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STOICISM IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The Apostle Paul and the Evangelist John as Stoics

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The question of the relationship between Stoicism and early Christianity is one of those that will not go away. The fact that a short, apocryphal and in itself not very interesting exchange of letters between Seneca and the apostle Paul has been preserved to us from antiquity suggests that there is some substance to the question. Even in antiquity some people apparently felt that there was an affinity here that was worth exploring. Luke, the evangelist, who also authored the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, must have felt the same when he composed a speech by Paul on the Athenian Areopagus (Acts 17:22–34) which very clearly draws on specifically Stoic ideas and even quotes the Stoic poet Aratus on Zeus:

For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are of his offspring.”

At the same time it has to be said that any statement – whether ancient or modern – on the relationship between Stoicism and early Christianity is most of all a hermeneutical Lehrstück in how any position on the matter reflects the intellectual background and interests of the speaker.

This also holds in the present. For a number of independent reasons there has been a strong renewal of interest in Stoicism within philosophy during the last three decades. This reflects an increased philosophical interest – probably under the influence of science – in bodiliness, materialism and monism and a concomitant critique of the traditional concern in philosophy with dualism and the mind as represented by that powerful current in Western thought which is Platonism. Concomitantly, there has been a turn away within scholarly analysis of the early Christian writings from the traditional, theologically oriented focus on ideas in the direction of an interest in practices, social situations, bodiliness and more. Here too, what has been left behind (by some, at least) is the huge baggage of the amalgamation of specifically Christian and basically Platonic ideas that began to be developed in the second century CE when a renewed form of Platonism was gradually becoming authoritative within philosophy. The increased interest in Stoicism during the last three decades among scholars of the New
Testament (which basically dates in the first century CE) is part of the more general turn away from Platonism. It is also part of a movement in the direction of looking at the New Testament from a critical, religious studies perspective that puts a distinctly theological interest on hold. In both respects the recent turn to Stoicism is itself also hermeneutically biased in the sense that it reflects changes in scholarly interests.

In what follows I will give two examples of the heuristic (as opposed to genetic) value of understanding central early Christian texts in the light of Stoicism. The aim is to show the complex ways in which Stoicism may be seen to underlie the thought of these texts: not so as to make them Stoic, but so as to help them express their own perspective on the world. The reader should be warned that the readings for which I shall argue are not always standard readings. I am attempting to show how Stoicism may be used creatively to make us understand the early Christian texts better. Note also that a certain amount of explanation is required to make the case in an intelligible way.

Paul on how to overcome akrasia: two questions for Romans 7:7–8:13

In his letter to the Romans Paul argues that the Jewish law of Moses is in itself insufficient to bring about the goal of which Paul is speaking, namely “righteousness” in the present and “salvation” in the future. The latter goal was to be understood as something as esoteric as a resurrected life in heaven together with Christ. Here, however, our focus will be on Paul’s account of the proper route towards the goal: not the Mosaic law, but the “Christ event” (that is, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) and the human experience of that event in faith (pistis) or the “belief” or conviction that it has occurred. Why does Christ work where the Mosaic law does not?

Paul spells out his answer to this question in a famous passage in the middle of the letter, 7:7–8:13, where he tackles the well-known philosophical question of akrasia and how it might be overcome. Because it addresses a theme that is in itself a philosophical one, the passage is an obvious place to go if one wants to understand Paul’s relationship with ancient philosophy. We shall see that his argument presupposes a number of motifs that have a distinctly Stoic origin. But the passage is also of central importance in itself since it addresses the following question, which goes into deciding Paul’s relationship with Judaism. If Christ is the necessary route to Paul’s goal, does Paul’s thinking lead him away from the law of Moses? Did he take the law to be superseded? This question would naturally come up for Paul himself, who was a Jew. For the same reason his answer is that his understanding of Christ does not have this consequence. On the contrary, as he has already stated earlier in the letter (3:31), “we uphold the law.” But what, then, is the precise relationship between the law and Christ that will make that possible? Thus there are two questions to be answered in the following discussion. One is internal to Paul’s own thought (on the relationship between the law and Christ) and one is more external and of immediate relevance to the present book: on Paul’s relationship with ancient philosophy and Stoicism, in particular.

Romans 7:7–13: the law creates an awareness of sin

Paul begins by suggesting a special role that the law has for a person who wishes to live in accordance with it and who has not (yet) experienced the Christ event. The way the law functions when it states that You shall not covet is to bring about in its listeners an awareness of their own “sin” (7:7), namely that from time to time they will in fact have and act on those desires that the law is designed to prevent. As Paul dramatically says, “the very commandment
that promised life,” namely if it were to be followed, “proved to be death to me” (7:10), namely by making it clear to him that he does not follow it. That is the awareness of sin that is generated by the law. “So the law is [in itself] holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (7:12), but sin brought death to the person, “working death in me through what is good [the law], in order that sin might be shown to be sin” (7:13). Here Paul is out to distinguish the law from sin even though living under the law is living with sin in the way he goes on to explain. The next verse (7:14) introduces the problem of akrasia as Paul’s way of spelling out exactly how the law and sin together create an awareness of sin. He says: “For we know that the law is spiritual [pneumatikos]; but I am of the flesh [sarkinos], sold into slavery under sin.” And he then spells out (7:15–25) how this “slavery under sin” works when a person is also living under the law.

