Mirror-Reading Moral Issues in Paul's Letters[1]

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Abstract

Biblical interpreters have long recognized the need to engage in mirror-reading when it comes to studying the apostle Paul's letters, as they are 'occasional' writings, where an understanding of the context of the wider conversation gives insight into the proper understanding of the text's meaning. In 1987, John Barclay made a key contribution to the practice of interpreting Paul's letters by offering a criticism of unwieldy attempts at mirror-reading and by presenting a methodological standard for how mirror-reading can and should be carried out. While Barclay's article has brought a helpful critical standard to the practice of mirror-reading Paul's letters in general, his methodology was focused specifically on texts where the interest is in false teaching and polemics (as in his test-case of Galatians). This article attempts to draw from the approach that Barclay set forth with an interest in tailoring it to fit the needs of studying an occasional letter where moral issues are central to the text. After examining Barclay's method, addressing the need for a similar approach to moral concerns in Paul's letters, and developing a new method appropriate to that subject matter, the topic of sexual immorality in 1 Thessalonians and Romans will serve as test-cases of this re-applied approach to mirror-reading.

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Introduction

Mirror-reading New Testament documents is well-recognized as a necessary, but challenging and frustrating, exercise. The term 'mirror-reading' is apt. This can be demonstrated by the example that, in many countries, the word 'ambulance' is laterally inverted on the hood of the emergency vehicle, so as to appear 'correctly' when seen through a rear-view mirror. Otherwise, the driver in front of the ambulance would look back and see the letters, but could not immediately understand the word. Again, mirrors are useful, but *limited*. The better we understand their limitations, the more we can account for and accommodate to using them.

Mirror-reading a letter involves, of course, looking at an 'image' (part of a conversation) and trying to discern the original 'object' (the original discussion or context). From a letter of Paul, for instance, we can learn some details about the situation against which he might be reacting. In Paul's letter to Philemon, it is apparent that his slave has left and Paul is encouraging Philemon to accept Onesimus back. But not all the details are clear, so gap-filling is required to understand why Paul writes the things he does in the letter.

A serious complication involves the fact that much is left assumed in Paul's letters because there is shared knowledge between himself and his original readers. As we modern interpreters listen in on Paul's side of the conversation, we are not fortunate enough to have this repository of information. The issue is further complicated when more voices are involved—such as opponents who have infiltrated Paul's churches—and he is, at the same time, writing to minister to the needs of his converts and also reacting against accusations and assertions made by third parties.

Who are these opponents? What did they say and do? How long have they been around? What sort of influence have they had on the churches of Paul? In some cases, scholarly theories are endless and unwieldy. In 1987, Professor John Barclay called for a more cautious approach to mirror-reading.[2] He highlighted the fact that 'mirror-reading is both essential and extremely problematic' and turned his attention to developing a set of criteria for undertaking this task in a more circumspect and careful manner. The influence this article has had on strengthening the theories regarding opponents in Paul's letters is impressive.[3] However, mirror-reading is not only needed for reconstructing the character and

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2. Full bibliographical information as follows: 'Mirror-Reading a Polemic Letter: Galatians as a Test Case', *JSNT* 31 (1987): 73-93; republished in S.E. Porter and C.A. Evans (eds.), *The Pauline Writings: A Sheffield Reader* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 247-67.

3. It is rare, for instance, for his article not to be cited in a commentary on Galatians that has been published after 1987; see, e.g., Fung 1988: 5; Matera 1992: 6; Dunn 1993: 16; Martyn 1997: 120; Vouga 1998: 14; Lémonon 2008: 35. In terms of monographs and critical essays that seriously interact with Barclay's methodology, consider the following sampling: Vos 1994: 1-16; Miller 2004: 177-236; Schäfer 2004: 38-44; Schewe 2005: 50-53; Wilson 2007: 48-68; Ng 2008: 679-95; Müller 2009: 365-94. Gordon Wenham brings Barclay's work into the discussion of Pentateuchal source criticism; see Wenham 1991: 84-85.

theology of Paul's opponents. There is another dimension to Paul's letters that often requires significant mirror-reading: discerning the nature of moral issues that Paul may be trying to address and/or correct. Of course, just as there are not opponents involved in every letter that Paul has written, so there are letters that might not be addressing moral failures. However, proposals have been made often enough for most of Paul's letters such that the time is ripe to discuss mirror-reading and Paul's moral concerns.[4] A good example of the challenge of mirror-reading moral issues can be found in the discussion of the purpose and context of Paul's letter to the Philippians. In his 1995 monograph, D. Peterlin argues that disunity in the Philippian church is so widespread and problematic that this particular exigency supplies 'the background against which Philippians is to be read'.[5] Peterlin is certainly not the first to propose that Paul's pleas for harmony and solidarity, alongside other textual clues, betray a grave schism within the church at Philippi.[6] What Peterlin attempts to do, though, goes beyond looking behind the more explicit statements regarding unity (as in 1.27; 2.1-2) as he detects 'allusions and references to disunity' in a number of other places (1.1-11, 19-26; 2.19-24; 4.4-9, 21; see Peterlin 1995: 217). Those scholars who have reviewed Peterlin's work have questioned his methods (and conclusions) in terms of both so-called explicit concerns with disunity in Philippians and the 'allusions' to which he also refers. For example, J.S. Vos disagrees with Peterlin's assumption that Paul's appeal to unity presumes a background of division: 'His appeal for unanimity (1:27; 2:1-2) does not necessarily point to a fundamental disunity in the congregation, but can be explained as a preemptive warning to close ranks and join him in his struggle' (2005: 275). Even those, like Markus Bockmuehl, who admit that the solidarity texts in Philippians probably have some exigency in mind, still fail to be convinced that 'disunity is already an acute and critical problem in the church' (1998: 108). Another concern that has been raised with Peterlin's proposal is the matter of the obviously friendly and joyful tone of the epistle, which would be odd if factionalism and strife had taken root in the Philippian church (Hooker 2002: 381).

