

Finding Out the Things of God: A Dialogue on Matthew Sharp's *Divination and Philosophy in the Letters of Paul and New Testament Studies*

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Summary (Hewitt)

Matthew Sharp's *Divination and Philosophy in the Letters of Paul* delivers that elusive combination of plausibility and provocation.¹ It is, put differently, *generative*. What makes it so? The book is an exercise in redescription, uprooting long-held assumptions. It is self-aware and honest about its distinctive 'angle', so one does not have to worry about a methodological sleight of hand. And it is saturated with sensibly selected and juxtaposed primary evidence beyond the New Testament, thus inviting the reader into genuine discovery. Above all this, though, the book is generative because, despite the somewhat esoteric ring of its title, *Divination and Philosophy*, its subject matter is something that undergirds almost every aspect of Paul's self-understanding, his writings, and their reception through the ages. That subject, in simplest terms, is how one knows things about God. Sharp has something that is both new and well-founded to say about Paul's understanding of this subject.

1. What follows is a lightly revised version of the review (J. Thomas Hewitt) and response (Matthew T. Sharp) presented at a book launch for *Divination and Philosophy in the Letters of Paul* hosted by the University of Edinburgh's Centre for the Study of Christian Origins on 31 January 2023.

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How does Paul think one finds out the things of God? Sharp's contention is that neither the ancient Jewish category of 'prophecy' nor the modern Christian category of what we might call 'discernment' lend accuracy when mapping all the craggy contours of Paul's ideas. Prophecy is too narrow, requiring the contortion of Paul's thought to make it fit the category and resulting in an artificial cordoning off of Paul from his Hellenistic context. Discernment, or at least some comparable notion, is too domesticated, rounding off the surprising sharp edges of Paul's reports of his own experiences. To rectify these mis-descriptions of Paul, Sharp develops the analytical approach of what he calls 'comparative divination', by which he is able systematically to explore similarities and differences between Paul's conceptions and practices of 'receiving and interpreting knowledge of a divine, or superhuman, source', and corresponding conceptions and practices evinced in ancient sources, mostly Graeco-Roman but also Hellenistic Jewish (Sharp 2023: 2).

Using this analytical approach, Sharp first explores how the ancients, including Paul, understood the 'mechanics of divination'—the 'psychophysiological' processes by which knowledge is transmitted from the divine to the human—a decidedly philosophical matter, at least in the ancient world (Sharp 2023: 27–61). Sharp then investigates how these mechanics operate for Paul and the ancients in four different categories: visions of superhuman things, divinely inspired speech (which includes the aforementioned phenomenon of prophecy), the use of sacred texts, and the interpretation of signs. The fruit of Sharp's analysis is not merely a cataloguing of structural similarities and differences between Paul and others, though such a catalogue is indeed interesting in its own right. Rather, Sharp's analysis produces a more fine-grained portrait of Paul himself, made all the more vivid by a well-developed, multi-textured depiction of Paul's setting—his first-century Jewish and 'pagan' Hellenistic contexts. In this panorama, Paul emerges as a figure who is neither conventional nor incomprehensible. His own divinatory conceptions and practices are, more or less, recognized technologies in the ancient world for accessing divine knowledge. Yet, the things Paul finds out are at many turns surprising.

Contributions (Hewitt)

Sharp takes seriously that Paul thought he knew things. Hence Sharp, rightly in my opinion, senses a disappointing lack in analyses in which 'divination emerges as a primarily performative phenomenon' (Sharp 2023: 21). As Sharp goes on to observe, 'divination, at all levels of ancient society, was thought to work, and was thought to make sense as a means of knowledge, both by those who practiced it, and by those who reflected on it' (Sharp 2023: 22). The point here is that there is not just something theological that may be lost in readings of Paul that see his claims merely as power plays, though that they may be in

part, but rather that there is also something historiographical lost when ancient epistemologies are side-lined, perhaps unwittingly, because they are other than our own. This demeanour toward investigating Paul's writings is particularly fruitful in his examination of Paul's visions. Sharp finds more in Paul's reports than a mere means of asserting authority (Sharp 2023: 62), and this allows Sharp to illuminate Paul's juxtaposition in 2 Corinthians 12 of 'a superlative heavenly ascent and a (maybe disappointing) healing oracle' as a 'rhetorical tightrope walk' that fits very well indeed within the broader literary and rhetorical context of 2 Corinthians (Sharp 2023: 95).

Another major contribution of Sharp's book is that it is a model of even-handed comparative work. The comparisons Sharp draws between Paul's writings and other sources are fine-grained, avoiding generalizing conceptualizations that distort the evidence, and his comparisons move along trajectories of both similarity and difference, avoiding insinuations of Paul's incomparable uniqueness (on which more below), but also escaping the spectre of 'parallelomania' and steering clear of attempts to define paths of influence, which often lead to dead ends.² The value of Sharp's disciplined application of comparative analysis is particularly poignant in his discussion of *pneuma* (or 'spirit' for those uninitiated in the mysteries of how New Testament scholars decide what to transliterate and what to translate). While some sectors of scholarship have rightly noticed and explored commonalities between Paul's representation of *πνεῦμα* and that in various Stoic writings, some important threads of Paul's thought have, I think, been lost in the excitement surrounding these parallels. Sharp, however, has been able to take on board insights about the ways in which Paul's understanding of *πνεῦμα* is similar to, or even indebted to, the philosophical currents of his day without failing to notice also the 'novel character Paul gives the *pneuma* granted by Christ' (Sharp 2023: 53 n. 93) and to notice in particular that, for Paul, this *πνεῦμα* is 'personally identifiable' (Sharp 2023: 50)—in other words, something a bit more than the stuff of stars.³