**Romans 7:15–25: akrasia as an ineradicable form of sin under the law**

Akrasia is knowing the good (7:19, through one’s knowledge of “God’s law,” which one also wishes to follow, 7:22), but not knowing what one does when one does what one does not want to do, but in fact hates doing (7:15). Paul gradually sharpens his description. First, “I know [oida] that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh [sarx]” (7:18). Then “I find [heurisko] with regard to the law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand” (7:22, my translation). And finally, “I see [blepo] in my members another law at war with the law of my mind” (7:23). This gradual, ever stronger realization of the apparently ineradicable fact of akrasia even in the person who wishes to follow “God’s law” then leads to Paul’s concluding outburst: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (7:24). In sum, the body of flesh will invariably raise its head against the commandments of the law and issue in acts of akrasia, the result being an almost schizogenetic realization of one’s own “sin”: that one is incapable of always and only following the law. Is there no solution, then? Yes, experiencing the Christ event. That is what Paul goes on to spell out in 8:1–13. “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his Son …, he condemned sin in the flesh / so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit [pneuma]” (8:3–4).

**Romans 8:1–11: the role of the pneuma in the solution to the problem of akrasia**

The essence of Paul’s solution is that those who have experienced the Christ event and respond to it with faith have also received from above something he calls pneuma (“spirit”). This is something that Christ believers may be in, but which may also conversely live in them (8:9). It is called “God’s pneuma” or “Christ’s pneuma” or even “Christ” himself (8:9, since the risen Christ is pneuma). I have argued elsewhere that it is best understood along the lines of the Stoic notion of pneuma, that is, as a material entity of divine origin that permeates, if not the world at large, then (and precisely only) the material bodies of Christ believers. They have received it in baptism (see a few verses later: 8:14–17) and it will stay with them until their death and resurrection, of which it will itself be instrumental. Paul explicitly makes the latter point in our text: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (8:11). How, then, will the pneuma bring about what the law could not? The answer is perfectly clear. By 7:14, the law was itself spiritual (pneumatikos) and what created
the problem was that human beings were “of the flesh” (sarkinoi). Now, however, by the infusion of pneuma, they have themselves become spiritual and thus are able to meet completely the spiritual law. Now, then, the law will be completely fulfilled, always and everywhere.

Then we can also answer the question from which we began concerning the precise relationship between the law and the Christ event. The latter is required for the former to be fulfilled. The law has not been superseded. On the contrary, it is brought to full fulfi(ection – (LSJ: the pneuma of sin and of death. Of the law of my mind (7:14–25) and its resolution (8:1–11), we will see that he basically understood both phenomena in cognitive terms. What is bad about the problem is the realization of the split between, on the one hand, God’s law that one serves with one’s mind (nous, 7:25) and in which one delights in one’s inmost self (kata ton esô anthrôpon, 7:22) and on the other hand the “other law in my members that is at war with the law of my mind” (7:23, my translation). Similarly, the solution to the problem (in the form of an infusion of pneuma into Christ believers’ bodies) is spelled out in cognitive terms: of having the “thought, purpose, or will” (LS: the phronêma) of the pneuma, which leads to “life and peace” – as opposed to having the phronêma of the flesh, which leads to death (8:6). Here the thought of the pneuma, which constitutes the solution by leading to the doing of the law, clearly consists of an understanding of the Christ event itself and all its implications for human beings, including an understanding of the very change from akrasia to full goodness whose character Paul is spelling out in the passage itself. Once all of this has been understood, then it will also be done. So, both the problem and the solution are understood in cognitive terms.

In itself this does not point specifically in the direction of Stoicism. Both Plato and Aristotle would see the problem of akrasia and its resolution as (at least, in part) a cognitive problem. Where they differed from the Stoics was that they wanted to account for the cognitive problem by introducing a part of soul that was distinctly non-cognitive: some form of desire. Is that not also what we find in Paul, for example, when he speaks of “sin that dwells within me” (7:20)? Here one needs to be careful. The description of a violent split in the mind does not automatically point towards Plato or Aristotle. The Stoics, too, might describe the phenomenon of akrasia in that way. What matters here is the theory of psychic entities that underlies such a description. Where Plato and Aristotle would partly invoke desire as an independent part of soul, the Stoics stayed cognitive all through and aimed to provide a cognitive understanding even of desire.
Have we any access to a theory of psychic entities on Paul’s part? I think we have: the fact that the solution to the problem of *akrasia* was understood to be a cognitive one shows that he must have understood the problem itself to be cognitive too. This is a point where the Stoic moral psychology is much closer to Paul than anything we find in Plato and Aristotle. In Stoicism grasping the good takes the form of what may best be called a “conversion”: a sudden insight that changes all one’s previous perceptions and leads to right action. And that is exactly what we find in Paul too, where the “grasp of the good” (i.e. of the Christ event and its meaning) is something suddenly believed (in faith, *pistis*) and understood (through the *pneuma*). If that is the logical form of the solution, then it will throw light back over the problem. The problem of *akrasia* as described by Paul in 7:7–25 may only be overcome in the way he describes it in 8:1–11 if it is itself understood as a problem that is through and through cognitive. For Paul’s solution to work, he must have understood the problem along Stoic lines.

