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A Stoic Reading of Internal Obedience in Romans 1:18–2:29

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Abstract: Romans 1:18-2:29 connects with Stoic philosophy in a way that would be unmistakable to a Gentile audience. While acknowledging the Hellenistic tone of the passage, this paper focuses on the Stoic elements of natural law that were broadly recognized in Rome. Particularly, Cicero's speeches, rhetorical handbooks, and philosophical treatises provide a comprehensive account of the connections between Hellenistic philosophy and Roman law and declamation. Although no direct evidence exists to show that Paul had read Cicero, these texts reveal the culture of the Roman Christians to whom Paul was writing. Key concepts of natural law appear in Romans that contextualize Paul's message on internal obedience in 2:27-29, although he reworks them. Paul emphasizes spirit ’πνεῦμα’ as the generating force of obedience. Two interpretations of πνεῦμα echo Stoic perspectives as the intent opposed to the letter of the law and as the inward motivation of the person obeying the law. The third interpretation as a foreshadowing of the Holy Spirit would be new for Paul’s Roman audience. This paper demonstrates that by incorporating Stoic elements on natural law, Paul presents the central significance of internal obedience in a way that would be understandable to his Christ-believing auditors and readers in Rome.

Keywords: natural law; stoicism; Cicero; Romans; spirit; Pauline studies; hermeneutics; rhetoric

1. Introduction

Although Romans 1:18-2:29 does not include a direct quotation of pagan sources, it connects with pagan philosophy in a way that would be unmistakable to a Gentile audience in Rome. Paul would have encountered Stoic theories in Tarsus, an intellectual center of Stoicism (Muntz 1913, p. 47; Pohlenz 1949, p. 69; Arnold 1958, p. 110). Scholars have noted the Hellenistic and Aristotelian tone of this passage (Engberg-Pedersen 2000, p. 359; Jewett 2007, p. 214; Collins 2010; Martens 1994). While acknowledging this influence, the Stoic elements of natural law that were broadly recognized in Rome. Cicero translated the ideas of many Greek philosophers into Latin, popularized Greek philosophy, and molded it to fit a Roman context (Powell 1995, p. 9; Blyth 2010, p. 72). Largely owing to him, Stoicism thus became the leading philosophy in Rome. Stoic philosophers such as Seneca were prominent in Rome at the time Paul was writing, and the influence of Stoicism is discernable in Roman jurisprudence and the oratory of the law courts.1 Although Paul most likely had not read Cicero, his texts reveal the culture of the Roman Christians to whom Paul was writing (Spicq 1938, p. 57; Briones 2019, p. 2). In particular, Cicero’s speeches, rhetorical handbooks, and philosophical treatises provide a comprehensive account of the connections between Roman law and Hellenistic philosophy, especially since he inextricably linked philosophy with his rhetoric (Long 2006, p. 297). As Crowe (1977, p. 36) notes, “It was, however, through Cicero more than anyone else that the natural law of the Stoics passed to the Latin west” (Cf. Watson 1996, pp. 217, 225; Weinreb 1987, pp. 43–44). Some scholars maintain that Stoic concepts of natural law are foreign to Paul’s writing (Greenwood 1971, p. 264; Crowe 1977, p. 53; Bell 1998, p. 156) or that he rejects them (McKenzie 1964, p. 12). However, the far-reaching influence of Stoicism and Roman law in the intellectual thought of the empire formed the historical and social context of Paul’s writing, providing him with concepts and terminology that would be
familiar to his audience (Ball 1901, pp. 3–4, 559, 562–63; Muntz 51), an audience composed primarily of Gentiles in Rome (Romans 1:5-7, 13-15, 11:13). This paper takes a twofold methodology both in approaching Paul’s use of Stoic language and concepts as a conscious rhetorical strategy to communicate his message, similar to Cicero’s endeavor to persuade his audience through rhetoric, and also in considering the potential response of Paul’s audience to his message through the lens of their own cultural knowledge.

In so doing, this paper demonstrates that by incorporating Stoic elements on natural law, Paul presents the central significance of internal obedience in Romans 2:27-29 in a way that would be understandable to his Christ-believing auditors and readers in Rome.

2. The Natural Law Foundation in Romans 1:18-32

Key Stoic concepts of natural law appear in Romans 2:1-29 (Dodd 1932, pp. 35–36; Kuhr 1964, pp. 256–58) within a framework that Paul established earlier. In three essential ways, Romans 1 provides the foundation for Paul’s natural law arguments in Chapter 2. First, in Romans 1:20, Paul points to the created world as a reflection of God. From the creation of the world (ἀπὸ κτῆσις κόσμου), God’s unseen qualities (ἀορατα), in particular his eternal power (ἀϊδίας δύναμις) and divine nature (θειότης), are clearly perceived (καθόρω) and understood (νοέω) by the people God has made. At this point, Paul is referring to all humanity, the ἄνθρωποι that he first addressed in verse 18, who experience the wrath of God as a result of their unrighteousness; although they have known (γνώσκω) God, they have turned away from that knowledge to the worship of created things (1:21-22). This rejection of knowledge is performed with conscious purpose (Bruce 1985, p. 78). This passage connects with the Stoic belief that the natural order of the world reveals God. Although Greek thinkers were the first ones to formulate and discuss rival theories of the origins of life, Cicero’s texts present a clear and comprehensive account of them within the context of the late Roman Republic. Undoubtedly drawing upon his experience as the foremost legal advocate in Rome, Cicero provides the key supporting arguments and their critiques on both sides of the topic. In De Natura Deorum, a dialogue supporting, refuting, and contrasting the perspectives of Epicureanism and Stoicism, the Stoic speaker Balbus uses a multitude of terms to argue that the distinction (distinctio), variety (varietas), order (ordo), reason (ratio), consistency (constantia), and beauty (pulchritudo) of the universe are evidence that a mind (mens), intelligence (consilium), and foresight (providentia) rather than chance (fortuna), heedlessness (tenebitas), or error (erratia) were responsible for its creation (Nat. D. 2.15, 2.54, 2.56, 2.87). He uses several analogies in support of this claim. The first is that if a person enters a house, the gymnasiu, or the forum, it would be evident that these places with their internal processes do not appear without a cause (Nat. D. 2.15). The same would apply to a statue or a painted picture, which a person would recognize to be the work of artistic skill (Nat. D. 2.87). Similarly, the course of a ship, the ability of a sundial or water-clock to measure time, an orrery showing the motions of the heavenly bodies, or the movement of a machine all point to the use of deliberation and reason (Nat. D. 2.87-88, 2.97). Finally, Balbus gives the extended analogy:

