin Rowe for further development of this idea.

life as a Stoic, giving historians and philosophers a window into how Stoicism was developing in the first century world.⁶

It is much more difficult to provide a biography of the apostle Paul. Most everything that is known about him personally is found in the Bible, and he does not provide much of an autobiography of himself. From what can be surmised with the historical evidence, Saul of Tarsus was born in approximately 5-10 C.E. He was trained up to be a Pharisee by Gamaliel, a prominent member of the Jewish Sanhedrin.⁷ He called himself “a Hebrew of Hebrews,” which shows how significant his Jewish background was to his worldview.⁸ He claims to have been very zealous in his beliefs, persecuting Christians throughout much of his early life. In 34 C.E., he claimed to have had an encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Because of this experience, he converted to Christianity. From this point forward, he committed the rest of his life to sharing the message of the gospel throughout much of the ancient Near East. He was a prominent leader in early Christianity, and much of the New Testament is made up of his writings to the churches across the ancient Near East. Because of his zeal for the Christian faith, he was frequently imprisoned. Eventually, he was brought before Nero and ordered to be beheaded in approximately 64-68 C.E. It is through the letters Paul wrote to the churches that his background, philosophy, and theology are understood.⁹

⁶ See *Seneca: A Life* by Emily Wilson for a complete biographical account of Seneca’s life.

⁷ See Acts 22:3.

⁸ See Phil 3:5.

⁹ See David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, and E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters, and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 83-101 for a detailed chronology of Paul’s life.

Seneca's Perception of "God"

Seneca's concept of God seems as if it differs from letter to letter. "God" is referred to in a variety of terms. Some examples of these terms are given below:

Jupiter possesses all things, but he has surely given over the possession of them to others...¹⁰

And among the other reasons for marveling at the genius of *the Divine Creator* is, I believe, this,—that amid all this abundance there is no repetition...¹¹

Now God, who is *the Father* of us all, has placed ready to our hands those things which he intended for our own good...¹²

Do we ask what cause is? It is surely *Creative Reason*,—in other words, God.¹³

"It is Nature," you say, "who supplies me with these things." But do you not understand that, when you say this, you merely give another name to God? For what else is *Nature* but God and *the Divine Reason* that pervades the whole universe and all its parts?¹⁴

Given the many names and references to God that Seneca uses, it is difficult to know how best to refer to his idea of the divine. Seneca addresses his many names for the divine in his moral essay *On Benefits*: "Any name that you choose will be properly applied to him if it connotes some force that operates in the domain of heaven—his titles may be as countless as are his

¹⁰ Seneca, *Ep.* 73.12-15 (Gunmere, LCL); see also *Ep.* 107.9-10; 110.11-20; 119.7-9 (emphasis added).

¹¹ Seneca, *Ep.* 113.15 (Gunmere, LCL); see also *Ep.* 65.23; *Prov.* 5.8 (emphasis added).

¹² Seneca, *Ep.* 110.10 (Gunmere, LCL); see also *Ben.* ii. 29.4 (emphasis added).

¹³ Seneca, *Ep.* 65.11-14 (Gunmere, LCL) (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Seneca, *Ben.* iv. 7.1 (Gunmere, LCL); see also *Ep.* 29.4-9; 55.1-2; 78.7-10 (emphasis added).

benefits.”¹⁵ To Seneca, any reference to the divine is sufficient. He recognizes that there is a divine power that was the first cause, yet ultimately he believes that Nature, Fate, and Fortune all refer to this first cause, which he most commonly refers to as God.¹⁶ Sevenster best summarizes Seneca’s understanding of God:

Seneca’s God is, when all is said and done, fate, nature, and his ‘deeds’ are the decrees of fate, the enactment of the laws of nature. ‘God’ or the ‘gods’ are ultimately nothing but figuratively used, friendly terms for the irresistible fate, for which man is no match, and to which he voluntarily submits, if he has any wisdom.¹⁷