Note one important consequence of this reading. When Paul spells out along Stoic lines the change from being what in effect amounts to a Stoic *prokoptôn* (a person making moral progress: here the Jew who wished to follow the law, but did not always manage to do so) to the Christ believer, he in effect describes the latter as a Stoic sage. Paul saw Christ believers as (Stoic) sages. Here, of course, he differs entirely from the Stoics themselves, for whom the sage was as rare as the Phoenix. Much more important, however, is the range of consequences that follow from this Pauline construal of Christ believers. They all basically turn on the relationship of believers to their bodies and the present world. But that is for another discussion.

The third point to be made is that the account we have given of the cognitive character of Paul’s argument both relies on and supports an understanding of his notion of *pneuma* that sees it in close proximity with the Stoic notion of *pneuma* in two connected respects: that it is an entity that is both material and cognitive. I have developed this understanding of Pauline *pneuma* in a quite different context. But it fits in completely here too – and is in fact explicitly invoked in Romans 8:11 quoted above. It fits in because it explains how the *pneuma* may enter the (fleshly) bodies of human beings and generate a change of them so that they may themselves become spiritual (*pneumatikoi*). At the same time the *pneuma* is also a cognitive entity, which plays an epistemological role in accounting for believers’ coming to possess full knowledge and so becoming wise. In these two respects the Pauline *pneuma* is closely similar to the Stoic one.

*Romans 8:12–13: the Stoic character of Pauline paraenesis (moral exhortation)*

The fourth point to be made brings us to the last two verses of our passage: 8:12–13. Seen in the light of our account of the pneumatic Christ believers as sages who will always and only do what they should, it may come as a surprise that the Pauline letters are permeated with exhortations on Paul’s part that his addressees *should* behave in this or the other way. Why exhort them if they are already wise? This question may seem even more pressing when one notices that in his actual exhortatory practice Paul applies very many of the techniques that the Stoics had themselves developed in their own account of moral exhortation, namely paraenesis. But Stoic paraenesis was explicitly addressed to the non-wise. Am I wrong, then, in claiming that Paul understood his addressees to be wise? On the contrary. When we resolve this apparent discrepancy between Paul and the Stoics, we will find support for the solution in another part of Stoic doctrine. The argument runs as follows.
Stoic exhortation presupposes that its addressees are (only) prokoptontes. That means two things. First, they must have some grasp of the ultimate good. Second, they may need to have spelled out to them what the good concretely consists in. When that happens, their decision to do the good may also be strengthened. And so they will move further in the direction of becoming fully wise. As against this, Paul’s exhortation presupposes – on my proposal – that its addressees are (already) wise and therefore have a full grasp of the ultimate good. They have grasped the Christ event and understood what it means for human behavior, and they are filled with pneuma, which will make them do what they have understood. However, it may also be that there remain certain vestiges – what the Stoics (but not Paul) called “scars” – of their earlier value system. In order for these scars to remain inactive, those having them may therefore need to be reminded of the understanding that they already have. And that is the situation to which Paul’s exhortation is directed. Its addressees are wise; they have grasped and understood the Christ event and all its implications. But they may need to be kept cognitively in shape in the mental fitness center in which Paul is operating.

This feature of Paul’s thought explains the way he concludes his whole account of the relationship between living under the law (alone) and living in Christ. Having stated what has happened to his addressees, he concludes “paraenetically”: “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh –/ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. … [So do that!]” (8:12–13). Thus, directly contrary to the way the issue is usually understood, the fact that Paul engages in paraenesis does not go against the idea that his addressees are already wise. On the contrary, it presupposes it. Pauline paraenesis – and here it does resemble Stoic paraenesis – does not aim at changing its addressees, only at strengthening them in a grasp that they already have.

Paul, the Stoic

In summary, in Romans 7:7–8:13 Paul draws on a number of specifically Stoic ideas. Akrasia is a cognitive disaster, which may be solved through a cognitive change that consists in a full grasp of “the good” (here: the Christ event). This change is operated by a power that is both cognitive and material: the pneuma. The Pauline Christ believers are best understood as sages in the Stoic sense. In spite of this there may be a need for paraenesis. But this too should be understood in a way that differs from, but is also congruent with, the Stoic understanding of that procedure. Thus Paul fundamentally conceived of his Christ-believing addressees along distinctly Stoic lines.