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4. It is profitable to reflect on whether or not there is a need to determine the historical background of a letter to understand its moral instruction. While it is true that Paul's paraenesis is discernible and understandable most of the time without the need for social and historical reconstructions, this kind of investigation aids in understanding where his theological and moral emphases lie and also what sorts of ethical problems commonly or uncommonly plagued his converts. Thus, there are both theological and historical gains that come from such discussion. Francis Watson offers the mature warning that a pursuit of Paul's 'theology' in a letter must not be undertaken with an ignorance of the 'social correlates' involved (2007: 10-12).

5. Peterlin 1995: 9. Peterlin further clarifies the multi-dimensional facets of this disunity which is threefold: 'disunity among members; strife between (some) members and Epaphroditus, tension between (some) members and Paul' (9).

6. See Garland 1985: 162, 172; Black 1995: 16; Peterman 1997: 111-13; Dahl 1995: 3-15; Osiek 2000: 48.

At bottom, what these scholars have taken issue with in Peterlin's approach is his tendency to over-interpret in his act of 'mirror-reading'.[7] The relevance this discussion has for my own interest in re-working and utilizing previous research on mirror-reading is most evident in a passing comment made by Troels Engberg-Pedersen regarding Peterlin's argumentation: 'One wonders what the result would have been had Peterlin attempted to apply to his own reading the caution advocated, e.g., in J.M.G. Barclay 1987 on how to mirror-read a Pauline letter' (Engberg-Pedersen 2000: 313). It is telling that Engberg-Pedersen presumes that Barclay's principles are applicable to Peterlin's project. I will argue, in this article, that essentially Barclay's cautions, highlighting of pitfalls, and principles for interpretation are relevant for a discussion of mirror-reading *moral discourses and problems*, but only when some modifications are made.

The remainder of my study will progress in four parts. First I will review Barclay's methodology. Next I will develop a similar model of analysis with respect to moral issues. Then I will apply this approach to the debated issue of whether sexual immorality was a major concern behind the writing of 1 Thessalonians. And, finally, I will raise a question of whether a concern for sexual immorality could have been behind, at least in part, Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome.

J.M.G. Barclay's Approach to Mirror-Reading Polemical Letters

From the outset of Barclay's article, he recognizes the need to do some mirror-reading when opponents are apparently an issue.

> If we are to understand such polemics, we must make every effort to clarify the origin and nature of the relevant dispute; and an indispensable ingredient of that effort will be the attempt to reconstruct the attitudes and arguments of the other side of the debate (1987: 247).

The challenge, though, comes when we must access the opponents through documents that stand against them. This kind of situation, Barclay admits, makes this hermeneutical exercise quite challenging. In particular, Barclay highlights two **complications** (or **problems**) involved in mirror-reading. The first one, which we have already discussed above with respect to critiques of Peterlin's work, is the complication of over-interpretation.

> [I]t is easy to jump to conclusions about what the conversation is about and, once we have an idea fixed in our minds, we misinterpret all the rest of the conversation (1987: 248).

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7. In fact, both Bockmuehl (1998: 108) and Hooker (2002: 381 n. 18) use the term 'mirror-reading' in the expression of their concerns with Peterlin's work.

Barclay observes that, because Paul is not responding directly to the opponents, but to the Galatian Christians, it is very difficult to know what statements are counter-accusations and which ones are 'just for his converts', so to speak. A second complication involves the recognition that what we may have, e.g., in Paul's letter to the Galatians, is a *rhetorical* reflection on the opponents. It is common, in such portrayals, to vilify the detractors and to apply sinister motives to their behavior (see Gal. 2.4; 2 Cor. 11.13) (1987: 249-50). Finally, under 'problems', Barclay notes that we only really have one voice (Paul) among three parties (which would also include the Galatian Christians and the opponents). It is terribly difficult to untangle his web of communications, straining to discern which statements are in response to which groups.

From complications, Barclay turns to **pitfalls**.[8] The pitfall which is most useful for our discussion is the issue of *undue selectivity*, where some interpreters latch onto a limited portion of the letter and do not treat it in its entirety or in view of the whole (1987: 254).

Barclay then develops seven criteria useful in mirror-reading a polemical letter.

1. *Type of Utterance.* He begins by highlighting the *type of utterance* in the text (260-61). Assertions, denials, commands and prohibitions should not all be treated in the same way. For instance, with an assertion, some scholars immediately jump to the conclusion that he is reacting against a denial. But, Barclay reasons, it may simply be that 'those to whom he writes may be in danger of overlooking what he asserts' (260). And, of course, these are two extremes in the middle of which are a number of possibilities.