Hic ego non mirer esse quemquam qui sibi persuadat corpora quaedam solida atque indivisa vi et gravitate ferri mundumque effici ornatisimum et pulcherrimum ex eorum corporum concursione fortuita? Hoc qui existimat fieri possit, non intellego cur non idem putet, si innumerables unius et viginti formae litterarum vel aureae vel qualeslibet aliquo coiciantur, posse ex iis in terram excussis annales Ennii ut deinceps legi possint efficere; quod nescio an ne in uno quidem versu possit tantum valere fortuna.

I must now marvel that anyone can persuade themselves that certain solid and indivisible bodies, born by force and weight, have produced this most adorned and beautiful world by their accidental collision. It seems to me that the person who thinks such a thing possible should also believe that if innumerable quantities of the letters of the alphabet, either of gold or whatever else one pleases, are thrown together and shaken onto the ground, then they will produce the Annals.
of Ennius so that a person may read them in order. I do not think that chance is strong enough to produce even one verse (Nat. D. 2.93-94).

Balbus then embarks on a lengthy and detailed encomium on the wonders of nature, such as fountains, mountain peaks, the expanse of the sea teeming with life, the rain and wind, the intricate design and purpose of the various parts of the human body and different kinds of plants and animals, and the creative power of the human mind (Nat. D. 2.98-2.162). He also illustrates the beauty and order of the constellations by extensively quoting from the Phaenomena. This poem, which Cicero translated from Greek, making it accessible to a Latin-speaking audience, is the same poem by the Greek poet, Aratus, that Paul references nearly a hundred years later at the Areopagus. For the Stoics, the cause of these wonders is a mind, superior to the mind of humans, that created the world and continues to govern it as its architect, director, and ruler (Nat. D. 2.4, 2.75, 2.80, 2.90).

Second, in Romans 1, Paul adds that humankind possesses knowledge of God’s moral standards, which are applicable to all (Johnson 1982, p. 195; Morris 1988, p. 83). The αὐθωρτός of 1:18 who suppressed the truth are still the ones Paul is referring to in 1:32 (VanDrunen 2014, p. 236; Bell 1998, p. 138), when he says that they recognize God’s just decrees (δικάκωμα) but continue to engage in outward actions, inward attitudes, desires, and motivations that merit the punishment of death. The term δικάκωμα carries a legal connotation in its reference to decrees or to the sentence given by a judge. In Cicero’s seminal text on law, he defines law (lex) as recta ratio in iubendo et vetando (right reason in commanding and forbidding, Leg. 1.33), and he designates the princeps et ultima lex (first and ultimate law) as originating in the mentem dei (mind of god, Leg. 2.8). The original law of approval and disapproval, approbation and disapprobation, is universally known by all nations and individuals possessing reason, and it serves as a standard that renders their positive laws either just or unjust (Leg. 1.33, 1.42-43). This summa lex (highest law) was in place ages before written laws or the establishment of political states (Leg. 1.19).

The lex naturae (law of nature) can forbid practices as unjust even when mos (custom), lex (statute), and ius civile (civil law) permit them (Off. 3.69). Alternatively, the law of nature can also condemn customs (instituti) and written laws (leges) as unjust (Leg. 1.42). Such concepts noticeably align with Paul’s statements. Although the people of Romans 1:32 have joined together in giving their approval (συνενδόκησα) to those who follow their patterns of unrighteousness, they are aware of the just sentence God pronounces against those who break his laws.

Third, Paul constructs his framework of natural law arguments by showing how humankind did not retain the knowledge of God and instead turned to wickedness. God handed them over to a depraved mind (ἀδόκησα νοῦς, 1:28) when their desires (ἔπιθεμα) and passions (πάθη) corrupted human understanding and caused them to depart from nature (φύσεως, 1:24-26). Paul’s use of φύσις echoes the Stoic emphasis on nature as a guide to human flourishing and on appetitive desires as perverting reason (Martens 1994, p. 59; Bornkamm 1959, p. 117). Cicero argues that naturam optimam bene viviendi ducem (nature is the best guide for living well, Amic. 5.19). Since the lex naturae (law of nature) joins the entire humani generis societatem (fellowship of humankind, Off. 3.27-28, Leg. 1.42), humans act contra naturam (against nature) when they commit injustices such as harming another or coveting or stealing what is another’s (Off. 3.21, 3.28), but secundum naturam (according to nature) when they undertake great labors and burdens for the sake of preserving or aiding others (Off. 3.25). However, although nature (natura) has formed humans to share in an understanding of justice, due to mali mores (evil customs) and depravata opiniones (perverted opinions), igniculi extinguantur a natura dati (the sparks which have been given by nature are extinguished, Leg. 1.33, Tusc. 3.2) (Cf. Dyck 2004, p. 188). Cicero uses perturbationes animi (disorders of the soul) as a Latin translation of the Greek πάθη (Tusc. 3.7), and says that those who are carried away by libido (lust) and iracundia (anger) have ceased to be led by their mind (mens) and by natura (Tusc. 3.11). Humans fall from the ideal of nature through corrupt passions, opinions, and habits. In the midst of varii errores (diverse errors), vanitati veritas et opinioni confirmatae natura ipsa cedat (truth yields to emptiness and nature
itself to established opinion, Tusc. 3.3). The problem is not a lack of understanding, even though people do not possess the full knowledge of law and justice, but rather their failure to follow even the 
\textit{umbra} (shadow) and the \textit{imago} (image) that they perceive, which are drawn \textit{ex optimis naturae et veritatis exemplis} (from the best examples of nature and truth, Off. 3.69).\textsuperscript{11}

Thus, Paul establishes in Romans 1:18-32 that the created world reveals God’s existence, divinity, and moral decrees, and he also demonstrates that humans have corrupted themselves by turning away from this knowledge and their original nature, which ensured their well-being. These ideas are consonant with central tenets in Stoic philosophy (Long 1986, pp. 149–50, 182; Annas 1995, p. 273), and they provide the necessary context for the natural law arguments that Paul makes in Romans 2.

