Mercy and Monarchy

Seneca's *De clementia* and Paul's Letter to the Romans

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Abstract: This article compares *De clementia*, a somewhat neglected minor work of the Roman Stoic philosopher L. Annaeus Seneca, and Paul's Letter to the Romans. First, Seneca's ideas about rule as a god-given task of moral improvement of the subjects and the role of mercy (*clementia*) within it are analysed. Then, Seneca's argument is compared with Paul's thoughts concerning salvation by grace in his Letter to the Romans. Seneca's short political treatise *De clementia* shows a considerable number of interesting and specific agreements with Paul's reasoning in the Letter to the Romans, even more than his other writings, which have been in the focus of scholarly investigation. Finally, some suggestions are made about the possible source(s) of the convergences and how they could be interpreted.

Keywords: Seneca, De clementia, Paul, Romans, Stoicism

Recent years saw an enormous increase in studies on Paul and Stoicism, particularly in studies on Paul and his contemporary, the Roman Stoic philosopher L. Annaeus Seneca. Most of these studies

deal with the convergences and differences between Seneca's and Paul's cosmologies, anthropologies, and ethics.[1] Regarding Seneca's works, the focus was mainly on his *De beneficiis* and *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*. Whereas earlier generations of scholars tended to use phrases or ideas found in Seneca as "parallels" for seemingly similar passages in Paul and did not always succeed in avoiding biased comparisons or Christianizing interpretations of the Stoic philosopher, recent scholarship wants to engage in a "dialogue,"[2] i.e., first to interpret both authors in their own terms and only thereafter to analyse similarities and dissimilarities.

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[1] Cf. esp. the two seminal works T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), and J.M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). Cf. also: R.M. Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study of Ancient Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); T.R. Blanton, "The Benefactor's Account-Book: The Rhetoric of Gift Reciprocation according to Seneca and Paul," *NTS* 59 (2013) 396-414; J.R. Dodson, D.E. Briones (ed.), *Paul and Seneca in Dialogue* (Ancient Philosophy & Religion 2; Leiden: Brill, 2017); J.R. Dodson, A.W. Pitts (ed.), *Paul and the Greco-Roman Philosophical Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); J.R. Dodson, "The fall of men and the lust of women in Seneca's Epistle 95 and Paul's Letter to the Romans," *NT* 59 (2017) 355-365; E.-M. Becker, "Das introspektive Ich des Paulus nach Phil 1–3: Ein Entwurf," *NTS* 65 (2019) 310-331; W.L. Willis, "Paul, the Gift and Philippians," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 41 (2019) 174-190.

[2] Cf. e.g. R.M. Thorsteinsson, "Jesus Christ and the Wise Man: Paul and Seneca on Moral Sages," in *Paul and Seneca in Dialogue* (ed. J.R. Dodson, D.E. Briones; Ancient Philosophy & Religion 2; Leiden: Brill, 2017) 73-87, at 74.

So far, political theory has played a minor role in the comparison between Paul and Seneca. Therefore, I want to point to a somewhat neglected work of Seneca, his *De clementia*.[3] As far as I know, a few studies have dealt with the idea that the ruler is given power by the gods, or God, found in *De clementia* and in Rom 13:1.[4] There are, however, many more points of contact between Seneca's political advice to the young *princeps* Nero and Paul's thoughts. In the following, I will first analyse Seneca's ideas about rule as a god-given task of moral improvement of the subjects and the role of mercy (*clementia*) within it. Then I will compare them with Paul's thoughts concerning salvation by grace in his Letter to the Romans, showing that there is a significant overlap but that there are also some characteristic differences. Finally, I make some suggestions about the possible source(s) of the convergences and how they could be interpreted.