Given that Seneca’s god is synonymous with nature, there are several characteristics of the divine that we can infer. Seneca’s god is impersonal. Seneca portrays God more as a force of nature rather than as a God that humanity can relate to. Setaioli recognizes this by saying that “Seneca’s god never acquires an individual face or personality.”¹⁸ While Seneca sometimes uses personal or familial language in referring to God, he is using this language in a purely figurative sense in order to make a point regarding the self. While the divine is often mentioned in his writings, it is never his primary concern. The focus of Seneca’s writings is not on the divine, but on the self and how one can live a virtuous life. The goal of the Stoic’s life is to “Live according to Nature.”¹⁹ Since, in Stoic thought, God and nature are synonymous with one another,²⁰ it is important for one to understand nature/God in order to know how to live in harmony with it.

¹⁵ Seneca, *On Ben. iv 7.1-2* (Gummere, LCL).

¹⁶ Seneca, *On Ben. iv 7.1-2* (Gummere, LCL).

¹⁷ J.N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1961), 39.

¹⁸ Aldo Setaioli, “Physics III: Theology,” in *Brill’s Companion to Seneca: Philosopher and Dramatist*, ed. Gregor Damschen and Andreas Heil (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 389.

¹⁹ Seneca, *Ep. 5.4* (Gummere, LCL).

²⁰ Sevenster, 39.

Still, the focus is first situated on the self before anything else, including nature/God. Sevenster summarizes this by saying, “Seneca always speaks first of man and from man’s point of view and only in connection with this – and then usually in passing – does he speak of the divinity.”²¹

Rather than focusing his attention on the divine, the center of Seneca’s cosmology is, according to C. Kavin Rowe, “*Fortuna*.”²² It is within Fortuna that all human life is lived. While this force has power over the human life, it does not have a mind of its own. Rather, it is the name that Seneca gives to “the world in all its excess.”²³ Much of Seneca’s instruction for how to live the life of a Stoic is to build a defensive strategy against Fortuna and all its power.²⁴ In doing this, he does not believe that Fortuna is good or evil in and of itself, but instead views it and everything it does as morally neutral. Instead of focusing on the acts of Fortuna, Seneca points the Stoic to look within their soul. The soul’s response is what determines whether something is good or bad.²⁵ While Fortuna is not necessarily a divine force, it is nevertheless a key term in understanding Seneca’s view of cosmology, nature, and the self. With Seneca’s perception of the divine now put in its proper context, his perception of the self may now be examined.

²¹ Sevenster, 67.

²² Rowe, 22.

²³ Rowe, 22.

²⁴ *Ep. 51.8, Ep. 91.8, Ep. 45.9.*

²⁵ *Ep. 9.13, Ep. 98.2.*

Seneca's Perception of the Self

Understanding Seneca's view of the self is central to understanding all his writings, as most of his focus is on developing the self through virtuous living. The first thing that stands out in Seneca's writings is that his anthropology is dualistic: in many of his letters, he starkly contrasts the body and the soul/spirit. In doing so, he has a contemptuous view of the body and an elevated view of the soul. This is best expressed in Epistle 65:

For this body of ours is a weight upon the soul and its penance; as the load presses down the soul is crushed and is in bondage, unless philosophy has come to its assistance and has bid it take fresh courage by contemplating the universe, and has turned it from things earthly to things divine.²⁶

In this section, Seneca associates the body with earthly things and the soul with divine things. This dichotomy is throughout much of his writings: the body (and all earthly things associated with it) is clearly viewed as evil and burdensome. At one point, Seneca states that "to despise our bodies is sure freedom."²⁷ Seneca usually accompanies these statements with a praise/emphasis of the soul. For Seneca, the soul is a divine spark within each human. His view of the human problem is the wrestling within oneself of the divine nature/soul and the weak body/flesh. Much of his philosophy deals with this struggle, encouraging his followers to live according to this divine nature.²⁸

While Seneca has a negative view of the body, it is also important to note that he does not believe that human nature is inherently evil. He addresses this idea in Epistle 94:

For you are mistaken if you suppose that our faults are inborn in us; they have come from without, have been heaped upon us... Nature does not ally us with any vice; she produced

²⁶ Seneca, *Ep.* 65.16 (Gunmere, LCL).