2. *Tone.* Barclay gives notice to the *tone* of a given statement or command. The more serious and emphatic the tone, the more likely it is to be a central issue. If the tone is light, the matter is probably not a strong enough hook on which to hang a polemical argument (261).

3. *Frequency*. Barclay advises that, 'If Paul repeatedly returns to the same theme it is clearly important for him' (261). Conversely, too much cannot be made of a singular, brief statement made by Paul.

4. *Clarity.* With this 'criterion', Barclay simply wishes to ensure that the word or phrase in the letter has a perspicuous meaning before the mirror is held up to it (261).

5. *Unfamiliarity*. Barclay accepts that, even though we have a limited amount of literature from Paul to work with, the presence of an uncommon 'motif' or theme may provide grounds for viewing the issue as one raised by a debate with opponents.

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8. It is a bit difficult to discern how Barclay differentiates 'problems' (or complications) from 'pitfalls'. The former seems to involve warnings that are general and deal with orienting oneself to the task of mirror-reading. The latter are more specific and are relevant once the interpretation efforts have begun.

6. *Consistency*. With this criterion it is reasonable to ask: does the collected evidence 'amount to a consistent picture of Paul's opponents', presuming there was one group (262)?
7. *Historical Plausibility*. Did the theological or philosophical perspective of the reconstructed rivals even exist at that time? This is relevant especially to theories involving 'Gnostic' opponents.

Through the use of these cautionary factors, it should become clear that 'there are only a limited number of facts which we could determine with anything like certainty' (262). Even if it is agreed that Paul was in fact responding to and writing about opponents, what one can be 'certain' of is much less than what is merely 'conceivable'. What Barclay proposes, then, is the development of a 'sliding scale of hypotheses' that follow this range: 'Certain', 'Highly Probable', 'Probable', 'Possible', 'Conceivable' and 'Incredible' (262).[9] In his brief discussion of Galatians, a reconstruction could establish that 'Paul's opponents were Christians' ('Certain'), but it would be only 'Conceivable' that they made reference to the law of Christ or used the word στοιχεῖα (255-56).

What Barclay has effectively done is to rein in the very common (and often necessary) practice of mirror-reading, but with specific interest in how a *polemical* letter is read. The issue with which I will take interest has to do with *moral* problems that might be revealed in a text. Thus, while Barclay's cautions, pitfalls and criteria will be useful, to apply them to this other matter will require some adjustments, though the general interest in 'care and accuracy' (248) will remain central.

Towards an Approach to Mirror-Reading Moral Issues in Paul's Letters

That Paul took moral issues seriously and felt the need to address them directly is evident in 1 Corinthians, where he deals simultaneously with factionalism, sexual immorality and idolatry. In fact, apparently, these were all common issues in the early churches (see Heb. 13.4; 1 Jn 5.21; Rev. 2.14-20; *Did.* 3.4; 5.1; 6.3; *1 Clem.* 46.5; Ignatius, *Trall.* 6.1).[10] But, given the ubiquity of such vices, how can we know when Paul (or another ancient author) was particularly combating an *already existing problem* and when he was simply *warning* them of such

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9. Barclay acknowledges that these labels were inspired by E.P. Sanders 1985: 326-27.
10. On the first two items, see the discussion in Perkins 1992: 662; Horrell 2005: 140-51; Rosner 2007:111-14; Marcus 2008: 112-14; so Bockmuehl: 'For Paul as for early Christian literature generally…idolatry (perhaps including arrogance, greed and blasphemy) and sexual immorality are probably the most fundamental of all moral concerns' (2000: 170). Lest one conclude that prohibiting these vices for Paul was *merely* convention, it should be remembered that it was a *real* threat in Corinth, attesting to the fact that this moral-polemic 'convention' was very relevant as a warning to the early Christian communities.

problems? Put another way, when we have moral discourses, how do we know if they are meant to be *reparative* or *preventative*? With these questions in mind, we can turn to our own unique set of **complications** that arise when trying to mirror-read moral discourses. The problem of *over-interpretation*, which Barclay raises in regard to mirror-reading polemics, is certainly also an issue in our discussion (as evidenced in the critiques of Peterlin's work above). The *rhetorical* nature of Paul's letters makes it difficult for interpreters accessing only one side of the discussion to know, for example, whether or not Paul is using hyperbole when characterizing his readers' failure in a moral area.

Two additional complications arise in our situation that do not relate specifically to polemics. First, we have the problem of paraenesis in Paul and whether it actually addressed relevant issues within the churches, or, as M. Dibelius has argued, it merely was composed of stock moral exhortation borrowed from society (see Dibelius 1919; 1936: 217-37). Dibelius argued that the paraenetic sections of Paul's letters appeared to be written in a different style and rhetorically detached from the rest of the letter. Many scholars today have questioned Dibelius's assumptions and arguments, but methodologically his work has caused scholars to think through the relevance of such hortatory sections for the interpretation of the whole letter. In order to take the ethical imperatives seriously in Paul's letters, an effort should be made to demonstrate that such advice is more than conventional.[11]

The second problem is closely related: virtue and vice lists.[12] James L. Bailey and L.D. Vander Broek put the matter succinctly: 'Is the N.T. writer simply borrowing common Hellenistic virtues or vices, items having no relationship to the specific situation being addressed, or is he listing virtues or vices that are immediately relevant to the community in mind?' (1992: 67). These positions are both taken up by scholars. E.P. Sanders, for example, regards the Pauline vice lists as 'traditional Jewish homiletical material' which is carried over into his letters without much additional reflection (1997: 115-16). Alternatively, B.J. Oropeza