3. Romans 2:1-13: God as the Ultimate Judge

Although hints of legal terminology appeared in Romans 1, Paul brings this language to the forefront in the second chapter. Paul himself was trained in Jewish law, which undoubtedly contributed to his propensity for using legal terms and concepts that were common in Roman law (Hall 1985, p. 340; Lyall 1981, pp. 85–86, 95; Cohen 1966, p. 33). The ὁ ἀνθρώπος whom Paul directly addresses in 2:1 and 2:3 connects with the ἀνθρώπως of the earlier chapter and signifies that he is still speaking to all humanity, specifically to those who with ἕκληρότης (hardness) and an ἀμετανόητος καρδία (unrepentant heart) despise God’s kindness (2:4-5), as indicated by the continued direct address of σοῦ in 2:3-4. The designation of ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ψυχήν ἀνθρώπον (upon every soul of man) in 2:9, with the additional delineation of Jews and Greeks, further underscores the all-encompassing nature of this group, which continues as Paul’s subject of conversation through 2:13. He begins the chapter with the observation that people serve as judges in an unofficial court of law, using their own opinions and standards to condemn others. Because they judge (κρίνω) others for doing (πράσσων/παίων) what they themselves practice, they unconsciously pronounce judgement (κατακρίνω) against themselves (2:1-3). Unlike human judgement, which varies according to the individual, τὸ κρῖμα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐστὶν κατὰ ἀληθείαν (the judgement of God is according to truth), and it serves as a just and righteous judgement (δικαιοσύνη) when it condemns all who act against his standards (2:2-5). God is the final judge ὃς ἀποδίκει ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ (who will render to each person according to his works, 2:6), whether the work is κακῶν (evil, 2:9) or ἀγαθῶν (good, 2:10). Although labelled as works, these deeds encompass inward desires and motivations, as seen in Paul’s list of the unrighteous actions practiced in 1:29-31, which include internal states such as envy, covetousness, and lacking natural affection.

Stoic philosophy had prepared Paul’s Roman audience to accept such arguments. A hundred years earlier, Cicero had specified that civil laws exist only as a part of \textit{ius ac lex} (universal justice and law, Leg. 1.17). True law unites human society, laying its obligations upon all, and it exists outside of the written statutes and unwritten customs (Cic. Leg. 1.42). In his well-known quotation from De Republica, Cicero stresses that god is the author and judge of the universal law that rules all people in accordance with nature:

\textit{Est quidem vera lex recta ratio naturae congruens, diffusa in omnes, constans, semipiterna, quae vocet ad officium iubendo, vetando a fraude deterreat . . . nec vero aut per senatum aut per populum solvi hac lege possimus, neque est quaeerendus explanator aut interpres eius alius, nec erit alia lex Romae, alia Athenis, alia nunc, alia posthac, sed et omnes gentes et omni tempore una lex et semipiterna et immutabiles continentur, unusque erit communis quasi magister et imperator omnium deus, ille legis huius inventor, disceptator, lator.}

Indeed, true law is right reason consistent with nature, spread out over all people, unchanging and eternal, which calls them to duty by its decrees and deters them from crime by its prohibitions . . . we are not able to be released from this law either by the senate or the people, nor must we seek someone to explain or interpret it for us; there will not be one law in Rome, another law in Athens, other laws now or other laws in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will...
preserve all peoples at all times, and god, the teacher and ruler of all people, is the author, judge, and proposer of this law (Rep. 3.33).

This recognition of an outside source, authority, and judge of moral behavior not only connects Stoic natural law philosophy with Paul’s letter, but also demonstrates the truth of the apostle’s statement in 1:32 that all perceive God’s righteous decrees but choose to turn away from that knowledge. As previously stated, Cicero argues that actions which harm others such as coveting the belongings of another or stealing them for oneself are contrary to nature and against both lex divina et humana (divine and human law, De Off. 3.23-24). This is why he argues in Philippic 11 that law is nihil aliud nisi recta etiam a numine deorum tracta ratio, imperans honesta, prohibens contraria (nothing except right reason derived from the will of the gods, which commands honorable actions and forbids the opposite, 11.28).

4. Romans 2:14-15: Revelation Written in the Heart

Romans 2 has raised many long-standing controversies among theologians, and one of the difficult questions occurs in 2:7. While Paul is speaking of all humankind in this passage, are the ones who are steadfast in ἔργον ἕγαθον (good work) necessarily Christ-followers? The fact that they are to receive eternal life seems to indicate that they are believers. Paul is likely speaking hypothetically, that those who do good will receive eternal life, even though he will clarify in 3:9-10 that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under ἠμαρτία (guilt) and οὐκ ἐστίν δίκαιος (none is righteous). The complication of whether Paul is speaking of Gentile believers or non-believers intensifies in 2:12-15. Significantly, in 2:12, although he has referred to a judge, judgements, and decrees, for the first time in the letter Paul uses νόμος, a term which he repeatedly employs throughout the rest of the chapter and which signifies that he is now speaking of God’s law as divinely revealed to the Jewish people. When discussing the Mosaic law as applied to the Jews, Paul also has in mind the covenant relationship that exists between God and his people, a relationship that does not exist with the Gentiles. However, the Gentiles, who do wrong ἄνομως (without law), and the Jews, who do wrong ἐν νόμῳ (in law), will all be judged (2:12). An innocent verdict is not granted for those who hear the νόμος, but only for the person who is a τοιχήτης (doer, 2:13). Even those who do not have the written revelation of God’s law (νόμος) have the work of the law (ἔργον τοῖς νόμοις) written in their hearts (γραπτά ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν), and sometimes follow it by nature (φύσις) with their moral consciousness (συνεδρίας), both accusing and defending the actions of themselves and others (2:14-15). Both of these verbs, signifying the actions of making an accusation (κατηγορέω) and a defense (ἀπολογέω), employ the legal language of the lawcourts (VanDrunen 2014, p. 254; Bell 1998, p. 149). When Paul employs συνεδρίας, he is referring to both believers and unbelievers (Thielman 2018, p. 139).