²⁷ Seneca, *Ep.* 65.22 (Gunmere, LCL).

²⁸ *Ep.* 5.4.

us in health and freedom. She put before our eyes no object which might stir in us the itch of greed.²⁹

Seneca's view of physical nature directly impacts his view of human nature. Because nature is inherently good, it would then follow that humans are inherently good. The human soul is divine in its origin, and this divine source is viewed as inherently good. Not only is the soul's source the divine, but it is actually a particle of God found within each human being.³⁰ Because of this divine origin, humans are viewed as being gods themselves.³¹ This understanding of the divine in relation to the self shows that there is not a relationship that occurs between two entities, but rather the individual looks within themselves to understand their own divine nature. The goal of the human life, therefore, is to look within oneself in order to "tap in" to the divine spark found within.³² One can accomplish this by devoting themselves to a love of philosophy.³³ While there are other things that the Stoic can spend their time doing, such as being involved in politics, their primary focus should be on studying the Stoic principles and applying them to every facet of life.

Epistle 41

In epistle 41, entitled "On the Gods Within Us," Seneca expounds on his understanding of both anthropology and the immanence of God. He begins his letter to Lucilius by emphasizing the importance of attaining sound understanding for oneself. In making this point, he says that one does not need to make a big show out of one's prayers in order to be heard by an idol: rather, a

²⁹ Seneca, *Ep.* 94.55 (Gunmere, LCL).

³⁰ *Ep.* 66.12; 92.30; 120.14.

³¹ *Ep.* 31.11; 41.1; 110.1.

³² *Ep.* 73.15.

³³ *Ep.* 65.16.

person only needs to look within themselves to be connected to God. This is where he makes a statement that seems to directly correlate to his view on the immanence of God: “God is near you, he is with you, he is within you.”³⁴ While this may seem like a statement that Christians would agree with, it is important to examine the context in which he is saying this. A few lines later, Seneca quotes Vergil’s *Aeneid* by saying that “In each good man a god doth dwell, but what god we know not.” This quote reveals that Seneca is not referring to a personal god, but rather a piece of the divine that is within every human, often referred to in Stoicism as the divine spark. He goes on to talk about a holy spirit that indwells within people, serves as their guardian, and marks their good and bad deeds. While Seneca is using the same words that are often found in Christian writings, he is not using the same ideas. This “holy spirit” is not an external force; it is the human spirit that is already within every human, and all that one needs to do is to look within themselves in order to find fulfillment in life.

While Seneca’s focus is primarily on the human spirit, it is important to note he also believes in an external force that one can refer to as “god.” The next section of this epistle explains why he believes in such an entity. He illustrates his belief in the divine by describing different aspects of nature, from the towering groves of trees to the hot springs of water. This section is reminiscent of Romans 1:20, where Paul points to God’s creation as one of the reasons why people are without excuse before God. While the two arrive at different conclusions, they both view nature/creation as proof for the existence of an external deity. He then says that a man who lives out the Stoic ideals (happy in adversity, untouched by desires, etc.) does not achieve these things by relying solely on their human selves, but only by being “propped up by the

³⁴ Seneca, *Ep. 41.1* (Gunmere, LCL).

divine.”³⁵ The question that naturally follows is this: to what extent does Seneca argue that humans are dependent on the divine? Rather than needing to supply additional commentary on the relationship between God and humanity in Seneca, the analogy that he uses immediately following this statement illustrates it well. He views the human soul as a ray of sunshine; it touches the earth, yet it still clings to its source. In the same way, the human soul is within oneself, yet its ultimate source is still the divine. This concept helps in developing one’s understanding of Seneca’s view of the divine, although it is important to recognize its shortcomings. While it helps to understand the divine spark concept that is prevalent in Stoic thought, it can also be misunderstood if applied to other Stoic concepts. Stoicism is generally concerned with the self and how to develop the self. They do not focus on the source of the soul, but only on the soul itself and what one can do to further develop it. Where Christianity would focus on the source of the light (i.e. God), Stoicism would focus on where the light ends up (i.e. the soul within). The analogy is only used to show that there is a source to the human soul.