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11. Barclay himself has challenged Dibelius's reading of Galatians in his *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (1988). However, that does not mean that Barclay mirror-reads the paraenesis in such a way as to suspect that the Galatian believers were struggling with moral problems. It was his concern to demonstrate that the paraenetic material in Gal. 5.13–6.10 served to expand and conclude his earlier discourses. Relating to the problem of general teaching versus corrective teaching, Todd Still raises this issue with respect to 1 Thessalonians and Paul's admonition about work in 4.9-12. Was Paul offering general teaching which he gave to all his churches (R. Hock) or did he intend to redress an issue that was presently a troublesome matter in Thessalonica? Still notes, following C.S. de Vos and John Barclay, that the nature of the discussion, as well as the detail involved and the elaboration on the subject, opens up the serious possibility that Paul was engaging in a 'live' issue in Thessalonica (Still 2007: 209-11).

12. See, generally, Fitzgerald 1992: VI, 857-59; also Vögtle 1936. For a comprehensive listing of the virtue and vice lists in the NT, see Mussies 1972: 67, 172.

urges that closer inspection will reveal that the vice lists are intentionally constructed with the *situation* in mind (1998: 9-10). When the task of mirror-reading is undertaken, then, such matters must be kept in mind. It is probably advisable that, in each case, the paraenesis and the virtue/vice lists must be inspected closely, and the potential evidence discovered within them needs to be analyzed in such a way as to take into consideration that either or both might be included (in that specific case) by convention. One must rely on the picture drawn by a full accounting of the principles listed below as well.

Following Barclay's progression of the discussion, we may move on to **pitfalls**. Only one of Barclay's items is directly useful for mirror-reading moral discourses: the problem of undue selectivity. This, perhaps, can be demonstrated again in the matter of an argument for widespread disunity (Peterlin) in Philippians. As Hooker has pointed out, focusing on the parts of the letter that may allude to dissension and internal strife does not do justice to the obviously positive and joyful attitude of Paul in the letter as a whole.

Now, turning to Barclay's 'criteria', the heart of his methodological discussion, much here is relevant. Of his eight criteria, five will be carried over with little modification. Three more will be added.[13] Instead of calling them 'criteria', though, I will use the term 'principles', choosing to classify each one by a title and then a proposition.[14]

1. *Type of Utterance*: All things being equal, mirror-reading imperatives (commands and prohibitions) will provide more appropriate grounds for arguing that the letter-writer is reacting against moral problems among the readers, though with each kind of utterance (assertion, denial, command, prohibition) there is a range of possible exigencies to which it may address.
2. *Tone*: If the tone of particular statements and commands involving moral issues are more urgent and emphatic, the more likely it is that the author is concerned with the readers' current state of behavior.
3. *Frequency*: The more frequent a reference to a particular moral problem (especially in commands and prohibitions), the more likely it is that the author is reacting against failure in such an area.[15]

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13. We will not take into consideration 'consistency' because we are not trying to discover a unified opposition. By the nature of moral problems in general, it is plausible that a given church struggled with several vices at once (which is apparent in the Corinthian church). 'Clarity' and 'Historical Plausibility' will also not be included, not because they are irrelevant, but simply because, in the scholarly discussion of moral problems lying behind the purposes and content of Paul's letters, they are not as much of an issue. In general we would support the notion that arguments for constructing a moral problem behind a discourse should be based on clear and historically accurate information.
14. The principles which are entirely new for this subject (not taken over from Barclay) will be labeled with an asterisk (*).
15. Thus, one should *not* base a theory of moral failure on one or two assertions in a letter without reasonable cause.

4. *Rarity*[16]: If the moral subject that is addressed in the letter is relatively uncommon, it is reasonable to suggest that it has been brought up in direct relevance to the situation of the reader.[17]

5. *Coherence*: Any theory regarding moral problems behind an ethical discourse must take into account the character of the whole letter. This relates to principle 2 and tone. While the tone of a particular statement or command may seem urgent, one must also account for the tone of the entire letter. If it is one of celebration and affirmation, making an argument for treating the epistle as emphatically reparative would be dubious.[18]

6. *Variety**: One can more securely establish that the author is responding to moral failure (and not simply offering stock advice) if a variety of terms and forms of speech are used to describe the moral problem that is raised.

7. *Elaboration**: If the discussion of a moral issue is extensive, it is likely that such an issue is being highlighted as a response to failure among the readers.

8. *Centrality**: If particular moral issues are addressed at key points in the letter, it is more likely that a moral failure has encouraged the author to write the discourse and place this issue at the center of his discussion.

Attentiveness to these principles, I am arguing, will lead to a more methodologically reflective discussion of how moral issues are read behind ancient letters. Before turning to two test-cases to which we can apply these principles, it is useful to reflect on Peterlin's argument regarding disunity in Philippians now that the methodological discussion is complete.

In terms of my principles, Peterlin's thesis probably has four that are in its favor. If his reading is correct, it is certainly supported by the *variety* of the language of unity and solidarity (which also involves its *frequency*). Peterlin could also make a good argument that unity language falls in significant places in the letter (*centrality*), especially at the beginning. In terms of *tone*, the very serious attitude that Paul takes with regard to the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche (4.2) does raise questions about why the apostle was insistent on calling out these two women with such urgency.