John on how to overcome Jesus’ death: John 13:31–17:26

When we turn from Paul’s letter to the Romans, which is the earlier text (from around 54 CE), to the Gospel of John (around 100 CE), we are moving into a superficially quite different world. Where the texts from Paul are letters that address specific groups of Christ believers with a basically paraenetic aim, and where the warrant for Paul’s exhortation derives from the Christ event and hence from Paul’s conception of the risen Christ rather than the earthly Jesus, the genre of John is that of a narrative gospel that basically tells the story of the life of Jesus until his “return” to God in heaven. With such a difference, if it was relatively easy to see points of contact between Paul and philosophy, one would expect it to be much more difficult to find similar points in the case of John.

However, John is a very peculiar narrative, and when it begins – in its famous prologue (1:1–18) – by stating that “[i]n the beginning was the logos, and the logos was with God, and
the *logos* was God” (1:1), it immediately strikes a tone that is nothing if not philosophical. That tone is kept throughout the gospel. We therefore need an approach that I have called “narrative philosophical exegesis” to capture what John is saying. In what follows I will focus on a single, substantial text in John – Jesus’ so-called “Farewell speeches” in chapters 13–17 (13:31–17:26) – and argue that there is a range of problems in scholarship that may be solved once one brings in ideas from contemporary philosophy, in particular Stoicism. As it happens, these ideas are closely similar to those we have already met in connection with Paul: that Jesus’ addressees (the disciples) are to be understood as being fully wise; that they will therefore act on the moral maxim that Jesus articulates to them as a direct consequence of the Christ event itself; and that they are actually able to do so because upon Jesus’ “departure,” that is, his death and resurrection, they will receive a substitute for his earthly presence which is the *pneuma* in the shape of a specifically Johannine entity, the Paraclete. Thus here too we are in a field where underlying elements of a specifically Stoic cosmology, epistemology and moral psychology play together to articulate and give coherent form to the overall message of Jesus’ speech.

**Three problems in the scholarly understanding of John 13:31–17:26**

Critical scholarship has wrestled with at least three connected problems in trying to reach a satisfactory understanding of this text. There is general agreement about its overall shape. Once John’s account of Jesus’ activity in Galilee and Jerusalem is over (end of chapter 12), he clearly embarks in 13:1 on the “passion story.” However, that story does not begin until 18:1. In between Jesus shares a meal with his disciples on the eve of Easter (13:1–3), which contains, first, the so-called “foot-washing scene” (13:4–17), next, a scene in which Jesus almost forces Judas to undertake his treachery (13:18–30) – and then the scene of our text, in which Jesus speaks of his own departure and how the disciples should and will overcome that. Problems begin in that long stretch of text, 13:31–17:26.

The most fundamental problem is (1) that of unity. Is 13:31–17:26 a single, coherent piece that gives the whole of Jesus’ final speech, as it were the “farewell speech”? Or is it a conglomerate of several farewell speeches? Chapter 14 looks like a single speech of its own in which John is primarily concerned to show (a) that the disciples do not understand Jesus’ talk about his departure (13:36–38, 14:4–7 and 8–11, 14:22), (b) that Jesus promises them a substitute for himself which he calls “another Paraclete” (14:16) and characterizes as “the pneuma of truth” (14:17), and (c) that he also promises his own return, either in the distant future (14:1–3) or as something about to happen very soon when Jesus and God (!) will “come to” Jesus’ followers “and make our home with them” (14:23). Already here one meets the problem of how to understand the precise relationship between the Paraclete and Jesus and also the precise relationship between Jesus’ distant and more immediate return. Is the text then coherent even within chapter 14? The question of unity is further raised by the end of the chapter (14:27–31), which looks distinctly valedictory (see 14:27: “Peace I leave with you …”) and in any case ends with a famous interpretative crux when Jesus says “Rise, let us be on our way” (14:31) – and then continues speaking for three more chapters.

The question of unity becomes even more acute in what follows. Chapter 15 consists of (x) a parable of Jesus as a vine (15:1–8), (y) an elaboration of the *love command* that was very briefly introduced in 13:34–35 (15:9–17), and (z) a section on “the world’s” hatred for Jesus and the disciples (15:18–25). These are basically new topics. By contrast, chapter 16 appears to repeat the content of chapter 14. Once again, (a) there is the question of the disciples’ lack of understanding (16:5–6 and 16:16–33). Once again (b) Jesus speaks of the Paraclete
(16:7–15, cf. 15:26–27). And once again (c) there is the question of understanding the meaning of Jesus’ claim that in “a little while … you will see me” (16:16–19). So, if chapter 15 brings in something new and chapter 16 is basically mere repetition, how do the three chapters 14–16 together constitute a unity? It is easier with chapter 17, which consists of a prayer by Jesus to God on behalf of the disciples. This looks like a conclusion to the whole scene. But here too there are difficulties. For instance, Jesus explicitly states that the disciples do know and understand everything (17:6–8), as they precisely did not in chapters 14 and 16. This confidence about the disciples parallels the picture given of them in chapter 15, where Jesus at one point says this: “I have called you friends, because I have made known [εγνώρισα] to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (15:15). In sum, do chapters 14–17 constitute a unity across these difficulties?