Following this, Seneca turns his attention to what humans should praise about themselves: “that which is one’s own.” He gives two analogies to illustrate his point. First, he says that an untamed lion is preferable to a tamed one because his spirit is unbroken. A tamed lion develops its skills through the influence of its trainers, while an untamed lion has developed its skills completely on its own. This illustration reveals a key concept in Stoic thought: a focus on the self and one’s role in developing the self. While Seneca does recognize the need for the existence of the divine, he does not teach that the Stoic should focus on the divine in order to further develop the self. Rather, he teaches that it is through immersing oneself into Stoic philosophy that one can become more mature and complete. This is seen in his second

³⁵ Seneca, *Ep. 41.5* (Gummere, LCL).

illustration as well, where he praises a vine that grows and is fertile on its own. A human should only praise that which he has developed within, namely virtue.

Seneca concludes the letter by saying that humanity should focus on fulfilling what it was designed to do since birth: living in accordance with one's own nature. This statement best summarizes the central tenet of Stoic philosophy. This idea of "nature" could be interpreted as several things. Given the context, it seems as if nature is the way that a person was designed to live at birth. This gives nature a slight connection to the divine (since a deity would have been the one to design the person in the first place), yet it still keeps the focus on the individual. Stoicism recognizes the role of the divine only as far as it affects the individual; the central focus in Seneca's writings, including in this epistle, is on the strengthening of the inner self through embracing Stoic thought.

One more observation needs to be made when examining this epistle. In concluding his thoughts, Seneca mentions how living in accordance with one's nature is made difficult due to "the general madness of mankind."³⁶ He describes how all of mankind is pushing one another towards vice. While Seneca generally views humanity as inherently good, he often references mankind in a negative fashion. His view of men pushing one another towards vice might suggest that man is inherently sinful, but he never commits to this view. Instead, he describes the soul of man as good and the body as evil; those who are part of the "general madness of mankind" are the ones who neglect their soul and instead allow their passions to lead them.

³⁶ Seneca, *Ep. 41.9* (Gunmere, LCL).

Seneca's View on Immanence of God

Because Seneca's view of God is directly tied to nature, it can be difficult to understand his view on God's immanence, especially in comparison to Christian thought. However, Seneca directly addresses the issue of immanence in several of his letters. While Seneca's god is impersonal, it is still fully aware of every aspect of each individual. At the beginning of his epistle concerning drunkenness, he addresses why the task of hiding one's actions from other people is futile:

“Nothing is shut off from the sight of God. He is witness of our souls, and he comes into the very midst of our thoughts—comes into them, I say, as one who may at any time depart.”³⁷ This shows that Seneca's god is omniscient, knowing the condition of each person's soul. However, the greater question is how immanent can we consider Seneca's god to be? In addressing this issue, Setaioli says, “the concept of an immanent god is as orthodox as can be [in Stoicism].”³⁸

Given that the human soul is viewed as being divine in origin, it would then follow that the divine would naturally have a certain level of immanence. However, Setaioli also recognizes that Seneca's references to the immanence of god are always used in elevating the soul. In discussing this, he acknowledges that “most scholars consider his [Seneca's] concept of a god within us as a mere corollary of the divine nature of the human soul.”³⁹ Once again, Seneca is seen to focus primarily on the human soul rather than on the active presence of a deity in a person's life.

³⁷ Seneca, *Ep. 83.1* (Gunmere, LCL).

³⁸ Setaioli, 386.

³⁹ Setaioli, 392.