The majority reading is that Paul was addressing pagan Gentiles in 2:14-15, but long-lasting disagreement exists on this point with persuasive arguments offered by theologians who support this view and also by those who believe Paul was referring to believing Gentiles. Although the verse echoes Jeremiah 31:33 (Berkley 2000, p. 159), when God says that “I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts” (ESV), Paul here refers to the work of the law rather than the law itself (Seifrid 1998, p. 122; Deenick 2018, p. 151). While not perfectly following the law as revealed by the fact that their reasoning both accuses and defends them (2:15), these Gentiles are still doing φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου (by nature the things of the law, 2:14). They do not possess God’s law in an externally written form, but within their nature—indeed, inscribed in their very hearts—God has provided them with a moral sense that enables them to serve as a ἀκριβός νόμος (law to themselves, 2:14; Spicq 1938, p. 55; Stepień 1980, pp. 12–13; Bussey 2020, pp. 5–6). This νόμος still contains elements of God’s law, though in a distinct form; as Sanders (1983, p. 130) notes, the distinction is in “the mode of revelation, not the contents.” Therefore, 2:14-15 provides the condemnation for the Gentiles, but not their justification, which they can receive only through belief in Christ. Only the doers of the law δικαιωθηκόνται (will be justified, 2:13),
5. Romans 2:27-29: Internal Obedience to Law

Paul’s arguments for natural law lead into the concept of internal obedience in 2:27-29, where he expands on the notion of the “true Jew” as one who not only conforms to the written letter of the law, but has experienced inward transformation. For the first time in this chapter, the term γράμμα appears (though, cf. γραπτόν in 2:15), signifying the written letter of the law, which Paul parallels with circumcision, the outward physical sign of being a Jew (2:27, Barclay 1998, p. 545; Wolter 2008, p. 150). In contrast with the manifest (φανερός) evidence of being a Jew seen in circumcision (2:28), the circumcision of the heart (περιτομή καρδίας) is a hidden (κρυπτός) reality, just as the spirit (πνεῦμα) is the hidden reality in relation to the letter (γράμμα) of the law (2:29). In this passage, ἐάν indicates a hypothetical possibility when Paul speaks of a Gentile who is not merely a doer (ποιητής) of the law, but one who fulfills (τελέω) it (2:27). Just as Paul drew on Scripture to imagine the law “written on the hearts” of Gentiles in 2:15, so too does he now likely draw on Scripture to understand the inward circumcision of the heart (cf. Deut 30:6; 10:16; Jer 4:4). Radically, though, Paul appropriates this eschatological promise of God’s inward transformation of his covenant people and presents this saving work as available for Gentile individuals who join themselves in faith to Israel’s Messiah (cf. Rom 1:3–4). His point is directed to a Jewish audience, letting them know that the person who possesses the outward sign and the written commandment is not righteous, but rather the person who obeys God in an inward orientation of the heart that manifests itself in an outward fulfilling of the law. The “true Jew” is thus the person who possesses the reality of what the outward sign is supposed to indicate.

The clear correspondence between Roman perspectives on natural law and Paul’s conception of internal obedience enables the apostle to present his essential point in a way that his Roman audience would immediately comprehend. Paul emphasizes spirit (πνεῦμα) as the generating force of internal and external obedience, and in this way the presence of the spirit indicates the arrival of the eschatological era (Kamlah 1954, p. 278; Kremer 1980, p. 224; Käsemann 1971, pp. 145–47). Even though it does not equate with them, this idea is similar to the Stoic conception of intent and the law of nature (Fridrichsen 1922, p. 191; Käsemann 1971, p. 142). It is not clear when Paul uses πνεῦμα if he is referring to the spirit of the law, the spirit of the person obeying the law, or the Holy Spirit. The passage seems to allow for any of the three possibilities. The textual parallel in 2:29 of ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι (in the spirit, not in the letter), would appear to indicate that since γράμμα refers to the letter of the law, πνεῦμα could be referring to the spirit of the law (Ervin 1984, p. 113; Alford 1852, p. 2.313). In this sense, πνεῦμα would be like the voluntas (purpose) or sententia (meaning) of the law in Roman declamation (Cohen 1966, p. 47), which points to the alignment between the written letter of the law and the universal law of nature, which
is unwritten. The irony here, when placing 2:27-29 in connection with 2:14-15, is that this deeper reality of the spirit as opposed to the letter (γράμμα) does in fact become written in that it is internally inscribed (γραπτόν) by divine power upon the hearts of God’s people.

The principles of natural law as an inherent element of the Roman rhetorical tradition were prefigured by the Greeks, but they are further delineated by the Stoics and particularly by Cicero (Citti 2015, p. 124). Aristotle distinguishes between the ἱδίος νόμος (particular law) that governs each individual people group through the written statutes and unwritten laws they all recognize,24 and the κοινὸς νόμος (common law) that is κατά φύσιν (according to nature) and reveals both justice and injustice to all peoples in all times and places (Arist. Rh. 1373b).25 The principles of equity may necessitate looking not to the law itself but to the διάνοια τοῦ νομοθέτου (intention of the lawgiver, Arist. Rh. 1374b). In forensic oratory, Aristotle notes that one can argue against written law by employing the standard of the unwritten κοινὸς νόμος and ἐπιεικὲς (equity), since both are according to nature and never change (Arist. Rh. 1375a).