My final, more specific commendations of Sharp's book concern his investigation of what we might call Paul's 'divinatory hermeneutics' (cf. Sharp 2023: 133–62). Sharp contemplates the interaction between text and circumstance that attends all acts of ancient scriptural interpretation, and he eschews linear paradigms of meaning-making in which either a sacred text has inherent meaning that is simply exegetically mined by Paul to produce his theology, or a sacred text is an empty vessel with no meaning, waiting merely to be filled when Paul adduces it to support his claims. Instead, Sharp proposes a circular paradigm of meaning-making, a divinatory hermeneutic in which a sacred text 'both receives

2. The classic articulation of this problem is Sandmel 1962.

3. See further Hewitt 2022.

its interpretation from [a] revealed mystery, and [also] adds further specificity and a level of interpretation to the mystery itself' (Sharp 2023: 130).

Relatedly, Sharp goes on to critique much scholarship on Paul and scripture, noting that it tends to frame scripture merely as an argumentative tool for Paul versus a source of information. Viewed through the lens of ancient divination, however, this framework turns out to be historically implausible. This is an encouragement for the guild to be a bit less coy about what we think Paul is doing when he draws upon texts. Perhaps he is indeed up to more than constructing arguments, appropriating idioms, borrowing imagery, and capitalizing upon textual ambiguity. Perhaps, at least in Paul's own mind, he is divining information. Furthermore, if correct, Sharp's observation gives a sight more traction in accounting for Paul's voluminous use of Jewish ancestral texts when writing to almost exclusively gentile audiences. Thus, the discussion can confidently move beyond questions of whether and to what degree a gentile would have understood Paul's use of the Jewish scriptures to questions of what divine knowledge Paul thought those texts might yield for the benefit of gentiles.

Critical Dialogue (Hewitt & Sharp)

Similarity and Difference

Hewitt: I now want to shift registers and pose some critical questions about Sharp's work, questions to which Sharp responds in turn. To begin, I have some questions that concern the project's overall theoretical model. First, I would like to ask Sharp to elaborate on the respective significances of *similarity* and *difference* in his comparative approach. A few times in the book he writes of Paul 'making sense in' or being 'convincingly situated in' his historical context (Sharp 2023: 60, 197). I take these comments to be related to the issue of *similarity* between Paul and the *comparanda* with which Sharp works. Precisely, what does it mean for a historical contextualization of Paul to be 'convincing' or to 'make sense'? And how does one judge that a redescriptive project achieves this? With regard to *difference*, I detect an interesting tension in the rhetoric of Sharp's book. On the one hand, he is reticent to speak of any 'uniqueness' attributed to Paul, but on the other hand, he notes a number of ways in which Paul's thought is 'distinctive'—or in other words, *different*. What are the reasons for this 'rhetorical tightrope walk', to use one of Sharp's phrases? When is conceptualization of difference permissible and enlightening, and when does it go too far? Is there more to this than terminological finessing in preferring one synonym over another? Is there any danger of overstating *similarity* given a certain shyness about *difference*?

Sharp: I am immensely grateful to J. Thomas Hewitt for his thoughtful and nuanced appraisal of my book *Divination and Philosophy in the Letters of Paul*.

His assessment of the book's argument and contributions accurately captures my own hopes for the book. Even more gratifying than agreement or accurate representation are the areas in which Hewitt identifies the book as generative for future ideas and research. The generation of new perspectives is present, I think, in Hewitt's review itself. At times, he summarises my position in words I would not have thought to use but that improve upon and advance the clarity of my argument. His discussion of Paul's 'divinatory hermeneutics', for example, both clarifies my argument and also identifies implications I had not considered myself.

Hewitt's critical questions provide further opportunity for both clarification and development. To begin, what does it mean to 'convincingly situate Paul in his historical context'? Most of us are taught from our earliest classes in exegesis that context is vital for interpretation at every level. A word makes sense in the context of a sentence. A sentence makes sense in the context of a paragraph. A paragraph makes sense in the context of a book or letter. A letter makes sense in the corpus of an author's work. These contexts move out in concentric circles, and we are used to reading for maximum coherence between these various contexts. When we move out from a particular author to a cultural context, however, the impulse has often been to immediately read for difference. What makes Paul different from other Jews of his day? What sets him apart from his broader Graeco-Roman environment? The first way for Paul to make sense in his historical context though is to read him as thoroughly embedded within these social and religious contexts, just as much as the words he uses are thoroughly embedded in the sentences in which they appear.