Paul's Perception of the Self

In order to understand Paul's view of the immanence of God, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of his perception of what it means to be human. For the purposes of this thesis, the areas of Paul's anthropology that are especially relevant in comparison to Seneca's view will be examined. Perhaps the greatest distinction that needs to be made in regard to Paul's understanding of the self is his how he would divide the self (assuming he would make any such division). Paul was situated between two distinct contexts that shaped his understanding: Jewish and Greek. Each had distinct perspectives in their understanding of the self. In his discussion of this issue, James Dunn said, "While Greek thought tended to regard the human being as made up of distinct parts, Hebrew thought saw the human being more as a whole person existing on different dimensions."⁴⁰ In philosophical terms, the Greeks had a dualistic understanding of the self, while the Jewish people had a monistic understanding of the self. Given that Paul was influenced by both schools of thought, the question that naturally follows is this: which of these views did he hold to? N.T. Wright argues that Paul was more influenced by his Jewish background than he was by the Greco-Roman culture that surrounded him. Speaking of Paul, he says, "He knows very well the world of the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Academic, perhaps particularly the first, but though he's engaging with them he is doing so in confrontation, not derivation."⁴¹ Paul understood the culture around him and used uniquely Greek terms to address their understanding of the body. However, his discussion of the human body, soul, and spirit indicates a Hebraic rather than Greek understanding. Wright argues that rather than viewing each

⁴⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 54.

⁴¹ N.T. Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul, and Body: All for One and One for All – Reflections on Paul's Anthropology in His Complex Contexts," in *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*, ed. N.T. Wright (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 460.

of these as distinct parts, Paul views them as different aspects of one unified person.⁴² Graham Warne also argues for a holistic view of the human, saying: “Paul maintains a Hebraic perspective which emphasizes the wholeness of the human person’s existence, both in the present life and beyond it.”⁴³ Wright also argues that the dualistic view generally elevates the soul while downgrading the body.⁴⁴ The dangers of this view are that if the body is viewed as evil, then it tarnishes the view of both being made in the image of God and of Jesus being fully human. Given both Paul’s Jewish context and the theological implications, Paul takes a monistic view of the self.

Another aspect of Paul’s anthropology that should be discussed is his understanding of the nature of human beings. Paul views humans as being the crowning achievement of God’s creation since they are the only ones created in the image of God.⁴⁵ While he recognizes that all humans are image-bearers, he primarily characterizes humans as either slaves to sin or slaves to Christ.⁴⁶ Prior to conversion, human beings are in bondage to sin, which condemns their existence to an eternal death.⁴⁷ Sin causes humanity to be separated from God, which thus characterizes them as not knowing God.⁴⁸ At conversion, human beings go from being enslaved to sin to being slaves of Christ.⁴⁹ Following this conversion, humans are then identified as being

⁴² Wright, 471.

⁴³ Graham Warne, *Hebrew Perspectives on the Human Person in the Hellenistic Era: Philo and Paul* (Lewiston, NY: Mellon Biblical Press, 1995), 252.

⁴⁴ Wright, 466.

⁴⁵ See Gen. 1:26-27; Col. 1:15; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 11:7; 1 Cor. 15:49.

⁴⁶ See Rom. 6:6-22.

⁴⁷ See Rom. 3:9; 5:12; 5:15-19.

⁴⁸ See 1 Cor. 1:19-21; 1 Thess. 4:5; 2 Thess. 1:8.

⁴⁹ See Rom 6:18, 22.

“in Christ,” which allows them to experience eternal life instead of death.⁵⁰ Paul’s understanding of human nature requires one to wrestle with the tension of humans being both made in the image of God and having a sinful nature that separates them from God.

Paul’s Perception of God

To describe Paul’s perception of God initially seems like an insurmountable task. Because this is a broad topic, only the areas of Paul’s theology that directly compare to Seneca’s understanding will be examined. Paul’s writings assume the existence of the Jewish God. He inherited his belief in the oneness of God from his Jewish background.⁵¹ While he understands Jesus and the Holy Spirit as distinct persons from God, he still retained a monotheistic view.⁵² He never concerns himself with proving the existence of God because it was an assumed presupposition.