These concepts of nature, law, and intention appear more frequently in Roman declamation. When teaching students in rhetoric, *Rhetorica ad Herrenium* provides instructions for the courtroom advocate who is defending a person who broke the law. The situation may arise when a person confesses that they are guilty of breaking the leges (laws), but justifies their action (Rhet. Her. 2.13). In particular, the advocate can argue that the *sententia* (meaning) or *voluntas* (purpose) of the lawmaker should be upheld rather than what is *scriptum* (written), the literal *verba et litteras* (words and letters) of the law (Rhet. Her. 2.14).26 By assuming that the lawmaker intended the law to align with other *lex* (law), *mos* (custom), *natura* (nature), and what is *aequus et bonus* (good and equitable), the advocate can show that if the law’s application in this case would contradict any of those principles, then the defendant should be declared innocent (Rhet. Her. 2.14). Particularly, the advocate can attempt to demonstrate that the *sententia* argued by the prosecutors contradicts other laws or that it is *stultus* (foolish), *inustus* (unjust), or contrary to the *ius communis* (universal law, Rhet. Her. 2.14).27 In all these instances, the written statute is superseded by an interpretation consistent with unwritten principles that dictate a law must be wise, practical, just, and consistent with universal law. These unwritten principles govern the written law in its interpretation, purpose, and application.

Cicero’s rhetorical handbooks of the Roman Republic also uphold this principle. *De Inventione* dives into greater depth than *Rhetorica ad Herrenium* when Cicero addresses the five controversies that can arise over written laws. The first type occurs when inconsistency exists between what is *scriptum* (written), the actual *verba* (words), and the *voluntas* or *sententia scriptoris* (the will or intent of the author, *Inv. Rhet.* 1.17, 2.128). A practical example of this is when Epaminondas, the general of Thebes, retained his army a few days longer than permitted by *lex* (law), but achieved a complete victory over the Spartans (*Inv. Rhet.* 1.55). On the one hand, a prosecutor could argue that Epaminondas must be condemned by the written statute, because in order to obey the laws, one must follow what is written (*Inv. Rhet.* 1.70). On the other, an advocate could argue that all laws are enacted for the purpose of benefiting the state. Since Epaminondas protected the safety of the state, he fulfilled the *sententia scriptoris*, and cannot be said to have disobeyed the law (*Inv. Rhet.* 1.69). Other examples include a man who contrary to *lex* opened the city gates at night to admit friendly forces so that they would not be killed by the enemy, or a man who was ordered by *lex* to depart on a certain day for his embassy but did not because the treasurer did not give him the necessary funds (*Inv. Rhet.* 1.123-24).28 When arguing against the letter of the law in favor of its intention, an advocate should point to an outside standard of reference such as *aequitas* (equity, *Inv. Rhet.* 2.136), and mention that the person who follows the *sententia* (meaning) obeys the *lex* (law) more fully than the person who only adheres to the *litterae* (letters) and *verba* (words) that are *scriptum* (written, *Inv. Rhet.* 2.141).29

These arguments appear not only in rhetorical theory, but also within the Roman courtroom. A law is limited, never able to cover all situations and necessary exceptions.
Therefore, both the Roman rhetoricians and the jurisconsults recognized that the intent of the lawgiver as well as the words of the law must be taken into consideration (Vonglis 1968, p. 16). Cicero reports that in *Causa Curiana*, Crassus won his case by appealing to *aequitas* in opposition to *scriptum*, demonstrating that his interpretation of a will, although not consistent with the literal words, was consistent with what was *aequus* (fair) and *bonus* (good, Brut. 39.145). In *Pro Caecina*, Cicero appeals to the precedent of the *Causa Curiana* to show that *verba* are often insufficient and that *voluntas* (intention) must be considered, as *verba* were invented in order to reveal *voluntas* (*Caecin. 18.53)*. He argues that following *verba* in some situations will undermine *aequitas* (*Cic. Caecin. 13.37)*. By using *verba* to create sophistic arguments and reject the *consilium* (intention), *ratio* (reasoning), and *auctoritas* (authority) of the lawgivers, one could invalidate every type of written statute (*Caecin. 18.51*). Thus, he sets the unwritten intent of the lawgivers and the standard of equity against the written words of a law.32

Cicero recognizes a difference between statute law and natural law insofar as he maintains that nature reveals to humankind the difference between a *bona lex* (good law) and a *mala lex* (bad law), between *virtus* (virtue) and *vitium* (vice), between what is *honestum* (honorable) and *turpe* (base), and between good and evil itself (*Leg. 1.35, 1.44-46*). Since justice (*iustitia*) and right (*ius*) are based not on opinion but on nature (*Leg. 1.28*), Cicero determines that written statues contrary to natural law cannot even be classified as law (*Leg. 2.13*).33 Thus, an apparent dichotomy exists between positive law and the law of nature, but a deeper examination reveals the division to be superficial since the written laws of a state are only another extension of true law (*Powell 2001, p. 37; Dyck 2004, p. 33; Forschner 2016, p. 55*). As seen in the earlier passage from *De Republica*, *vera lex recta ratio naturae congruens* (true law is right reason consistent with nature). Unwritten law is the ultimate guiding standard of justice, but similar to Paul’s emphasis on an inward obedience that manifests itself in action, the universal unwritten law finds its expression in just written statues (*Bosman 2003, p. 247; Schnelle 2005, p. 79*).