As Paula Fredriksen has pointed out, demonstrating that a text can sustain a particular reading is not the same as demonstrating that said reading is historically plausible (Fredriksen 2020: 311–12). To read Paul historically involves a continual conversation between text and context. For this reason, I am also wary of what Troels Engberg-Pedersen dubs the *lex Malherbe* of comparison: "each worldview must [first] be investigated on its own premises, without any bias of interest in one or the other of the comparanda" (Engberg-Pedersen 2020: 56). The truth of this rule is that a good historical reading of a text aims for internal coherence and should not be bent out of recognition to fit the mould of external *comparanda*. The danger, however, is that it can make one view comparison solely as a secondary and superfluous stage to interpretation—since we have already understood the text 'on its own terms'—rather than allowing the *comparanda* to inform our reading of what the text may be saying in the first place.

None of this is to say that Paul never says anything distinctive or even idiosyncratic. Hewitt questions whether the terminological preference for 'distinct' over 'unique' is anything more than a rhetorical trading of synonyms. This is a valid concern. In conversations with students, one can sometimes get the impression that contemporary training in New Testament studies primarily consists in

learning what words to avoid (e.g., church, Christian, spirit, monotheism etc.). There are good historical reasons to avoid all of these terms, and I generally do, but if they are replaced by new words (or indeed transliterations) that continue to encode the same concepts then we have not really solved anything.

I do not think that is what I am doing in my preference for ‘distinctive’ over ‘unique’. Rather, in my understanding, when scholars claim the uniqueness of a Jewish or Christian idea, they are claiming a *categorical* distinction. If Paul’s methods of divine communication are unique then they form their own category, which admits no comparison with any other. This claim is thus a denial of comparability, and usually indicates the superiority of the thing that cannot be compared (Novenson 2020). Distinctiveness on the other hand, in the way I use it at least, relates to the particular shape of the object of study, which is discerned through comparison. Every object of study is distinctive. Plato, Plutarch, and Posidonius (to take a few of my most prominent Pauline *comparanda* that begin with P) are all distinctive thinkers whose writings evidence a distinctive shape to their thought and life.⁴ Since Paul is the object of study for this book, I am interested in the distinctive shape of his divinatory practices. A well-walked tightrope between similarity and difference in this case is to be able to clearly situate Paul’s access to divine knowledge in a category, which provides ancient *comparanda* by which Paul’s distinctive shape can be illuminated.⁵

A final point about historical context: In order to understand Paul in his context we need to make sure we have adequately understood the complexities of that context. The particular burden of this book is to understand Paul’s context in ways that go beyond the Judaism/Hellenism divide. If scholars claim to situate Paul thoroughly within his ancient Jewish context but construct a Jewish context that exists in isolation from the broader world of which it was a part, then this is not a historically plausible reconstruction. Categories like revelation and divination as they have historically been used in biblical scholarship have served to facilitate this artificial separation of contexts. They have functioned primarily to drive a wedge between Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and Graeco-Roman paganism on the other. This is why a clearer picture of Paul’s access to divine knowledge within his broader first-century context requires first of all a critical reappraisal of these categories.⁶

4. Novenson 2020: 84 tentatively imagines distinctiveness ‘inhering not in particular features but in clusters of features’. It is the particular cluster of features that, taken as a whole, I would argue, forms something’s distinctive shape.

5. For a similar parsing of these terms, see Fredriksen 2020: 304–5.

6. In this endeavour I am preceded by Eyl 2019: 20–45. For my engagement with Eyl, see Sharp 2023: 18–22.

Orders of Discourse

Hewitt: Remaining for the moment at the level of Sharp's model of comparison, I want to commend the book's very clear delineation of first-, second-, and third-order discourses in relation to historical description (Sharp 2023: 7–9). In brief, first- and second-order discourse involves categories and terms found in the primary sources, that is, the ways in which insiders to the historical context being studied see themselves or each other. Differently, third-order discourse involves the perspective of those outside the object of study—here Sharp and his readers—and it often involves the introduction of categories or terms that are not found in the primary sources. So far, so good. However, I become a bit concerned when, for third-order discourse, a scholar employs a term or category that is native to first- or second-order discourses, but then uses it in a way that is broader than its usage in the primary sources.⁷ I wonder if this problem is introduced by Sharp when he uses 'divination' as an analytical category of third-order discourse while it is also represented in the primary sources by the term *μαντεία*, which usually refers only to a subset of the practices which Sharp gathers into the category 'divination' (Sharp 2023: 6–9)? Does Sharp foresee this leading to any misconceptions about ancient divination? Is there anything significant about Paul's avoidance of the term 'divination' to refer to his own practices, a significance that may be overshadowed by Sharp's use of the term for third-order description?

Sharp: Should one create third-order categories that use terms native to first- or second-order discourses?⁸ First a minor, but important, clarification: Terms like *μαντεία* and *μαντική* only sometimes, in certain authors, refer to a subset of divinatory practices. For Plato, for example, these terms are properly used of inspired dreams and oracles, but not of the rational interpretation of signs or prophecies. The more usual course, however, is that taken by Cicero for whom *divinatio* (his translation of *μαντική* [*Div.* 1.1]) is a broader term that encompasses a range of divinatory practices and also shares fuzzy boundaries with similar phenomena such as weather prognostication (*Div.* 1.13–16). This point is important because it shows that 'divination' is not a stable category but one whose boundaries have always been porous and whose definition has always been contested for various rhetorical or ideological purposes in both ancient and modern sources.