Rather, Paul focuses more of his attention on the attributes of God and discussing how one can relate to God through Christ. Given this understanding, the primary attributes that Paul views God with can be examined. First, God is transcendent over humanity.⁵³ The Godhead is viewed as being the creator of all things and existing before all things.⁵⁴ God is viewed as being holy and set apart from humanity, with his glory (frequently mentioned in the Pauline corpus) putting him far above his creation.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ See Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 15:22; 2 Cor. 5:17.

⁵¹ Capes, Reeves, and Richards, 257.

⁵² See 1 Cor. 8:6; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:3-14.

⁵³ See Rom. 11:33-36; Eph. 4:6.

⁵⁴ See Col. 1:15-17.

⁵⁵ See Rom. 3:23.

Paul also views God as a personal being.⁵⁶ The personal nature of God is most clearly seen through God choosing to enter the world through the person of Jesus Christ. Because God chose to directly intervene in human affairs, he is seen as showing concern for his creation.⁵⁷ Paul describes God as demonstrating his love for humanity through the work of Christ.⁵⁸ This shows that Paul's God is compassionate and is actively involved in the events of human history. Paul's perception of God is consistent throughout each of his letters. Even though he does not give a systematic account of his view of God, he does not contradict himself in his writings. Paul pays careful attention to the manner in which he discusses God and how God relates to his creation. Because of this, there are not as many contradictions in thought as in Seneca's writings.

For Paul, God is understood as being Triune. While he maintains a monotheistic view, he understands God as having three distinct persons. While one of the primary trinitarian passages will be examined below, Paul refers to the three members of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in several of his writings, including 2 Corinthians 13:14 and Ephesians 2:18-22. God the Father is the God who chose Israel and raised Jesus from the dead.⁵⁹ Jesus Christ the Son is God incarnate. He is the one who is both in the form of God and equal to God.⁶⁰ The Holy Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ (see discussion in section below). Rowe describes the Holy Spirit as articulating "the complete presence of God in Christ and the way by which

⁵⁶ See Col. 2:9; Phil. 3:8-10.

⁵⁷ See 2 Cor. 1:3-4.

⁵⁸ See Rom. 5:8.

⁵⁹ See Romans 8:11, 11:2.

⁶⁰ See Philippians 2:5-11.

human beings come to know this presence in the here and now.”⁶¹ While each person of the Trinity is important in the discussion of Paul’s view of immanence, more attention will be given to the Holy Spirit because of its role within the lives of Christians, which will be discussed more below.

Romans 8

It is difficult to locate a single passage where Paul substantially addresses the immanence of God. Paul is addressing a specific audience in each of his writings, whether it be a church or an individual. However, the immanence of God within an individual’s life is most clearly seen in his discussion of the Holy Spirit. Much of Paul’s teaching discusses the indwelling Holy Spirit of God within the Christian’s life. The chapter where he most clearly addresses the role of the indwelling Holy Spirit is Romans 8. Given the significance of this chapter in understanding Paul’s view of immanence, the section of this chapter that is especially relevant to this discussion, verses nine through eleven, will be examined.

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him. If Christ is in you, then although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then the one who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (Rom. 8:9-11; translation is my own).

In these verses, Paul discusses in great detail the effect that the immanence of God has within the life of a Christian. Essentially, he is describing what it means to live within the realm of the Spirit rather than the realm of the flesh. According to J. Knox Chamblin, Paul’s use of the term “flesh” (sarx) here denotes “man’s being and attitude as opposed to and in contradiction to

⁶¹ Rowe, 89.