1. Seneca's *De clementia*

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[3] Latin text: L. Annaeus Seneca, *De clementia libri duo* (ed. H. Malaspina; BT 2021; Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

[4] H. Cancik, "Alle Gewalt ist von Gott: Römer 13 im Rahmen antiker und neuzeitlicher Staatslehren," in *Staat und Religion* (ed. B. Gladigow; Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1981) 53-74; T. Engberg-Pedersen, "Paul's Stoicizing Politics in Romans 12-13: The Role of 13.1-10 in the Argument," *JSNT* 29 (2006) 163-172; S. Krauter, *Studien zu Röm 13,1-7: Paulus und der politische Diskurs der neronischen Zeit* (WUNT 243; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

About 55 CE Seneca published his treatise *De clementia*.[5] The original work was probably longer than the now extant version. The *dispositio* in Seneca, *Clem*. 1.3.1 suggests that the work consists of three books but only two books, the second of which is remarkably short, have been handed down. The treatise is perhaps based on several speeches about *clementia* written by Seneca and delivered by Nero (Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.11.2). While these speeches were addressed directly to the public, the implied audience of the treatise is constructed in a more complex way.[6] On the surface, *De clementia* seems to be an ancient forerunner of the medieval "mirrors of princes" (*speculum principis*):[7] it is a hortatory essay in which a tutor gives advice to the young ruler. But since the work was published it is not a private communication between the philosopher and his student. The Roman public, i.e., the senatorial elite, is meant to overhear the dialogue between Seneca and

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[5] The date is uncertain. According to Seneca, *Clem.* 1.9.1, Nero was 18 years old. This would mean that Seneca wrote the treatise after Nero had murdered his stepbrother Britannicus; cf. S. Braund, *Seneca De clementia: Edited with Translation and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 16-17. Some scholars consider this impossible given that Seneca praises Nero's innocence (Seneca, *Clem.* 1.1.5). Cf. e.g. O. Zwierlein, "Zur Datierung von Senecas *De clementia*," *RMP* NF 139 (1996) 14-32.

[6] Cf. Braund, *De clementia*, 23.

[7] Cf. P. Hadot, "Fürstenspiegel," *RAC* 8 (1972) 555-632; J.M. Schulte, *Speculum regis: Studien zur Fürstenspiegel-Literatur in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Antike Kultur und Geschichte 3; Münster: Lit, 2001); G. Manuwald, "Der Fürstenspiegel in Senecas *De Clementia* und in der *Octavia*," *MH* 59 (2002) 107-126. For the genre of *De clementia* cf. Braund, *De clementia*, 17-23.

Nero. Nero, in his turn, is thought to know that the public has read Seneca's admonitions and to conclude that he is expected to follow them.[8]

At first glance, "mercy" does not seem to be an original topic for a treatise addressed to a ruler. However, for Seneca the choice of this topic is almost astonishing. First, *clementia* (or its Latin synonyms *lenitas*, *misericordia*, and *humanitas* or its Greek equivalents ἐπιείκεια, πραότης, and φιλανθρωπία) is not a favourite subject in Stoic philosophy. Seneca, as we will see, has to take great pains in demonstrating that *clementia* is a virtue and not an irrational passion.[9] Secondly, in late republican Latin the lexeme is mostly used in the context of foreign politics (the *clementia populi Romani* towards defeated enemies). Iulius Caesar seems indeed to have "invented" the use of *clementia* within the sphere of domestic politics: he discovered that forgiving was a powerful means to disarm his opponents.[10] Augustus took over his adoptive father's idea (Cassius Dio 48.3.6) and widened the scope of "mercy" from political opposition to other legal or moral offences.[11] It remained unclear, however, how a concept of mercy, which presupposed a hierarchy

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[8] Certainly, the public is also thought to recognize that it is Seneca who gives advice to the *princeps*. It is, however, not plausible to conclude that Seneca's only aim in publishing the book was to parade himself as Nero's tutor (as already Tacitus derisively suggested concerning the speeches, *Ann.* 13.11.2).

[9] Cf. Braund, *De clementia*, 66-68.

[10] A. Wallace-Hadrill, "Golden Age and Sin in Augustan Ideology," *Past and Present* 95 (1982) 19-36, at 29. Cf. Cicero, *Lig*. 30; *Marc.* 1. On the development of the concept of *clementia* cf. K. Winkler, "Clementia," *RAC* 3 (1957) 205-231, at 206-215.