The contested nature of the category of divination means that the line between emic and etic does not neatly map onto an us/them distinction. 'Divination' is an

7. Some scholarly uses of the term 'messiah' (and its derivatives), uses which differ from that of the same terms in primary sources, are an example of this problem (see already de Jonge 1966: 132–33).

8. My thoughts on this topic have been considerably sharpened and clarified through conversation with Alexi Chantziantoniou.

emic term for much of Paul's cultural context but an etic term when applied to Paul himself. It would also be possible to formulate a third-order category that is entirely independent of the existing ancient and modern categories. 'Divine communication' might be one such category that would suit my purpose. This would not be 'redescription' (construing one thing in terms of another [Smith 2004]) so much as a 'rectification' of existing scholarly categories (to 'rename the phenomenon of which our case studies are examples' [Mack 1996]). Such a rectification is implicitly present in the book in the way I define divination, but it is not a major aim of the book largely for pragmatic reasons.

I am inclined to the view of Michael Satlow that categories themselves do not tell us anything 'real' about religious activity. Rather, they are 'definitions we create in order to select data to compare' (Satlow 2005: 293). When formulating such definitions, 'we need not reinvent the wheel' but typically draw on both native categories and the history of scholarly reflection upon these categories (Satlow 2005: 294–95). First, in terms of the native category of divination, I rather think that avoiding the term altogether only serves to reify its definition in the ancient world as 'something ancient Jews did not do'. Instead, by using the category of divination I intend to draw attention to its malleability as a rhetorically constructed category in both Jewish and 'pagan' authors, and self-consciously participate in its continual redefinition for the purposes of historical scholarship. Second, in terms of existing scholarly categories, divination is the dominant way historians of the ancient Mediterranean talk about communication with gods. This is also increasingly the case for scholars of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism.⁹ By using the category of divination, therefore, I am able to include Paul not only in his broader historical context, but in the scholarly conversations about this context in ways I would not be able to do with a more neutral but also more idiosyncratic third-order category.

This, of course, leaves plenty of room for confusion and entanglement between the emic and etic uses of a category, about which Hewitt is right to be concerned. In the book I highlight some of this confusion in the secondary literature on 'prophecy', which shows that these problems already exist with our current categories. This should just encourage us to work with greater clarity and self-consciousness concerning how we are using any given category at any given time.

The Cosmic Role of πνεῦμα

Hewitt: I would like to turn now to one of the overarching conclusions Sharp draws. At the end of his book, he asserts that, for Paul, the πνεῦμα of the resurrected messiah 'is also at work in the natural world of creation and will

9. See, e.g., Thelle 2013; Hamori 2015; Hamori and Stökl 2018; Eyl 2019; Nissinen 2019; Tervanotko 2020.

ultimately transform the cosmos itself” and that this transformation is ‘the decisive eschatological event that shapes Paul’s broader thinking’ (Sharp 2023: 201). From there, Sharp goes on to say that this invites an investigation of what he calls ‘the physics of a “new creation”’ (Sharp 2023: 201). I am inclined to agree that Paul’s expectation of the transformation of the cosmos is fundamental for his thought, and Sharp’s notion of the ‘physics of a new creation’ is brilliantly evocative. However, the proposal that Paul’s expectation of creation’s renovation by *πνεῦμα* structures or shapes Paul’s conception of divination is something on which Sharp does not elaborate much. There is of course analysis of the role of *πνεῦμα* in divination generally, and there is brief mention of the epistemic capacities of resurrected pneumatic bodies (Sharp 2023: 115). But I would like to hear more about how these ideas relate specifically to Paul’s understanding of the transformative activity of *πνεῦμα* in the non-human created order.

Sharp: How do I understand the *pneuma*’s transformative activity in the non-human created order and how does this (if at all) structure Paul’s conception of divination? I argue in the book that *pneuma* in Paul’s letters is best understood as a type of divine substance but, as Hewitt has noted, one that is now personally identifiable with the resurrected Christ. To have the *pneuma* is also to have Christ. Paul often describes the function of Christ’s *pneuma* in terms reminiscent of Stoic discourses, particularly concerning its role in unifying baptised Christ-followers into a coherent body (1 Cor. 12). A significant difference, in this context, between Paul’s *pneuma* and the Stoic *pneuma* is that Paul does not talk of Christ’s *pneuma* permeating the entire cosmos, but only the bodies of believers.

This is potentially significant for Paul’s understanding of divination and the transmission of divine information. The signs through which Paul discerns divine activity and approval all tend to manifest themselves in human behaviour rather than the natural world. There is, of course, Rom. 1.20, in which creation reveals God’s eternity, divinity, and power in a very general sense. As far as Paul’s letters allow us to speculate, though, he seems more likely to infer specific instances of divine activity and approval from a miraculous healing, a prophecy, or speaking in other languages than in the flight of birds, a strike of lightning, or the arrangement of the stars.¹⁰ This fits with the sense in Paul that God’s *pneuma* currently only inhabits human believers, and this is the sphere in which positive divine activity can be detected. In 1 Cor. 2.12, the *pneuma* from God is not the *pneuma* of the cosmos. To what extent then is this *pneuma* ‘also at work in the natural world of creation’?