God and God's Spirit."⁶² Paul uses this word in Romans 7:25, where he says, "By means of the flesh I am enslaved to the law of sin." In Paul's view, those who live according to the flesh allow the direction of their lives to be determined by their fallen human nature, meaning that they are standing in opposition to God's will. Those who are now followers of Christ are not walking in the flesh in this sense, but rather are walking in the Spirit. The direction of their lives is determined by the indwelling Spirit of God.⁶³ Interpreting "in the flesh" and "in the Spirit" as datives of realm is crucial to understanding this passage. Douglas J. Moo, a leading scholar in Pauline studies, argues that being "in the flesh" and being "in the spirit" is a contrast between being in the old realm of sin and death and the new realm of righteousness and life. Since the flesh and the Spirit are characteristic of these two realms, one can be said to be "in" them (i.e. belonging to them). In verse nine, Paul is trying to assure the believers that they are, by definition, in the Spirit.⁶⁴

Cranfield says that the phrase "dwells in" refers to a "settled permanent penetrative influence."⁶⁵ When the Spirit of God is residing within believers in this way, then they are no longer living within the realm of the flesh. This verse is based on the presupposition that one must have the Spirit of God living within them in order to be considered a Christian. Moo argues that Paul is working under the assumption that the Spirit is a permanent resident within the

⁶² J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self: Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 50.

⁶³ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 387.

⁶⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 512.

⁶⁵ Cranfield, 388.

believer from the moment of conversion.⁶⁶ The final phrase in verse nine further asserts this idea. The opposite of this idea, that those who do not have the Spirit are not Christian, is also seen to be true.⁶⁷

Another important thing to note with verse nine is the hint of Trinitarian doctrine that is used. Paul unconsciously shifts between using “the Spirit of God” in the first half of the verse and “the Spirit of Christ” in the second half. This is the same Spirit, and it is sent by both God the Father and God the Son.⁶⁸ The close tie between the three persons of God that is seen in these verses reflect Paul’s belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. While Paul may have been trying to make a point about the Trinitarian relationship, he was likely switching between the different persons of God in this verse in order to emphasize different aspects of the indwelling Spirit. In verses nine and ten, Paul switches from “the Spirit of Christ living within you” to “Christ himself living within you.” It is important to clarify that Paul is not equating the two. Rather, he is considering the two so closely connected that he can switch from one to the other almost unconsciously. Christ and the Spirit of Christ are seen to be distinguishable yet inseparable.⁶⁹

In verse ten, the opening phrase shows that Paul thinks the indwelling of the Spirit is the manner in which Christ dwells within us.⁷⁰ While some argue that the use of the word “spirit” (pneuma) in verse ten is referring to the human spirit (speaking of the Christian’s inner life), this

⁶⁶ Moo, 512.

⁶⁷ Cranfield, 388.

⁶⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, The IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 200.

⁶⁹ Moo, 513.

⁷⁰ Cranfield, 389.

view does not work well within the context of the passage. Since each of the other uses of “spirit” (pneuma) in Romans 8:1-11 refer to the Holy Spirit, Paul is likely still referring to the Holy Spirit here.⁷¹ Also, “the spirit” is literally referred to as “life.” Since it is difficult to know what Paul would mean by calling the human spirit life, it makes more sense for this to be referring to the Holy Spirit instead. That would mean that this is referring to the life that the Spirit produces in the life of the believer.⁷²

In verse eleven, Paul’s reference to the Spirit’s indwelling is stated differently for the sake of emphasis – now, he calls the Spirit “the spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead” in order to greater emphasize the close connection between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the believer.⁷³ Verse eleven ends by referring to the Holy Spirit as the one “who dwells in you.” According to Cranfield, “the Spirit” is likely a genitive of agency. This rendering would mean that the Spirit who now dwells within the believer will hereafter be the agent of God in raising them up from the dead. Interpreted this way, this would be the only passage in Paul’s writings that explicitly ascribes the Spirit a role in the resurrection of the dead.⁷⁴ Given this interpretation, the Holy Spirit is seen to act as the breath of God that will raise and transform the mortal body of the believer.⁷⁵ In conclusion, because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that occurs at the moment of conversion, the believer is transferred from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit. The future resurrection of the believers from the dead is based upon the

⁷¹ Cranfield, 390.

⁷² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 409.

⁷³ Cranfield, 390.

⁷⁴ Cranfield, 390.

⁷⁵ Moo, 516.

indwelling Holy Spirit of God, showing the important role that the immanence of God has in the Pauline and Christian perspective.