This distinction between natural law and statute law aligns with Roman declamation and its contrast between *scriptum*/*verba*/*litterae* and *voluntas*/*sententia scriptoris*. Paul’s Roman readers would have caught the similarity between this tradition and his use of *γράφμα* καὶ *πνεύμα* (*Cic. Caecin. 31*). Cohen supports this viewpoint, noting the Latin replacement of *scriptum* and *sententia* or *voluntas* for the earlier Greek contrast of *ῥήμα* καὶ *διάνοια* (letter and meaning) and arguing that “the antithesis *γράφμα* καὶ *πνεύμα* (letter and spirit) coined by Paul was the equivalent to the Greek antithesis *ῥήμα* καὶ *διάνοια*, which was a commonplace in ancient Greek rhetoric” (*Cohen 1966, pp. 41, 58–59*). Although Paul does not use the common Greek or Latin antithesis, his pairing of letter and spirit echoes them in a way that would have been recognized by his audience. Under this interpretation, the true Jew would be the one who follows the intention of the law, not just the letter (*Wolter 2013; Westerholm 1984; Käsemann 1971*).

Another possibility is that Paul uses *πνεύμα* to refer to the inward disposition of a law-abiding person. The *περιτομή καρδίας* (circumcision of the heart) could refer to a Gentile whose *πνεύμα* aligns with the law, with the motivating force of obedience not being the written letter but rather coming from an inner orientation (*Longenecker 2016, pp. 317–18; Hultgren 2011, pp. 130–31*). As Hall summarizes, “perfect love makes law superfluous” (*Hall 1985, p. 378*). This interpretation would be consistent with Paul’s use of *πνεύμα* in 8:16, which refers to a person’s spirit: αὐτό τὸ πνεύμα συνμαρτυρεῖ τῷ πνεύματι ἵμων ὧτι ἔσχεν τεκνὰ θεοῦ (the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God).34

Roman declamation makes a parallel distinction between written statues and the natural law that is implanted in humankind, between outward presentation and inward conformity. In *Pro Milone*, when urging the jury to uphold the right of self-defense, Cicero says that *non scripta, sed nata lex, quam non didicimus, accepimus, legimus, verum ex natura ipsa adriputimus, hausimus, expressimus, ad quam non docti, sed facti, non instituti, sed imbuti sumus* (this law is not written but produced by nature, a law which we did not learn, receive, or read, but which in truth we absorbed, drank in, and pressed out from nature herself; we
were not taught this law but were created according to it, we were not built up in it, we were soaked in it, 10). At this point, Cicero is drawing from his earlier De Inventione, when he said that the *ius naturae* (law of nature) does not originate from human or individual opinion but is an inborn force begot in us by nature itself (2.161).

Cicero asserts that the just man, who follows the law that nature has implanted within him, could find the ring of Gyges, a magical ring that enables the bearer to become invisible, and yet he would continue to act virtuously; he would follow the decrees of justice even in the dark (Off. 3.77-78). Specifically, Cicero is referring to the story of the Ring of Gyges in Plato’s Republic, but more broadly, he is drawing on the tradition that a true law-abiding person cannot merely follow the written laws in their external actions, but must also understand the nature of justice and possess an inner motivation that empowers action. Plato maintains that the good citizen must obey not only the written laws, but also the underlying and unwritten approval and disapproval of the lawmaker (Leg. 822e). Aristotle echoes this idea when he acknowledges that unlike the unwritten laws, the written laws have the power of compulsion, but that the best person will not follow the laws through outward compulsion (Rh. 1375a). Cicero commends those whose actions align with the law not because they are compelled by the law but *sua sponte* (by their own will, Rep. 1.2.3). It is *ex natura vivere summum bonum* (the greatest good to live according to nature), which means to follow nature and live by her law of virtue (Cic. Leg. 1.56). Thus, a person obeys the law, whether just civil statues or the dictates of virtue, not because of outward coercion or the fear of punishment, but because of an inner dedication to the law. As Annas (2017, p. 182) states in regard to Cicero and the Stoics’ conception of natural law, “right reason in the mind of the wise person will always lead to right action from the right kind of virtuous disposition” (Cf. Arkes 1992, p. 259). This interpretation of πνεῦμα as the inward state of the law-abiding person (Cf. Friedrichsen 1922, p. 191) does not contradict the interpretation of πνεῦμα as the intention of the law itself; rather, the two interpretations fit together and align with the Stoic belief that the natural law without is echoed by a natural recognition of that law within a person.

Finally, through his use of πνεῦμα, Paul may be looking forward to the person of the Trinity that enables such an orientation and actions (Thielman 2018, p. 156; Jewett 2007, p. 236; Harvey 2017, p. 73). What is only foreshadowed in 2:29 reaches its full expression in later chapters. In 7:6, Paul returns to the spirit/letter antithesis within the context of the law, saying that Christians have been set free from the νόμος so that they might serve ἐν κανόνιστι πνεῦματος, καὶ ὁ παλαιότητα γράμματος (in the newness of the Spirit, and not in the obsolescence of the letter). At this point, the γράμμα is significantly positioned on the outmoded side of the eschatological divide between new and old, where the Spirit alone provides escape from the fatality of the written law (Wolter 2013, p. 45). Similarly, in 8:2, Paul distinguishes between the law of the spirit and the written law: νόμος τοῦ Πνεῦματος τῆς ζωῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ἡλευθερώσεν σὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου τῆς ἀμαρτίας καὶ τοῦ θανάτου (the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death). Additionally, in 8:4, he says that the δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου (ordinances of the law) are made complete in those who walk according to the πνεῦμα, thereby forging a link between the empowering presence of the third person of the Trinity and the believer’s ability to complete the law (Jewett 2007, pp. 485–86).