On the other hand, Peterlin's argument is particularly weak when four of the other principles are assessed. There is very little detail (i.e., *elaboration*) about any of the hypothetical disputes. Secondly, as already observed, the friendly and

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16. The term that Barclay uses is 'Unfamiliarity', but, in the case of moral issues, this criterion is best understood in terms of common-ness.

17. A good example of this issue would be the accusation in Rom. 2.22: 'You that abhor idols, do you rob temples?' (NRSV). The specificity of the claim is unusual and certainly not a common 'vice' among either Jews or Christians. It should be noted, though, that Paul is not necessarily directing this statement to his Roman church readers.

18. This also relates to how scholars determine whether a New Testament letter is *deliberative, epideictic* or *judicial*.

joyful mood of the letter appears to contradict an argument that widespread division plagues the Philippian church (*coherence*). In addition, appeals to solidarity (e.g., Phil. 1.27; 2.1-2) are hardly clear evidence of a direct concern over disunity. In general, a weak sense of group identity was common enough (*rarity*) among people under any kind of pressure that there is no obvious reason to presume that Paul knew and was consciously responding to a problem that was reported to him. This leads to, perhaps, the strongest critique of Peterlin's proposal. Peterlin takes certain assertions and commands of Paul and *presumes* that his main purpose is to reverse or counteract some moral failure (*type of utterance*). This, indeed, is possible. However, there is a difference between acting in a unified way as an act of solidarity in the wake of inner-conflict and a call to unity in light of *external* pressures. The attempt to read behind assertions involving 'all', for example (see Peterlin 1995: 1-30, 52), to find a 'hint' of a background of disunity is question-begging, as Peterlin appears to rely on a kind of rhetorical pattern that he finds particularly in the Corinthian letters. However, the context of those letters is more transparent (from internal clues) and, thus, Peterlin appears to be, to continue our dominant metaphor, angling his methodological mirror in ways that do not seem to be helpful. As T. Geoffrion has suggested, the commands and assertions involving solidarity may have been less about healing internal wounds than a rhetorical strategy meant to reinforce their social identity as a group vis-à-vis outsiders (1993).

The remainder of the discussion on methodology will take place in the form of two more case studies, both on the subject of sexual immorality. These samples are not meant to be instances where we will get to the bottom of the matters at hand exegetically, but rather opportunities for a dissection of the process of interpretation (looking at the kinds of arguments scholars have used) and also how the new methodology discussed above can be applied to particular problems in Paul's letters.

Sexual Immorality and 1 Thessalonians

It is helpful to apply the principles outlined above on a current scholarly debate over the question of whether or not Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in part as a response to the church's failure in the area of sexual immorality. The center of the discussion for those who argue that Paul's moral discourses are *reparative* is 1 Thess. 4.3-5:

> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication (πορνεία); that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.

Primarily on the basis of this section, scholars like Jeffrey Weima argue that Paul has written the letter to respond to this 'real situation' of πορνεία that he learned about from Timothy (3.6) (Weima 1996: 98-119). This reconstruction has been

similarly expressed by some commentators.[19] Of the principles outlined above, those in favor of viewing Paul's language as reparative rely, essentially, on *tone* and *centrality*. The fact that God's will is *solely* described in terms of purity and abstinence from sexual immorality strikes a very strong note. The placement of this discussion is clearly significant as it appears in a 'strategic location at the beginning of the parenetic section' (Weima 1996: 103). One could also argue that this scenario satisfies the principle of *elaboration*—as Paul further specifies how purity should happen with regard to the body[20] (or 'vessel'; 4.4) and in contrast to the wanton lusts characterized by pagans. Evaluating the type of utterance in 4.3 is difficult, because it is strictly an assertion, but it almost carries the force of an imperative (i.e., 'God wills your abstinence from sexual immorality *and thus flee from it*').

Many scholars, however, have disagreed with Weima's reading of the ostensible problems that gave rise to 1 Thessalonians. In the first place, one might expect that a prohibition of sexual immorality would come up again in the final exhortations found in 5.12-22, but it does not. In fact, such a topic is not found elsewhere in the letter. Thus, this reading would not have the advantage of *frequency* or *variety*.[21] Perhaps the biggest strike against the reparative view involves the principle of *coherence*. R. Hock surmises that, though a reparative view is *possible*, '[e]vidence suggesting the overall confidence and joy that Paul had toward the Thessalonians, plus his explicit statements about the Thessalonians doing well and needing only to do better, tip the scale in favor of Paul's responding to a generally positive situation that called for an epideictic rhetoric'.[22] It is

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19. See C. Wanamaker: 'In all probability Timothy had brought word to Paul that a problem existed in Thessalonica regarding the stringent sexual code that the missionaries had taught their converts as part of the necessary life-style for those who would please God' (1990: 150); see also Frame 1912: 14-15; Donfried and Marshall: 'Paul is…dealing with a situation of grave immorality' (1993: 59). Scholars of an earlier generation supposed that Paul's language in 4.3-5 represented a response to active opponents in Thessalonica who advocated the complete abandonment of the Pauline sexual ethic as part of a radical reaction to their perception of the eschatological new age in Christ; see Lütgert 1909: 547-654; Hadorn 1919; Jewett 1986: 105-106, 172-73.