In Rom. 8.9–30 Paul moves between the future bodily glorification of believers by the *pneuma* and the release of the creation (*ἡ κτίσις*) from its bondage to decay. The passage is structured so as to suggest not only that creation will enjoy

10. See, e.g., Rom. 15.19; 1 Cor. 2.4–5; 12.7–11; Gal. 3.3–5; Sharp 2023: 168–75.

the same pneumatic transformation as glorified humans (v. 21) but that the glorification of humans is the necessary prerequisite for the subsequent glorification of the rest of creation (v. 19). Both humans and the rest of creation groan (vv. 22–23), which in the case of humans at least is connected to their possession of *pneuma* (vv. 23, 26). This might suggest that the non-human creation is also infused with *pneuma* to a certain extent. The ‘expectation of creation’s renovation by *pneuma*’ in Paul’s eschatological scenario, however, seems to come through the agency of glorified (materially transformed) humans.¹¹

A similar picture could be derived from 1 Cor. 15.20–28. Here Christ rises first, then those who belong to him, after which follows a period of cosmic subjugation before the end. In this telling, Christ is the one who destroys every principle, authority, and power. From other hints in the same letter though (e.g., 1 Cor. 6.2–3) it seems that ‘those who belong to Christ’ and rise to meet him are also to play a part in this process of subjugation. As Stanley Stowers remarks, ‘Those remade in Christ’s pneumatic image will be administrators under Christ’s rule’ (Stowers 2017: 248). In this case (and I do not think Stowers sufficiently appreciates this point), one can read the defeat of every principle, authority, and power, the last of which is death, in parallel with creation being ‘set free from its bondage to decay’ at the unveiling of the children of God. The rule of the pneumatic Christ and his pneumatic administrators thus principally consists in transforming the perishable creation into an imperishable creation with *pneuma* as its dominant principle so that ‘God may be all in all’ (1 Cor. 15.28). This duality between perishability and imperishability is both eschatological and ontological and is what also fuels Paul’s epistemological contrast between seeing divinatory riddles in mirrors and seeing face to face (1 Cor. 13.12). Here, then, is another example where an examination of Paul’s approach to divination is embedded within larger discussions of anthropology, cosmology, and eschatology.

Mechanics

Hewitt: The balance of my questions concerns a few finer details arising from Sharp’s deft engagement with a multitude of interesting, smaller exegetical debates. In Sharp’s first chapter, which concerns what he calls ‘the mechanics of divination’, he touches only briefly on 2 Cor. 3.18–4.6, where he finds that Paul comes closest to describing a vision of God. Sharp is careful to note that Paul does not actually claim to see God, but rather ‘the glory of the Lord (τὴν δόξαν κυρίου)’ (2 Cor. 3.18), though it is probably worth noting that Paul’s language, however circumspect, is stronger than Ezekiel’s

11. Stowers 2017 and Litwa 2012 both draw attention to the active role of glorified Christ-believers in Christ’s future subjugation of the cosmos—an aspect of Paul’s letters that is insufficiently appreciated in most scholarship.

description of ‘the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God (ἡ ὄρασις ὁμοιώματος δόξης κυρίου)’ (Ezek. 1.28). In any case, Sharp goes on to assert that the visionary experience Paul depicts in 2 Cor. 3.18–4.6, wherein a glimpse of the glory of God is mediated by the messiah, is a visionary experience that ‘involves the operation of *pneuma*’ (Sharp 2023: 44). While *πνεῦμα* is mentioned at the end of 2 Cor. 3 by way of its identification with *κύριος*, I do not see that Paul gives us much to go on to understand the pneumatic ‘mechanics’, as it were, of this divinatory vision. My hunch is that Sharp may be right, but I wonder if Sharp can provide a bit more precise explanation of what he means by ‘the operation of *pneuma*’ in visions?

Sharp: The question I find most interesting about 2 Cor. 3.18–4.6 is whether what Paul describes can be classified as a vision at all. On the one hand this section is full of visual sensory terminology: splendour is beheld in a mirror with an unveiled face; unbelievers cannot see the light of God’s image; the light of God’s splendour is [seen?] in the face of Jesus Christ. Faces, seeing, splendour, light. On the other hand, this visual sensory language is interlaced with mental and cognitive language: The god of this world has not blinded the *eyes* of unbelievers but their *minds*; they are not prevented from seeing the *light* of Christ’s splendour, but the light of the *announcement* of Christ’s splendour. Similarly, the face of Christ provides *knowledge* of God’s splendour, which God has shone not into one’s eyes or face but one’s heart. Thus, what sounds like a straightforward visionary experience of God’s bodily image in 3.18 reads more like the inner illumination of cognitive content by 4.6. Trying to square the two can lead to some tortuous explanations:

[T]he resurrected Christ is ... a bodily being. ... What accounts for the bodiliness is both the fact that he is made up of *pneuma*, which is itself a bodily thing, and also the fact that he is shining. For the shining character is something that can be physically seen—once one’s eyes have been made able to see it by God’s ‘shining forth’ to one. It is true and important that these various events ... are all events that occur ‘*in our hearts*’ (4:6). But the shining is certainly *seen* in a bodily sense (though in the heart): there is a genuine *illumination* in both cases. (Engberg-Pedersen 2010: 57; italics original)

To be clear, I agree with Engberg-Pedersen that cognition is still a bodily phenomenon for Paul. It involves *pneuma* physically interacting with the human heart, which is where Paul locates the seat of cognition. But this is not visible to the eyes. Rather, the Corinthians ‘see’ God (for the present at least; cf. 1 Cor. 13.12) by receiving Christ’s *pneuma* into their hearts, which provides them with knowledge they did not have before.