While Cicero urged people to strive for virtuous following of the law, he recognized the incompleteness of that endeavor. He defines the true law-follower as the person who follows the intent rather than the mere letter, but the ideal of the Stoic sage who achieved this proved unattainable (Martens 1994, p. 66). As Chrysippus argued, the one who progresses toward virtue but fails to completely attain it is like the person who drowns just below the surface, he is just as dead as the person who drowns 500 fathoms deep (Plut. Comm. not. 1063a). Thus, although Stoic ideas contextualize Paul’s message in 2:29, his addition of the πνεῦμα profoundly reworks them. As Dodd (1946a, p. 132) comments, “Stoic morals are woven into the fabric of New Testament ethics. It is true that the robe which Christianity fashions out of the materials is widely different from the Stoic
philosopher’s cloak.” Unlike the Gentiles who serve as a law to themselves, imperfectly doing the works of the law by nature, the Spirit will enable believers to truly fulfill the law, with their goal being the righteousness of Christ rather than that of the law.41

Perhaps the best approach is to view πνεῦμα in 2:29 as deliberately ambiguous, allowing Paul to capture all three interpretations. Two of these interpretations clearly unite with Stoic perspectives, the third one (with πνεῦμα constituting a divine person) would be new for Paul’s Roman audience. By adding a new element, the answer to humankind’s inability to be rightly motivated in accordance with nature, Paul transforms Stoic legal philosophy. The righteousness that the law was powerless to bring about was accomplished through the work of Christ. For Paul, the Spirit enables an inward orientation that results in outward deeds consistent with the law. Therefore, internal obedience is established through faith in Christ, both for the Jew who desires to fulfill the written law and for the Gentile who seeks to fulfill the law given through nature.

As this investigation into the oratory of the Roman lawcourts and Cicero’s rhetorical handbooks and philosophical treatises reveals, Gentile believers in Rome would have been familiar with the Stoic language and concepts of natural law that Paul employs. Paul’s use of such elements as a deliberate rhetorical technique thus enabled him to communicate his message in a way that would be understandable to his readers and hearers in Rome. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul echoes Stoic arguments in establishing that creation reveals the knowledge of God and his moral decrees, but that humankind has turned away from this knowledge and their true nature. This provides the framework for the ideas that Paul continues to develop in Romans 2:1-15. Despite the lexical and exegetical complexities of this passage, two conclusions clearly disclose themselves, namely that God is the ultimate judge of all human behavior, and that the Mosaic law given to the Jews and the law given through the human conscience to the Gentiles are sufficient to condemn all. When Paul moves in 2:27-29 to the central significance of internal obedience, his previous use of Stoic elements on natural law prompts two potential interpretations of πνεῦμα in addition to the foreshadowing of the Holy Spirit: the spirit of the law itself and the spirit of the one following the law. All three interpretations are simultaneously compatible, together offering Gentile believers in Rome a deeper understanding of the law and the previously unavailable capacity for internal as well as external obedience.

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Notes

1 Rome’s legal system was highly advanced, allowing for complexity and flexibility, and it has exerted a lasting influence throughout legal history (Anderson 2018, p. 1; Riggsby 2010, p. 1; Domingo 2018, pp. 3–5). See (Hayes 2015, p. 81; Sandbach 2018, p. 16; Brunt 2013, p. 275; Annas 2000, p. 403) for the influence of Stoicism in Rome and in Roman jurisprudence and the jurists.

2 (Thorsteinsson 2003, pp. 88–89, 102–22) provides an overview of the perspectives on Paul’s audience and argues for it being composed solely of Gentiles. (Cf. Thiessen 2014). (Thorsteinsson et al. 2016) 21 asserts “Arguments that Paul includes Jews within at least parts of his rhetoric are very weak”. Nevertheless, even if the direct reference in 2:17 implies the inclusion of a Jewish interlocutor in Paul’s audience, as supported by (Morris 1988, p. 5; Westerholm 2022, p. 71; Thielman 2018, p. 125), the other clear references to a Gentile audience demonstrate that Paul is writing the dialogue of Romans 2:17-27 with the Gentiles looking on. Scholarship pointing to a primarily, if not completely, Gentile audience, amplifies the significance of Paul’s rhetorical strategy in using Stoic concepts when writing to them.

3 Our proposal of comparing Paul with Cicero affirms that despite significant differences (which will be highlighted below), there yet remains meaningful overlap between Paul’s view of how the spirit relates to the letter of the law and the view of Cicero on this subject. For a similar method of comparing differing ancient ethical theories, see (Annas 1995, p. 15). (Cf. Smith 1987, p. 14), who affirms that “[c]omparison requires the acceptance of difference”.
Wisdom of Solomon 13 provides a complementary account of creation testifying to the presence of a creator. However, unlike Paul’s insistence that those departing from this knowledge to the worship of created things are acting contrary to nature (παρ’ φύσειν, 1.24), which aligns with the Stoic perspective that humans gain the knowledge of God from nature herself (ab ipsa natura, Cic. Nat. D. 2.16), Wis 13:1 states that those who do not know God are foolish by nature (μηδενας φύσει). See (Linebaugh 2011) for the connection between Romans 1-2 and Wis 13.

For Cicero as a primary source for the Stoic argument on intelligent design, see (Foster et al. 2008, p. 53; Jantzen 2014, p. 35). For earlier arguments of design, see (Sedley 2007, pp. 78–83).


Asmis (2008, p. 6) notes that on these points, Cicero is “following them [the Stoics] closely”. Cf. (Covell 1992, p. 7).

Käsemann 1980, p. 47 nuances the abandonment to perversity, saying that “moral perversion is the result of God’s wrath, not the reason for it”. However, in 1:22-23, Paul notes the failure of humankind to glorify God, their descent into ungratefulness, and their worship of the creation; thus, Paul signifies that moral perversion can be both the cause and the result of God’s wrath.

Remus 1984 explores the connection between nonos and physis in Greek and Latin sources.

Cf. Cic. Off. 1.22 that the Stoic belief that humans are born to mutually assist one another and that naturam devenus ducem sequi (we ought to follow nature as our guide), and Off. 1.100: et quidem ista duce erratur nihil pacto potest (and indeed with that guide it is not possible to err in any way). See Off. 3.20 for Cicero’s following of Stoic teachings on moral duties (cf. Dyck 1996, pp. 18–19).

Brunt 2013, p. 17 explores the question of whether this state is curable.