The second and third problems to be noted focus on two of the issues that gave rise to the sense of disunity. (2) Do the disciples actually understand or do they not? If the text is a unity, then why does it describe their understanding in such a complicated manner? And the third problem: (3) How should one understand (m) the relationship between Jesus and the Paraclete and (n) the time frame for Jesus’ return? And why are the two issues described in such a complex way?16

**Unity: the structure of 13:31–17:26 as a piece of Pauline paraklēsis**

Scholars agree that the literary genre of our text is that of the farewell speech, of which there were several examples in antiquity.17 As a general characterization this fits.18 However, there is one feature of the text that has not been given the emphasis it deserves. At the very beginning (13:31–35) Jesus makes two announcements that may in a precise way be taken to structure the text as a whole. He first (13:31–33) states that he is about to depart from his disciples. Next (13:34–35), he gives them a “new commandment”: “that you love one another” (13:34). Together, these two announcements may be seen as constituting a rhetorical *propositio* for the whole ensuing speech, stating its overall theme. Jesus’ departure is treated in chapters 14 and 16, the love command in chapter 15. Chapter 17 has a special function, but we saw that with regard to the disciples’ understanding, it belongs with chapter 15: whereas in chapters 14 and 16 the disciples do not understand talk about Jesus’ departure, in chapters 15 and 17 they are explicitly taken by Jesus to understand.

If 13:31–35 constitutes a *propositio* for the rest of the speech, the question arises whether there is any special connection between the two parts of the *propositio*, Jesus’ departure and the love command. At its deepest level that is a philosophical question. If the sequence of the two themes is not just accidental but intentional, is there anything about Jesus’ departure (which the disciples do not yet fully understand) that explains why they should love one another as Jesus’ friends – and will come to do so once they have obtained the required knowledge? I insist on calling this a philosophical question since it turns on the issue of knowledge and understanding. Jesus apparently aims to tell his disciples something that turns on their understanding of what is going to happen and what this means for them. So, what is the logical connection between the two themes?19

To further clarify this question we may bring in the notion of *paraklēsis*, which is central in Paul. He uses the term and its verbal counterpart, *parakalein*, in two senses. In the more common sense, it means “moral exhortation” and “exhort.” Here it refers to the Pauline practice of paraenesis that we have already considered. In another use, *paraklēsis* means “comfort.”20 But the term remains the same. We may bring out this fact by translating *paraklēsis* and *parakalein* as “encouragement” and “encourage.” In his “exhortation
encouragement” (paraenesis) Paul encourages his addressees to do what they already know should be done. In his “comfort encouragement” he rather comforts them by appealing to what has already happened in the Christ event and spelling out how that should make them rejoice (Greek: *chairein* and *chara*) vis-à-vis the suffering and tribulation (*thlipsis*) that they encounter in their relations with the world. 

In both cases they are being encouraged. But the focus differs. Paul’s comfort focuses on what has happened in the Christ event. His exhortation focuses on how his addressees should behave in the light of that event. But a tight logical connection is implied by Paul’s use of the same term for both.

Drawing on this Pauline distinction, we may understand Jesus’ first announcement, in John 13:31–33, as spelled out in chapter 14 and parts of chapter 16 (in particular 16:16–33) as comfort encouragement. Jesus encourages his disciples against the background of his departure, not least by telling them of his return and the coming of the Paraclete. “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (14:1 and 14:27). “Pain [lupē] has filled your hearts” (16:6, my translation) and “you have pain [lupē] now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice [chairein], and no one will take your joy [chara] from you” (16:22). This is closely similar to the comfort encouragement that Paul gives to his addressees.

By contrast, Jesus’ second announcement in the *propositio* (13:34–35) as spelled out in chapter 15 is clearly exhortation encouragement (paraenesis). The parable of the vine (I am the vine, God is the vine-grower, you are the branches that must bear much fruit) and the exhortation to love one another are permeated with imperatives that have the same logical form as those in Paul’s paraenesis. They presuppose that the addressees are already where they are exhorted to be, and the imperatives are intended to make them stick to that. As Jesus says in John 15:4 and 15:9: “Abide in me,” “abide in my love.”

**The dynamic movement in time in 13:36–17:26**

Suppose that Jesus is engaged in comfort encouragement in chapters 14 and 16, where it is also stated that the disciples do not yet understand, and in exhortation encouragement in chapter 15 (cf. chapter 17), where they are explicitly stated to know. Then he will address the disciples in two distinct ways in the concrete narrative situation just before his death. In chapters 14 and 16 he addresses them in “the fictional present.” They feel pain now (hearing of Jesus’ imminent departure), but should also be comforted by the fact that certain good things will happen to them immediately upon Jesus’ death. In chapters 15 and 17, by contrast, Jesus addresses the disciples (in the fictional present) in the way they are going to be once he has departed and once those good things have happened that will turn their present pain into joy. Then they will no longer need any comfort, but rather exhortation that they remain where they have now come to be.