Should one still call this a visionary experience? On the one hand it does provide an intriguing parallel to Paul’s claim in Gal. 1.16 that Christ was revealed *in* him (ἐν ἐμοί). In the book, I tentatively try to probe the possible physics of such

a claim (Sharp 2023: 77), if that is in fact the correct way of translating that phrase. On the other hand, this way of speaking does not square with Paul's simpler claims to have simply 'seen' the Lord (ἐώρακα: 1 Cor. 9.1; ὤφθη: 1 Cor. 15.8). This is a claim Paul wants to restrict to a limited group of people, which does not fit the inner illumination he makes more freely available in 2 Cor. 3.18–4.6 (cf. Eyl 2019: 146).

Visions

Hewitt: Remaining for the moment with visions, Troels Engberg-Pedersen has suggested that Paul's preaching was perhaps sometimes accompanied by a 'direct vision' (Engberg-Pedersen 2000: 144). He bases this on Paul's report in Gal. 3.1 that the messiah was displayed as crucified before the Galatians' eyes. In contrast, Sharp, following Heidi Wendt, takes the view that Gal. 3.1 refers only to written oracles, given the meaning of the verb προγράφω as 'written beforehand' (Wendt 2016; Sharp 2023: 171 n. 25). I was sympathetic to this view.¹² However, Sharp's book itself has caused me to question it since he challenges us moderns not to be too quick in 'domesticating' Paul. Thus, I wonder if Sharp himself has too readily deemed the phrase κατ' ὀφθαλμούς, 'before the eyes', in Gal. 3.1 as figurative in some respect. Could Sharp say more about why he does not think Gal. 3.1 refers to a visionary experience of some kind? Do we lack a category of the divinatory use of texts to elicit visions? Would perhaps rabbinic writings about the study of the Merkavah provide a useful category? I am thinking here of the legend of the student Eleazar b. Arakh expounding the first chapter of Ezekiel to his mentor Yohanan b. Zakkai with the result of eliciting a vision.¹³ To be clear, I do not mean that Gal. 3.1 concerns Merkavah visions or bears any literary relationship to rabbinic tradition. Rather, I mean simply that the rabbinic account might suggest to us a category of divination that may be useful in elucidating Gal. 3.1.

Sharp: My point above about Paul's interest in restricting visions to a limited group of people makes me sceptical about reading Gal. 3.1 as a reference to visions. For one thing, if our only other evidence that Paul extends visions of Christ beyond the apostles is 2 Cor. 3–4, then Paul does not describe that sort of seeing as before the eyes (κατ' ὀφθαλμούς) but in the heart and mind.¹⁴ The visions Paul relates are also always of the resurrected Christ rather than the

12. For a further alternative view see Davis 1999.

13. Versions of the legend are found in the Tosefta, Yerushalmi, and Bavli in connection with Mishnah Hagigah 2:1. See further Schäfer 2009: 186–94.

14. In Eph. 1.18 divinatory knowledge is received by the 'eyes of the heart' (τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς τῆς καρδίας). Without such a qualifier in Gal. 3.1 though we cannot assume that is what Paul means.

crucified Christ. While Paul's preaching claims to focus on Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2.2), I would not expect this to be the content of his visions.

Hewitt does raise a valid and interesting point concerning 'the divinatory use of texts to elicit visions'. I am not sure this scenario can apply to Gal. 3.1 on grammatical grounds. If *προεγράφη* means 'forewritten', then it is not Jesus himself that is before the eyes of the Galatians but a written prophecy about him, and thus we lose the visionary aspect.¹⁵ If, on the other hand, Jesus appears before the eyes of the Galatians, then *προεγράφη* must mean something like 'publicly displayed', and the text thus loses any reference to written oracles.¹⁶

There are some better candidates in Paul's letters, however, that exhibit a close relationship between visions (or at least revelations) and scriptural oracles. The 'mysteries' Paul relates in 1 Cor. 15.51–52 and Rom. 11.25–27 are both novel eschatological predictions—the sorts of revelations I argue Paul's audiences would have assumed him to have learned on his heavenly ascents (Sharp 2023: 89–93, 128–90). They are both, at the same time, presented in conjunction with scriptural oracles that almost seem to be part of the revelation itself. A number of scholars have supposed that the mysteries Paul relates, especially in Rom. 11.25–27, are the product of Paul's reflection on scriptural oracles, although the mystery is not ultimately reducible to the scriptural text itself (Mussner 1976; Bockmuehl 1990; Sandnes 1991; Lang 2015). This could, then, be a situation like Dan. 9.1–29, in which an oracular inquiry of scriptural texts inspires a visionary response.