Cic. Nat. D. 1.36 describes how Zeno thought naturalem legem divinam esse (that the natural law was divine) and vim obtinere recta imperantem prohibentemque contraria (its strength maintained the commanding of right actions and the forbidding of opposite ones).

Keener 2009, p. 44, maintains that only those transformed by Christ can live thus.


Thus, the allusion to Jeremiah’s prophecy of God’s eschatological work upon his covenant people’s hearts becomes radically applied to Gentiles. Cf. (Hafemann 2019, p. 227), who, despite arguing against our view of “an innate moral law,” helpfully points to “the fulfillment of [Jeremiah’s] new covenant promise” here in Rom 2:15, in that “God has replaced the sin engraved on [these Gentiles’] hearts (cf. Jer 17:1) with an obedience to his law”. Rather than forcing these two options to be mutually exclusive, might there not be a way to combine elements of the new covenant promise of renewed hearts with those of the natural law theory? This is the hope of the authors, who tend, respectively, toward different readings of this passage.

Cf. (van Spanje 1999, p. 234; VanDrunen 2013, pp. 88–89), while emphasizing their “substantive similarities,” distinguishes Paul’s treatment of a natural law that is given to the Gentiles from the Mosaic law that is given to the Jews.

Bornkamm 1959, p. 115: “[T]he statements in Rom 2:15 stem from the previously established non-Christian tradition in which the conscience was already understood as an inner source of judgment for humanity and had become a method and topic for self-vindication and self-condemnation” (our translation).

Wolter 2006, p. 150 argues that the key term γράμμα in Rom 2:29, rather than designating the notion of Literalität (as it does in 2 Cor 3:6 and in Rom 7:6), designates “die Merkmale der Visibilität (ἐν τῷ φασιν) und der Materialität (ἐν σκέπῃ)”.

Lyonnet 1968, p. 95 describes “the indispensable renewal that Paul invokes, in accord with Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, [which entails] the ‘circumcision of the heart,’ a circumcision that God alone, through his Spirit, is able to effect in the individual”. (our translation).

Kamlah 1954, p. 278: “With these oppositions we can feel the well-known antithesis between the two aeons” (our translation). For a thorough discussion of the issues involved in the spirit–letter contrast in Paul (and particularly in 2 Cor 3:6), see (Hafemann 2005, pp. 1–7, 16–25). (Hafemann 2005, p. 21) follows (Stuhlmacher 1986) in viewing “the γράμμα/πνεύμα contrast between the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ [as leading] Paul to a γράμμα/γραφή antithesis between the Law read as a death producing demand for works and the Law read in the light of one’s encounter with Christ as ‘the comforting records of God’s leading’”.

Fridrichsen 1922, p. 191 argues that the Stoic “Gegensatz Schein-Sein,” a contrast between seeming and real (between ὀνόματι καὶ σώματι), corresponds with Paul’s emphatic contrast in Romans 2 between hearing and doing, and also with his distinction between the hidden Jew and the outward one. Cf. (Wolter 2013, pp. 43–44; Käsemann 1980, pp. 74–75): “Paul can use the Hellenistic
tradition in which Epictetus, for example, asks concerning the true Stoic. Here the appearance, which depends on the evaluation of spectators, is set over against the inward and essential existence”.

24 (Collins 2010, p. 129) particularly makes the case for a comparison between this aspect of Aristotle’s thought and Paul’s presentation of the “law unto themselves” in Rom 2:14-15.

25 This paper takes the traditional interpretation of Aristotle in contrast to recent interpretations (Burns 2002; Remow 2008), arguing that Aristotle did not view Antigone as an example of natural law or justice, but rather as an example of a particular cultural value that could vary between times and places.

26 Cf. Cic. Int. Rhet. 2.137, which uses the same language of contrasting what is lege aut in testamento scriptum (written in the law or in the will) with the sententia quoque et voluntate scriptoris (meaning and desire of the author); and Cic. Top. 25.96, which also contrasts the scriptum and verba with sententia and voluntas scriptoris.

27 Cf. Cic. Int. Rhet. 2.138, which says a law will never command what is inutilis (disadvantageous) or iniquus (unjust).

Cf. Cic. De Or. 2.134; Orat. Part. 30.104-106.


Cf. Cic. Caecin. 22.63, where Cicero instead uses sententia as contrasted with verba, and 23.65-66 where he contrasts verba, litterae, and scriptum with aequitas, voluntas scriptoris, and aequus et bonus.


29 In the early period of the Roman Empire, Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria continues to uphold this contrast. Many legal questions address conflicts that may arise between scriptum and verba on one side, and voluntas on the other (Inst. 3.6.88, 7.1.14, 7.1.45-7.6.9). Whenever a person breaks the written law, a number of options are available to justify the action and condemn the written interpretation (Inst. 7.1.50). Quintilian references the Pro Caccina to demonstrate that following the literal words of a law is not always the correct interpretation (Inst. 7.6.5). Instead of referring to the intent of the scriptor as Cicero does, however, Quintilian appeals to the law itself as embodying a meaning beyond the written words, the voluntas legis instead of the scriptum legis (Inst. 3.6.99-100). Although he primarily scrutinizes voluntas as opposed to scriptum, Quintilian also includes aequitas and even natura as independent principles that can be used to argue on behalf of voluntas against scriptum (Inst. 7.1.49 and 7.6.5).

30 Cf. Quin. Inst. that the true orator must be a vir bonus (12.1.44) who has studied both the leges that are given to all humankind by natura and the leges which are established by particular peoples and nations (12.2.3).


Cf. Quin. Inst. 9.3.83


Cf. (Schofield 2021, p. 114), on the twin ideas of the “moral law within” and the “divinely ordered universe”.

Cf. Cic. Fin. 3.48.

31 (Keener 2009, p. 48; McFadden 2013, p. 147; Pohlenz 1949, p. 82; Westerholm 1984, p. 241; Engberg-Pedersen 2000, p. 208; Wright 2001, p. 136); Romans 10:4, τέλος γὰρ νόμον Χρυστίκης.

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