20. This translation is, of course, highly controversial. Generally, those who have accepted and/ or defended the 'body' interpretation include Tertullian; Chrysostom; Rigaux 1956; McGehee 1989: 82-89; Gupta 2009: 138-55.

21. John R. Levison would interpret this otherwise: 'The struggle for sexual control appears to be alive and well in the Thessalonian community—hence the urgency and repetition of Paul's appeal' (2009: 265). He sees continuity with this concern over sexual immorality in the exhortations in 5.6. Unfortunately, for our purposes, these latter hortatory statements lack the specificity desired to further classify Paul's concern as directed towards the sexual problems in the church. Levison does rightly observe, though, the *urgency* of Paul's tone in ch. 4.

22. Hock 1999: 159-70, at 161; similarly, Nicholl: 'it is hard to imagine that [Paul] would have so categorically assured the community that they are currently pleasing God in their "walk" (4:1) and that he would then have cast Timothy's report in so positive a light (3:6)' (2004: 102). Another kind of socio-rhetorical approach is adopted by John M.G. Barclay who does not see evidence of the Thessalonians deviating from Paul's 'gospel'. The concerns in the early parts of ch. 4, according to Barclay, could be explained by Paul's desire to set clear insider-outsider boundaries by describing the nature of believers (as holy and God-pleasing) over and against

also argued by scholars, with respect to my principle of *rarity*, that too much cannot be made of this concern with πορνεία (being specific to the Thessalonians) as this was so naturally an issue of concern for Paul with respect to his converts in general. So, Gaventa points out that Paul's discourse in 4.1-12 lacks the kind of specificity that he was happy to provide elsewhere (as in 1 Cor. 5.1-8). Instead, Gaventa argues, Paul's concern in 4.3-5 is of a general preventative nature, as he believed that Christians 'live in a world hostile to Christian convictions, a world that will make Christian life a precarious undertaking' (1998: 49).

In terms of defining the range of possibilities regarding what the nature of Paul's moral discourse is, we may outline the following:

Certain
   Paul is very concerned that the Thessalonians maintain a state of moral purity which is particularly characterized by control of their sexual desires.
Highly Probable
   Some of the Thessalonians struggled with detaching themselves from the general social habits of their surroundings and former lives.[23]
Possible
   1.   Paul was made aware[24] of at least one serious sexually deviant matter in the believing community and wished to address this while offering general counsel to the whole group.[25]
   2.   Some Thessalonian Christians did not hold to a stricter sexual ethic due to a misunderstanding of the eschatological implications of the gospel.
Incredible or Tenuous
   Some Thessalonians have supported a full-scale opposition against Paul and his ministry demonstrated in their very dubious ethical practices including sexual immorality.

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those outside Thessalonians, the ones persecuting his converts, who do not know God and live lives of unrestraint. See Barclay 1993: 512-30, esp. 517.

23.   In a contextually informed way, Karl Donfried explores the sexual dimensions of participation in the cults in Thessalonica. This certainly could have fueled Paul's direct exhortations regarding purity. See Donfried 1985: 336-56, especially 337; cf. Ulonska 1987: 210-18.

24.   'Paul was made aware'—one of the challenges that we face when mirror-reading a moral problem is knowing whether Paul was addressing a problem that he actually *knew* about or simply ones that he *presumes* that non-Jews would struggle with as inevitable ills of society. In addition, we have the possibility that Paul knew of and had to deal with a moral problem in one church and, because it was on his mind, felt the desire to warn a different church about the same problem (even without explicit knowledge of real instances of failure in that community). There are sometimes hypotheses along these lines when it comes to mirror-reading opponents in Philippians—some have suggested that Paul was rotting in prison, frustrated with past and local opposition, and desired to rant to the Philippians about such kinds of people. For an example of this kind of argument, see Hooker 2002: 377-96.

25.   This appears to be the route that Gordon Fee takes in view of 4.6: 'at least one case of sexual sin has been an adulterous situation with another man's wife or perhaps with a household slave' (2009: 150-51); also Morris 1984: 84-85. Because this interpretation involves a particular reading of 1 Thess. 4.6a, see the fascinating argument based on patristic sources in Ogara 1938: 65-72.

Again, taking a cue from Barclay, the point of developing principles for interpreting moral discourses is to refine the discussion and practice of mirror-reading and avoid turning to extremes and over-interpreting the evidence. When all of the evidence is taken into account, especially having given attention to the methodological principles I have devised, it is unlikely that Paul's discussion of sexual immorality is meant to be reparative, at least not with respect to a problem that was plaguing the entire community. Nevertheless, the important thing is that recognition can and should be given to levels of plausibility, allowing for wide agreement on the 'givens' and the proposal of possible additional items that *may be* (or *probably are*) the case as well.