Speech

Hewitt: I turn now to Sharp's analysis of speech as a divinatory practice. Sharp notes Paul's uses of the idioms *ἐν πνεύματι* and *ἐν χριστῷ* to modify verbs denoting human speech, and he suggests that these prepositional phrases 'in Christ' and 'in the Spirit' are in these instances 'parallel' (Sharp 2023: 110, 115–16). What does Sharp mean by 'parallel', and in his analysis does he elide *πνεῦμα* and

15. For various ways to grammatically connect *προεγράφη* with *κατ' ὀφθαλμούς*, see Wendt 2016: 380–81.

16. Others have suggested that Paul presents his own body as the medium through which the crucified Christ was displayed before the Galatians (e.g., Bockmuehl 1990: 143 n. 71; Davis 1999). While I think Davis is too quick to dismiss the idea of written prophecies, this reading is also plausible. It coheres with Paul's statements elsewhere about carrying the marks of Jesus on his body (Gal. 6.17) and carrying Jesus's death in his body (2 Cor. 4.10), and, if correct, would form further Pauline evidence for Hewitt's point below about Paul's own body as a divine sign. My thanks to Logan Williams for drawing this interpretation to my attention.

χριστός?¹⁷ If not, how are these idioms distinct from one another when modifying verbs of human speech?¹⁸

Sharp: In what sense are ἐν πνεύματι and ἐν Χριστῷ parallel, and how are they distinct when modifying verbs of human speech? This is by no means a major feature of my argument in this chapter of the book, and the dataset for both idioms is small so any conclusion must be tentative.¹⁹ I do not take either as set technical phrases that Paul always employs consistently. The only clear example of speech ἐν πνεύματι is 1 Cor. 12.3, which enables the confession, ‘Jesus is Lord’ and prohibits the expression ‘let Jesus be cursed’. As speech enabled by *pneuma* but expressed in intelligible human language this speech is consistent with how Paul goes on to talk about prophecy in the chapters that follow. At this point, Paul is providing criteria for how to discern whether or not someone is speaking ‘in’ the right *pneuma*, and thus in both instances he further specifies the correct *pneuma* as ‘the *pneuma* of God’ or the ‘holy *pneuma*’. Paul himself, by contrast, will sometimes characterise his own speech, and that of his fellow apostles as ‘in Christ’ (Rom. 9.1; 2 Cor. 2.17; 12.19). Paul’s letters give us occasional license to elide Christ and *pneuma* as actors (1 Cor. 15.45; 2 Cor. 3.17–18), and the holy *pneuma* of 1 Cor. 12.3 forms believers into Christ’s body later in the same chapter (1 Cor. 12.12–27). In this sense they are parallel idioms, as they both use the same preposition to attribute human speech to the same superhuman source.

Linguistically, though, they do carry different resonances. Paul’s claims to speak ‘in Christ’ occur especially in polemical contexts where the invocation of the messiah seems to be designed to directly invoke the authority of that messiah rather than one among many possible *pneumata*. Paul’s language in these contexts also fits with his primary characterisation of himself not as a prophet who prophesies, but as a political envoy (ἀπόστολος) who proclaims (κηρύσσω) and announces (εὐαγγελίζομαι) the impending reign of a messiah.²⁰ The fact that this messiah currently takes the form of a life-producing heavenly *pneuma* lends Paul’s announcements a decidedly divinatory character, hence my characterisation in the book of the role of ‘apostle’ as a sort of ‘super-prophet’. The language, however, is drawn from a different discourse and Hewitt is right to probe the nuances of Paul’s linguistic choices.

17. There is a legacy of such elision, on which see Hewitt 2020: 10–13, 31–32, 38.

18. Paul appears to use the phrase ἐν χριστῷ in relation to his own speech specifically to indicate congruity between his words and the messiah’s. I am not convinced this same purpose attends his use of ἐν πνεύματι in relation to speech. See Hewitt 2020: 239–40.

19. ἐν πνεύματι: 1 Cor. 12.3; 14.16 (textually dubious); cf. 1 Cor. 2.13; ἐν Χριστῷ: Rom. 9.1; 2 Cor. 2.17; 12.19; cf. 2 Thess. 3.12 (ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ); 1 Thess. 4.1 (ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ), 15 (ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου).

20. Thanks to George van Kooten for nudging my thought in this direction.

Texts

Hewitt: I have already discussed Sharp's redescription of Paul's use of scripture as a divinatory activity. In this, Sharp has taken something that can often verge on banality in Pauline studies and made it provocatively strange. To augment my previous comments, I note that the category of divination serves to highlight the role of innovation in the interpretive activity involved in the uses of sacred texts, and that perhaps this emphasis aids us as modern readers of Paul by removing the expectation that Paul would necessarily use the Jewish scriptures in accordance with their 'original' meanings and contexts. I wonder if Sharp could elaborate on this. How might Sharp's conceptualization of Paul's use of sacred texts as divination suggest a new trajectory for scholarship on ancient scriptural interpretation?