This reading introduces an element of dynamic movement into the text. In chapter 14 (beginning at 13:36) Jesus gives comfort to his disciples in the fictional present in the way we have seen. By contrast, in chapter 15 (and in fact up until 16:15) he looks into the future and describes them as they will be once they have received the Paraclete (15:1–17). This dynamic movement from (a) 13:13–14:31 (comfort in the fictional present) into (b) 15:1–16:15 (exhortation in the fictional future) is reflected in the way Jesus speaks of “the world.” In section a, “the world” only makes a few brief appearances (14:17, 14:19 and 14:22). At the end of chapter 14, however, it plays a much more important role when Jesus states that “the ruler of this world is coming” (14:30). Jesus first reacts by saying that this ruler (alias Satan) “has no share in me” (14:30, my translation) and then utters the famous words: “Rise, let us be on our way” (14:31). Whither? Certainly not to meet him. On the contrary, when Jesus
goes immediately on to say that “I am [Egô eimi] the true vine, etc.” (15:1), he is developing the image of the group of Jesus himself and his followers that will turn their back on the world and its ruler. Where chapter 14 gradually brings in the world until it ends up speaking of its ruler, Jesus reacts by bringing in himself (corresponding to the world’s ruler) and the disciples as full members of the Jesus group (corresponding to the world at large). To them he may precisely say: Remain in me or my love. And he may call them his friends because he has made everything known to them (15:15). By now, that is, after Jesus’ departure, they constitute a group of their own that is directly attacked by the world. This is then further spelled out in 15:18–16:15. Here they are first explicitly contrasted, and precisely as the group of Jesus’ friends, with the world (15:18–25). Next the point is taken into chapter 16, now focusing on the role that the Paraclete will play in their relations with the world (15:26–27 and 16:7–15). And here their future trouble with the world is spelled out most explicitly (16:1–4) when Jesus says that “they will put you out of the synagogues,” etc. In sum, the dynamic movement from section a to b turns on a change from the fictional present to the fictional future when the disciples will have received the Paraclete and then stand united as the group of Jesus’ friends in direct confrontation with the world.

Why, then, does John’s Jesus go back – in section c, 16:16–33 – to provide comfort encouragement in the fictional present? Apparently, John aims to focus on the crucial issue of the disciples’ understanding. Here they are again very explicitly described in the fictional present as lacking the understanding which we know they will eventually obtain. This is spelled out in 16:16–19. And it lies behind the fact that “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice …” (16:20). It is true that Jesus goes on to declare that “[t]he hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures” (16:25), to which the disciples happily reply: “Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech!” (16:29). But this is immediately rejected by Jesus (16:31–33): they will all soon be scattered and leave him alone. Clearly, in all this John is out to emphasize the role of the disciples’ lack of understanding. Apparently, they could not understand fully until after Jesus had departed. At the same time he also intimates that even though they do not yet fully understand, they are perhaps somewhat further on the road towards understanding than they were in section a. At least, he does say that “you … have believed [pepisteukate] that I came from God” (16:27). But then he also adds (16:28) – and this is actually one version of the required full knowledge of Jesus – that “I came from the Father and have come into the world [this the disciples did understand, cf. 16:30]; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father” (this they have not yet understood). With this degree of knowledge among the disciples, Jesus may then go on in chapter 17 to pray to God on their behalf as if they had the required knowledge (see 17:6–8). In that way Jesus’ prayer provides a sort of bridge from the fictional present into the fictional future when they will fully know.

**Answering the philosophical question**

We asked whether there is something in the motif of Jesus’ departure that explains why the disciples should love one another as Jesus’ friends – and indeed will come to do so once they have obtained the required knowledge. In other words, how may one explain the dynamic movement from section a into b and again from c into d? How will the disciples obtain full knowledge? What is its content? How will it make the disciples friends of Jesus? And how will it make them do what they should do as Jesus’ friends, namely, act on the love command?

In a way we already know the answer: the disciples will receive the Paraclete. When that has happened, they will understand everything: that Jesus has died on their own behalf, as
their friend (see 15:13); that he has been resurrected and gone to his Father; and that the appropriate response on their own part to Jesus’ love for them is that they similarly love one another (15:12) whereby they will fully be Jesus’ friends (15:14). All of this, which constitutes the content of the Christ event, they will fully understand once they have received the Paraclete. And so they will also apply it in practice. However, this answer may be made clearer if we remember that the Paraclete is explicitly identified by John as pneuma – and if we then bring in the Stoic notion of pneuma as we did in the case of Paul. In Stoicism, the pneuma is both a material and a cognitive entity. It may be infused into human bodies and it may in this way generate knowledge in human beings. In John the same thing happened initially to Jesus himself. In the baptism scene of chapter 1, John the Baptist bore witness that God sent his pneuma down upon Jesus (1:29–34). In this way Jesus of Nazareth became the bearer in his own body of the divine pneuma. But this event also had a cognitive side to it. For the material pneuma is also the divine, cognitive logos of which the Prologue speaks, the one that “became flesh” (1:14) precisely when the pneuma descended upon Jesus.24 So, Jesus also came to know. Now this is exactly what will also come to pass for the disciples when they receive the Paraclete, which is “the pneuma of truth” (14:17, 15:26, 16:13). Then they will come to know Jesus’ logos: who he is, that he came from and went back to heaven, and what the purpose was of that. But in addition to this cognitive side of the disciples’ experience there is a material one. The disciples will receive the pneuma within their bodies (thereby being able to remain in the Jesus-vine just as he remains in them, 15:4), which explains why they will by then “bear much fruit” and act on the love command.25