Sexual Immorality and Romans

From the above discussion, one might reflect on the mirror-reading principles and treat them primarily as limiters of interpretation—sorts of hermeneutical watchdogs. Barclay is aware of this potential attitude of viewing these as 'excessively negative' and affirms that proposing theories and hypotheses is not inappropriate 'so long as one recognizes their proper status' (1987: 262). Some theories, though they cannot be empirically proven, can make sense of a text as a whole and produce fresh insight. With this in mind, I would like to address another test-case: the issue of sexual immorality in Paul's letter to the Romans. In the long and convoluted discussion of the purpose(s) of Romans, it is rarely argued that Paul acknowledges that the Roman Christians have fallen into sin and are in need of moral correction.[26] However, it is striking that the matter of passions and sexual immorality appears in a number of places (see below under *Frequency*). Could this lead to the conclusion that the Roman Christians did not have an appropriate perspective on sexuality and, thus, Paul was in need of urging them to be pure?[27] An appeal to the methodological principles will aid in evaluating and weighing the evidence.

Frequency and Centrality. Discussion of sexual immorality occurs primarily in four places: 1.18-32; 2.17-24; 7.1-25; 13.11-14.[28] The first and third group (1.18-32; 7.1-25) are, obviously, very important parts of Paul's argument altogether that humanity (whether Jew or Gentile) is in need of the saving righteousness of God, whose decisive act in Christ has changed the past and the future.

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26. In general, on the purpose of Romans, see Donfried 1991; Wedderburn 1991.

27. The only scholar of whom I am aware that proposes this is Mark Reasoner: 'There is some evidence for sexual immorality within the Roman community' (1999: 67). My point in putting forward this test-case is not to argue for a particular viewpoint, but to use this discussion as a context within which we can explore and 'test' the principles discussed above.

28. All of these passages are listed as potential evidence for mirror-reading sexual immorality in Rome by Reasoner, see 1999: 67-68.

Types of Utterances. Only in 13.11-14 do we have prohibitions. The significance and value of these we will return to under *Tone* below. In 1.18-32, the material related to sexual immorality most likely relates to the history of Gentile sin (and that of humanity in general), but certainly acts to indict the readers (or at least the 'judging ones'; see 2.1-3).[29] The much debated 'I' of 7.1-25 is probably not a Christian, and yet it appears that this discourse was meant to show that the law (Torah) would not be the ultimately secure means of warding off lust even for believers who try to live under the law (Watson 2007: 287; cf. Stowers 1994: 66-82). Though it is within an autobiographic-like framework, the personal characterization would be intended to be a warning to Roman Christians who may be in danger of misplacing their trust in the law.[30]

Rarity. Though sexual immorality, as a broad category, is mentioned quite often in moral discourses, there is evidence that Paul was intending to narrow in on a more specific issue. Mark Reasoner points out that in Rom. 2.22 (and again in 13.9) the seventh commandment (regarding adultery) is repeated, an unusual occurrence for Paul (1999: 67):[31]

> you, then, that teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? (Rom. 2.21-22 NRSV).

What is more, the vices listed in 2.21-22 seem curiously specific. Douglas Moo expresses well the difficulty the interpreter has in approaching this text: 'Why has Paul chosen examples of such serious and relatively infrequent activities to accuse Jews generally of failing to live out the law they reverence? How could his accusations be convincing to those Jews, surely in the majority, who had

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29. For a nice summary of the purpose of this text, see Adams 1997: 48-49. It is difficult to gauge, in the remarkable interpretive position of S.K. Stowers, how he views the practicality of his perspective that Paul is addressing the matter of self-mastery which would have been a concern of his Gentile audience. Can we assume they had current and widespread problems with it? Could Paul have been informed of actual instances that were harming the community? Do we need to prove that he knew in order to hypothesize that he wrote Romans in relation to problems with self-mastery? See Stowers 1994; cf. Wasserman 2008.

30. See the discussion in Burnett 2001: 202-203.

31. Paul is not addressing the Roman believers directly in this moral discourse, but rather the 'interlocutor'. However, there are many occasions in Paul's letters where he refers to someone or something and hopes his overhearing church will learn from the mistakes or situations of the other group. For example, in Philippians, when Paul groans over 'some of the brothers' who preach Christ out of rivalry and self-ambition, he, no doubt, wishes the Philippian believers to set aside those vices as well (Phil. 1.15; 2.3-4; 4.2). For a further defense that Paul's conversation with the interlocutor carries direct meaning for 'the Roman situation', see Watson 2007: 203-204.

never stolen, committed idolatry, or robbed a temple?'[32] It is the same kind of attempt to take seriously Paul's words here and mirror-read the original context that led Francis Watson to propose that Paul was exposing the ills of the 'Jewish teachers who had brought the whole community into disrepute by their immoral conduct' (2007: 204). Thus, while there is no scholarly consensus on the kind of sexual immorality in the Roman church, how serious it was, and how wide-spread, there is enough evidence to give several scholars pause.

Tone, Elaboration. Romans 13.11-14 is deserving of further attention in our discussion, because of the very unusual and specific language it contains, and because of its neglect from commentators. Here Paul writes:

> Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (NRSV).