Paul and Seneca in Dialogue

An important distinction to make when comparing Paul and Seneca is to recognize the purpose of each of their writings. Seneca is primarily focused with the self and how Stoicism can better improve the self. Whenever Seneca discusses the presence of the divine, it is always secondary to his discussion of the self. Paul, on the other hand, puts a greater focus on God than on the self. In his theology of Paul, Dunn argues that God is the “fundamental presupposition” of Paul’s theology.⁷⁶ Hays and Duvall build on this idea by identifying God’s relational presence as “the most promising center” for Paul’s theology.⁷⁷ Paul discusses the self only in relation to God. Dunn explained this by saying, “in Pauline perspective, human beings are as they are by virtue of their relationship to God and his world.”⁷⁸ By recognizing Paul and Seneca’s difference in focal points, their understanding of how God’s presence relates to the self can be understood in a greater way.

In comparing their perspectives on “God,” several issues arise. While an argument can be made that each of them believe that the divine is immanent within the individual, their concept of the divine is wholly different. While similar terminology is used by both, the concept they are referring to when using these terms is not the same. While Seneca believes that there is some external force that created the world, he does not think it can relate to its creation in any way. Rather, his perspective on God is essentially a combination of deism and pantheism. He believes

⁷⁶ Dunn, 28.

⁷⁷ J. Daniel Hays and J. Scott Duvall, *God’s Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 222.

⁷⁸ Dunn, 53.

that the divine created the world, but he does not believe that it relates with his creation. Instead, he believes that a piece of the divine lies within each individual in the form of the soul. The only divine being that one should relate to is oneself. Paul, on the other hand, does not believe that the soul is divine. While the two would agree that the universe is of divine origin, they have differing perspectives on the nature of the soul. Seneca views the soul as inherently good, while Paul sees it as marred by sin. Rather than viewing the self as “god,” Paul understands God to be a being that is both transcendent over humanity and actively involved in the lives of his creation. Paul’s God is personal, while Seneca’s concept of the divine is impersonal. Overall, there is little common ground in their concepts of the divine.

Given the stark contrast between Paul and Seneca’s views on God, it logically follows that their use of the term “holy spirit” is different as well. As stated earlier, the “holy spirit” to Seneca is the human spirit. While it is divine in origin, it is not a separate entity from the human soul, thus there is not a relationship with an external being. For Paul, the Holy Spirit is a separate entity from the human soul. The Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of the Trinity, a central doctrine of Paul’s belief system. It is the agent through which God’s presence dwells within the life of a Christian. The immanence of God for Paul is primarily characterized through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within a Christian. The immanence of God for Seneca is understood through focusing on the spark of the divine that lies within every human being. To live in accordance with nature, the primary Stoic virtue, is to live in accordance with the piece of the divine that is within oneself, which is the soul.

It is worth noting that despite the significant differences that have been discussed above, Paul and Seneca would agree on some points. Both recognize that there is a divine creator who brought everything into existence. While Seneca gives more attention to the role that fortune

plays in life, he still recognizes the need for an external creating force. Both men would also agree that the divine is immanent in the individual's life, and that adhering to their respective belief systems would allow one to experience the immanence of God in a more substantial way. While there are several other similarities that the two men have to one another, the purpose of this thesis is to show that the two men ultimately have fundamentally different worldviews.

In conclusion, the comparison of Paul and Seneca is not an easy one. By examining their perceptions of God and the self, it is clear that they hold to conflicting viewpoints. Because of this, their concepts of immanence widely differ from one another. Discovering that their perceptions of this issue are so dissimilar may cause one to ask why a comparative study like this is worth doing. The benefits of this study are seen in two ways. First, by comparing Paul and Seneca's views on the immanence of God, one comes to a greater understanding of these two prominent figures in first century philosophy. Second, the comparison of these two viewpoints provides the reader with further insight into an important philosophical and theological concept. Putting Paul and Seneca in dialogue with one another on the topic of immanence brings greater clarity and insight to the reader in regard to theology, anthropology, and the overall philosophical context of the first century world.

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