We should conclude that underlying the whole text of John 13:31–17:26 there is a philosophical question of what explains the dynamic movement or change from the situation of the disciples in the fictional present (sections a and c) into their situation in the fictional future (sections b and d) – and even more: that the text also provides a simple and clear answer to that question. What accounts for the change is the fact that upon Jesus’ departure the disciples will receive the Paraclete and that the Paraclete is pneuma with the features that we know from Stoicism.

**Jesus and the Paraclete: the immediate and the distant future**

Then we may also solve the second and third problems we identified, regarding the relationship between Jesus and the Paraclete and between the immediate and the more distant future. Jesus and the Paraclete are one and the same figure in a very precise way. The Jesus who is speaking and acting in John’s Gospel is a (possibly Stoically conceived) amalgam of two entities: Jesus of Nazareth and the pneuma that he received in the baptism scene.26 The Jesus who dies and is raised to heaven is the same composite figure. But that figure may come to be present on earth again, but now within the disciples and in dis-amalgamated form, as pneuma. That pneuma is the Paraclete. Though Jesus departs in one form, he also returns more or less immediately in a slightly different form, namely, as nothing but pneuma, which is nevertheless the form that makes him what he both was and is: Jesus Christ. There is absolutely no reason, therefore, to be surprised that Jesus speaks rather indiscriminately in chapter 14 of the coming of the Paraclete and of his own return: he is referring to the same event.

Then we can also understand the relationship between the immediate and the more distant future in Jesus’ statements about his own return. Jesus will return in the immediate future as pneuma (the Paraclete). But Jesus (possibly the whole package of Jesus’ human body as transformed by the pneuma) will also return in the more distant future when human beings too will be resurrected according to the traditional picture. There is no need to choose here. Both events may equally well take place as soon as one sees how to differentiate between them.
Conclusion on Paul and John as Stoics

The relationship between Stoicism and such central early Christians as Paul and John is complicated by a number of factors. Two stand out. First, for reasons that had to do with the content of their message, both Paul and John stood in strong opposition to "the world" in the sense of everything that did not immediately fall under their conception of what had happened in the Christ event. Second, to the extent that they would at all engage with anything belonging to the world, they had a strong preference for things Jewish for the obvious reason that they saw the whole Christ story in direct continuation of Jewish patterns of thought. Both facts imply that neither Paul nor John would place any value on "philosophy" as a distinctly or originally Greco-Roman practice. They were therefore very reluctant to employ technical terminology that might seem to belong to that kind of social practice.

It is against this background that one must understand what one finds in these two writers: no distinct or explicitly technical use of any form of Greco-Roman philosophy, but still a practice that reveals a much more thorough acquaintance with philosophy than appears on the surface. To see this, one must begin by realizing that the two writers do address issues in a manner that is distinctly philosophical. We saw that with great clarity in Paul. And the same holds for John in our text when he develops the motif of the disciples’ lack of understanding and their eventual acquisition of understanding through reception of the pneuma. That motif is in itself a philosophical one even though it is articulated in an exclusively narrative manner in John’s text. And it immediately leads on to the other philosophical question of exactly what they are expected to understand. Once one has realized this philosophical dimension of both texts, one must go on to consider the extent to which any scholarly problems about the texts (e.g. in the case of John, the question of its unity) may be solved if we postulate an underlying layer of philosophical awareness in them. This procedure will of course be greatly strengthened if one is also able to tie in any philosophical ideas with the presence of certain concepts that are in themselves distinctly philosophical. But that is not a necessary condition. The ultimate criterion for this heuristic type of reading lies in the extent to which the invocation of philosophical concepts and ideas helps to understand better the texts themselves. We have seen in both cases that it does help. And we have seen that it is specifically Stoic concepts and ideas that help.

Stoicism in early Christianity beyond the New Testament

What about Stoicism in Christian texts later than the New Testament? This topic has unfortunately only received very sketchy treatment. The only real exception is Michel Spanneut’s (1969) account of Stoicism in the church fathers of the second century (from Clement of Rome to Clement of Alexandria). This is an excellent sourcebook, but it does not engage sufficiently deeply with the ways Stoicism may have informed parts of the thought of the various second-century Christians. A more recent attempt to open up this whole field is Rasimus et al. (2010), which discusses individual texts belonging either to the New Testament or to second-century (Christian) Gnosticism, in particular. That leaves out the orthodox Christian writers up until and including the great Origen (184/185–254/255). The latter’s knowledge, use and rejection of Stoicism is a major topic of its own that cries out for renewed research.