Sharp: What new trajectories for scholarship might I hope my work on 'Paul and scripture' encourages? First, as Hewitt notes, I hope it puts to rest the idea that Paul should interpret his texts like a modern historical critic, and instead encourages scholars to look for a diversity of historical *comparanda* with which to understand the various roles of 'scripture' in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. I do not think it is much of an exaggeration to say that most scholarship on this topic has understood 'Scripture' (with a capital S) as a uniquely Jewish phenomenon, and Paul as its uniquely Christian interpreter. In place of this I hope scholars continue to elucidate various aspects of scripture in relation to oracles, ancient philosophical exegesis, legal and ancestral traditions, iconic books, and so on.²¹

Second, and related to this point, I hope future scholarship continues to pay attention to the varied texture of ancient Jewish sacred texts. Paul saw all his scriptures as divine in some sense, but that sense differed depending on what sacred text he was reading. This in turn affects how Paul searches them for divine information. The prophetic books are perhaps the most straightforward in providing oracles, which Paul says have either been recently fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus or will be fulfilled in the imminent future of his gentile assemblies. The Pentateuch on the other hand, at least in its narrative portions, sometimes yields up its divine information through allegory (Gal. 4.21–31) in the same way ancient scholars were accustomed to reading Homer. At other times, the Pentateuch, and other narrative books, function more like Herodotus's histories, which record past oracles that later authors can mine for information about a god's character. The Psalms are a varied collection of prayers and poems that Paul can invoke as a witness to shared human experience. They can also contain oracles about the future, particularly the future fate of the messiah. In this, David's collection of psalms is similar to the mixed literary output of ancient

21. Lee and Oropeza 2021 is a positive step in this direction.

seers like Bacis, Musaeus, or the Sibyl. Paying attention to the different ways Paul seeks God's voice in different types of text offers a promising way of conceptualising the various roles of different Jewish sacred texts that moves beyond a single homogenised category of 'scripture'.

Signs

Hewitt: My final question concerns signs. Sharp observes that 'Yahweh sometimes commands the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel to enact signs and omens, which symbolically enact Yahweh's message. As such, these are an interesting example of the divine manipulation of human beings into symbolic signs but are not quite in the same category as interpretations of natural or social phenomena' (Sharp 2023: 167). In saying this, Sharp wants to exclude from his analysis humans themselves as 'signs', but I could not help but wonder if humans ought to be included given the way Paul depicts his own afflictions in 2 Corinthians, where he seems to regard his suffering as an emulation and thereby announcement of the messiah's redemptive suffering. My question is whether Sharp thinks Paul may have regarded himself as a sort of 'sign' and regarded some of his writings, at least parts of 2 Corinthians and probably Philippians, as his divinatory practice of interpreting that sign.

Sharp: In the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel, the prophet occasionally receives a message from Yahweh to enact a message that symbolically depicts the near future (see Isa. 8.18; 20.2–4; Ezek. 12.1–16; 24.15–27). In these instances, the prophet himself is referred to as a sign (*σημείον*) or omen (*τέρας*). I found these enacted signs interesting as they are obviously drawing on an established discourse about divine signs and omens but the signs themselves are a step further removed from divine agency than what one would normally expect. The divinatory moment—the initial point of contact between human and divine—occurs not in the sign's performance but in the verbal instructions given by Yahweh to the prophet. In that case the means of divination at play here is prophetic (perhaps visionary) inspiration rather than sign interpretation. The enactment of the sign is the way the human prophet then conveys that message to other humans.

Hewitt's question has prompted me to reconsider, though, and it is possible that this distinction in fact collapses when viewed from the perspective of the prophet's audience. They simply observe a message, symbolically communicated by a god through human actions in just the same way that a god might symbolically communicate through the flight of a bird. Ancients debated the manner in which the gods controlled the flight of birds, and it would not be unreasonable to suppose that in one sense, a god commands a bird to fly a certain

way and that bird dutifully obeys.²² Homer talks of birds being sent as messengers (ἄγγελος) of Apollo or Zeus (*Od.* 15.525–31; *Il.* 24.292, 310, 314–21), and in *The Book of the Watchers*, the stars, which are effective (if illicit) means of divination, follow their courses in conscious obedience to divine command, which they are always capable of transgressing (*1 Enoch* 8.3; 18.13–16; 21.1–6). There may then be less difference between humans and any other part of creation enacting divinely commanded signs.

Paul does use the language of signs and omens to describe his own actions, but as I argue in the book, the link with divine *pneuma* and power makes it likely that these are miraculous signs and wonders rather than symbolic scripts he enacts (Sharp 2023: 168–71). He does at other times, however, point to his willingness to endure suffering and persecution as another way in which God’s power and life can be made visible: “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible (φανερωθῆναι) in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4.11; cf. Gal. 6.17). Traditional accounts of ‘revelation’ in Paul have generally favoured this image of revelation through weakness as the most genuinely Pauline, which Paul allegedly deploys to counter the ecstatic enthusiasm of his opponents (e.g., Lührmann 1965). Linking Paul’s own presentation of his suffering body with the signs of Isaiah and Ezekiel suggests that this form of revelation can also be included within Paul’s divinatory repertoire, which draws on established discourses about signs and omens.

I hope these responses have contributed to the thoughtful and critical dialogue Hewitt has initiated with his review. I have personally found his questions generative in the ways they push for greater clarity of key concepts and probe the implications and potential for further development of individual arguments. In this sense I hope this dialogue can also serve as a model for the advancement of scholarship through amicable and critical conversation.

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22. Cf. Marcus’s reasoning in Cicero, *Div.* 1.120–21 (Falconer, LCL): ‘For if every animal moves its body ... as it pleases, and performs these various motions almost mechanically; how much easier it is for such results to be accomplished by a god, whose divine will all things obey!’

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