Romans scholars generally struggle to discern why Paul has placed this paraenetic section here. Some simply conclude that it bears no relationship at all to what is before and after.[33] However, B.W. Longenecker makes a cogent argument that Rom. 13.13-14 comprise a 'chain-link construction' where 13.13 (on quarrelling and strife) look forward to community relationships in chs. 14–15 and 13.14 closes the discussion of the short hortatory section beginning with 13.11 (see Longenecker 2005: 100-101). But if the vices of 'quarrelling and jealousy' are 'live issues' in Rome, why not the other issues mentioned? Here is where *variety* and *elaboration* comes into the picture. Sexual sins are listed in this short

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32. Moo 1996: 164. Douglas A. Campbell (2009) offers a different view, which involves a more specific group that Paul is calling out in 2.17ff. It is 'not a generic Jew representative of Judaism in general but a representative of an elite group of literate Jewish males who are learned in the law and various Jewish traditions' (560). The charges Paul issues of theft, adultery and temple robbery are meant to 'evoke' the incident (according to Josephus) that caused the expulsion of the Jews from Rome. Certain Jewish pseudo-sages cheated a Roman noblewoman out of her money—accusations of sexual involvement may have been added by rumor and imagination. Even if Campbell's theory is true, the Gentile readers of Romans would have only been susceptible to these teachers and their promises of freedom from sinfulness if they had already seriously struggled with it (2009: 559-71).

33. See O'Neill 1975: 218; Moiser 1990: 571-82, esp. 578; these references are noted in Longenecker 2005: 100. One may argue that Paul's use of the (hortatory) subjunctive verbal form hints at the subject matter being more general and 'stock', rather than direct and specific. Indeed, it may be analyzed as such when one looks at 2 Cor. 7.1 or Phil. 4.1 (though even these cases could be debatable). However, in Rom. 14.13, the hortatory (first person plural) admonition to 'not judge anyone' begins with μηκέτι—'no longer'—hardly necessary for 'general' exhortation.

passage: sexual promiscuity (κοίτη) and debauchery (ἀσέλγεια). The summative term that Paul uses for all of these areas (drunkenness, malice, sexual immorality) in 13.14 is ἐπιθυμία, 'lust'. Though this term can have a general meaning of 'desire', it is used in 1.24 primarily with reference to sexual deviance.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the language here is *tone*: beyond merely a sort of vice list or generalized paraenesis, there is serious urgency in Paul's words. He claims that it is *already* (ἤδη) the moment to wake from sleep. His words would seem to be unnecessarily charged if his readers were not 'sleeping' or guilty of demonstrating such vices. Paul's specificity (*elaboration, variety*) in these exhortations has led R. Jewett to place it within the context of the Christian 'love feasts' which would have been based on the model of the symposia. Paul, then, would have been warning his readers about the 'danger of excesses associated with nocturnal feastings in the Greco-Roman world' (2007: 825). Whether or not Jewett is correct, what is important to note *methodologically* is his inclination to find a *Sitz im Leben* for this passage in light of the detail and tone.

Conclusion. When all the evidence is gathered, it is striking how the theme of sexual immorality runs like a thread across Romans, from ch. 1 to ch. 13, with stops along the way in chs. 2 and 7. How is one to mirror-read this material? Again, while the principles can aid in identifying and analyzing the evidence, it is an appropriate fundamental point of Barclay's article to insist that what one is left with is an opportunity to hypothesize, using 'mays' and 'mights'. Thus, in keeping with this cautionary tone, we can assess the evidence as such.

Certain. Paul saw the temptation to commit sexual immorality as a real problem (if only a future one) for the Roman believers. James Dunn is, probably, a good representative of this measured and careful viewpoint (with a specific interest in Rom. 13.11-14):

> [S]ince some members of the church in Corinth had to be rebuked for similar licentiousness (1 Cor 5–6)…the possibility cannot be excluded that Paul saw these as real temptations and threats to his Roman readers. Either way, the sequence of Paul's imagery and the intensity of his concern underline the extent to which Paul saw the circumstances and character of the old age of Adam (5:12–21) as still a powerful factor influencing the conduct of these first generation Christians. In their still belonging to the old unredeemed epoch, both in their own natural appetites and in their social context, there are forces to be reckoned with and guarded against lest the darkness close in again and once more shut out the light (1988: 792).

This would characterize Paul's moral discourses on sexuality as illustrative or preventative.

Probable. It is probable, though not able to be sufficiently proven, that problems were already in existence in Rome, as Reasoner hypothesizes (1999: 62-63).

Possible. The suggestion that 'Jewish teachers' are in mind, especially in Rom. 2.17-24, as a group that Paul has singled out as unworthy leaders who demonstrate 'immoral conduct' is certainly possible, but remains only a hypothesis (see Watson 2007: 204; Campbell 2009: 559-62).

Conclusion

Echoing Barclay's final statements, it is important to acknowledge that the criteria outlined above may not necessarily (or even often) lead to brand new insights regarding the context and background of Paul's (or any ancient letter-writer's) moral discourses. What is hoped is that more reflection can take place regarding the meaning and purpose of literary forms, like concluding paraeneses or vice lists, and how one determines the exigencies that lie behind particular ethical discussions. Theories, then, are not to be completely done away with, but examined in terms of agreed-upon principles that help to label them according to levels of certainty. In the end, the 'truth-is-often-stranger-than-fiction' maxim is true, and every reasonable hypothesis is worthy of mention. However, when theories become accepted in simple or undiscerning ways and are ossified and repeated by subsequent commentators, the interpretive potential of the text becomes static, and false assumptions are carried over into other areas of the text. To go back to the metaphor of mirror-reading, we can affirm that the 'original picture' can be seen in the mirror. And yet, we must find a way to come to grips with the reality that what we see in the mirror is a narrow portion of the original, and it may be dark in some areas and slightly obscured. The employment of principles of interpretation allows a greater possibility of sharpening the picture and reconstructing the whole original as best as we can.

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