Investigation of the influence of Stoicism on Christian writers of the second and early third centuries immediately plunges the scholar into the maelstrom of the interaction in second-century philosophy between Stoicism and Platonism, which eventually led to the victory of the latter. This battle had huge repercussions among Christian writers of those two centuries.
once they began to articulate their Christian beliefs more explicitly in philosophical terminology than their New Testament colleagues had done. Here too we may see the Christians as being part of the philosophical discussion rather than standing outside it—and even more banefully, as partners in the Platonic takeover of the philosophical scene from the Stoics. This development, which was to have a huge influence on almost all later Christian thinking as a form of Platonism, was prefigured in the first half of the first century by the Jewish Platonist, Philo of Alexandria, whose relationship with Stoicism is another topic that calls for investigation. It is my own contention that the second-century Platonic takeover of Christianity drastically changed the understanding of the earliest, first-century Christian writings that make up the New Testament. They—or at least those we have been looking at here—were far more Stoic than Platonic.

Notes
1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the New Testament are from the New Revised Standard Version (1995).
2 This is also true in the passage in Acts. After all, Luke makes Paul’s Stoic interlocutors mock him.
4 I should note that I do also find traces of a genetic influence from Stoicism on both John and Paul, but in this chapter I stay with the methodologically more interesting approach.
5 Emphasizing Paul’s Jewishness is one of the central, correct insights in the so-called “New perspective on Paul.” Another recent insight is that this does not in the least go against studying him also in his Hellenistic and Roman contexts (Engberg-Pedersen 2001).
6 This is one attempt on my part to take to the extreme the attempt to overcome the divide between ancient Christianity and all the rest.
7 For a particularly forceful reading of Paul as being Platonic here see Wasserman 2008.
8 See, in particular, Plutarch’s account in De virtute morali 441c–d and 446f–447a (both in SVF 3,459).
9 For more on this, see e.g. Engberg-Pedersen 1990: ch. 8, “Intention and Passion: Desire as Belief.”
10 What I have in mind is Paul’s root asceticism with regard to sexuality (see 1 Cor 6:11–7:40) and his radical disengagement from the present world (Rom 12–13).
11 Namely, in order to give an adequate sense to Paul’s claim in 1 Corinthians 15 (see 15:35–50, in particular) that at the resurrection of believers, their “psychic body” (psychikon soma) will be changed into a “pneumatic body” (a pneumatikon soma, 15:44), see Engberg-Pedersen 2010: ch. 1.
12 I developed this point in Engberg-Pedersen 2004.
13 For the Stoic notion of a “scar,” see Seneca’s reference to Zeno in On Anger 1.16.7 (SVF 1,215).
14 New Revised Standard Version with logos for “Word.”
16 It almost goes without saying that all these questions are standard in scholarship. One cannot say that they have been solved.
17 The classic account of the genre is Munck 1950.
18 There is one caveat, though. Whereas in a traditional farewell speech the speaker may tell of his own life as it were on its own, in John everything Jesus says about himself, primarily his whereabouts, is very specifically intended for his addressees, the disciples. Compare below on the Johannine farewell speech as a piece of paraklesis.
19 One feature of my proposed narrative philosophical approach is that it sees the text to be implicitly raising a philosophical question to begin with, which it then goes on to answer, though still by exclusively narrative means. Compare my analysis of John 9–10 in Engberg-Pedersen 2013.
A striking example is 2 Corinthians 1 and 7 where Paul repeatedly contrasts his own and his addressees’ suffering (thlipsis) with the comfort provided by God (2 Cor 1:3–8 and 7:4–6).

This is unfortunately the way it is almost invariably understood by commentators, who recall a somewhat similar expression in the Gospel of Mark (14:42). Against this, I am suggesting that Jesus is calling upon his disciples to leave the world behind.

Scholars regularly discuss how far the section that begins with 15:1 should be taken to go. One popular suggestion is: until 16:4a. Just for the record, it is worth noting that a nineteenth-century commentator on John, the excellent F. Godet (1869), divided the text in the way I am also doing: 13:31–14:31; 15:1–16:15; 16:16–33, and of course 17:1–26. Godet’s title for 15:1–16:15 is particularly apt: “The Position of the Disciples in the World after the Infusion of the Holy Spirit.” An equally admirable twentieth-century commentator, E. H. Dodd (1953: 410–16), took the whole of chapters 15 and 16 together, but also in fact saw the special place of 16:16–33: “With xvi. 16 we seem to be brought back to the theme of the dialogue in xiii. 31–xiv. 31” (415).

I have argued for this – unorthodox – understanding of the incarnation in Engberg-Pedersen 2012.

We moderns may have problems about taking the in relation so literally. It is a virtue of Stoicism, in particular, to insist that it should be so taken.

The Stoic amalgam would be a case of proper, Stoic krasis; see SVF 2.463–481, De mixtione, with the subtitle sōma dia sōnatos chôrei (“a body penetrates a body”).


One very good example of this whole issue, focusing on Justin Martyr (mid-second century), is a series of articles by Thorsteinsson (2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014).

Again, it was huge as may be seen from the number of citations in SVF.

Further reading


References