[11] Wallace-Hadrill, "Golden Age," 32. The golden shield decreed by the senate and the populace for Augustus named *virtus*, *clementia*, *iustitia*, and *pietas* (*R. gest. div. Aug.* 34). A temple was dedicated for *divus Iulius* and *clementia Caesaris* (Plutarch, *Caes.* 57.4; Appian, *Civ.* 2.106; Cassius Dio 44.6.4).

and could sometimes even be considered as humiliating, fitted into the official ideology of the

principate as restored republican order.[12] So, Seneca was the first who undertook to deal

systematically with this new subject of political philosophy.[13]

Seneca's starting point is a rather gloomy picture of the population of the Roman Empire. He

points to the unruly mob (*Clem.* 1.1.1; 1.6.1) but – contrary to the traditional self-perception of the

Roman aristocrats – he includes the elite in his negative assessment. Those who judge the mass of

common people most harshly would themselves have very good reasons to seek leniency. Seneca

sums up: "We all have done wrong" (*Clem.* 1.6.3).[14]

In such a situation of political, social, and moral disorder, ancient people would probably have

considered the strict application of laws as the appropriate remedy. Seneca, however, draws on a

philosophical tradition going back to Plato that written laws were only the second best solution

compared to the rule of wise men who embody the law (νόμος ἔμψυχος).[15] Punishment according

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[12] Braund, *De clementia*, 32-36. But cf. also D. Konstan, "Clemency as a Virtue," *Classical Philology* 100

(2005) 337-346, who shows that the claim is not correct that *clementia* was considered humiliating or

despotic per se.

[13] Wallace-Hadrill, "Golden Age," 30.

[14] The similarity of this *peccavimus omnes* and the Latin version of Rom 3:23 has often led to Christianizing

translations and interpretations. Cf. e.g. J.N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca* (NT.S IV; Leiden: Brill, 1961) 123.

Braund, *De clementia*, 237, points to the difference to the idea of "sin," which would imply an offence not

against human laws but against God.

[15] M. Schofield, "Seneca on Monarchy and the Political Life: De Clementia, De Tranquillitate Animi, De Otio,"

in *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca* (ed. S. Bartsch, A. Schiesaro; Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2015) 68-81, at 70-71, 76; Braund, *De clementia*, 25. Cf. Plato, *Politicus* 294 A-C (cf. on this text B.

to laws ameliorates the society by deterrence, prevention, or rehabilitation (*Clem.* 1.22.1), but

written laws are inflexible. The stricter they are, the more likely they are to have paradoxical

effects: they clash with the innate stubbornness of human beings (*Clem.* 1.24.2) and even incite

people to do what they prohibit (*Clem.* 1.23; cf. also 1.12.4).[16] Therefore, a wise ruler has a much

better chance of exerting a good influence on society.

Seneca claims that the best way to achieve this effect is *clementia*: when the ruler puts aside the

strict requirements of the law and is merciful and lenient this will improve the moral standards of

a society (*Clem.* 1.22.2-3). Presupposing the innocence of people makes them innocent (*Clem.*

1.2.1-2; 1.23.2). Seneca's reasoning is almost paradoxical: although the ruler is not bound by the

laws, he submits to them voluntarily, albeit not strictly. Therefore, his kingship is better than the

inflexible rule of strict written law, and so it will make people live according to the spirit of the law

and lead to a renewed golden age of faithfulness (*Clem.* 1.1.4; 2.1.4). Seneca uses the metaphor of

the body to illustrate his thoughts: the ruler as head of the body cares for all members (*Clem.*

1.5.1; 2.2.1),[17] he saves all and each (*Clem.* 1.3.2; 1.26.5), he is the life breath of the whole

organism of the state (*Clem.* 1.3.5; 1.4.1; 2.2.1). Seneca, however, does not conceal that the ruler

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Zehnpfennig, "Platon – von Gott als Maß in der *Politeia* bis zum göttlichen Gesetz in den *Nomoi*," in *Staat*

und Religion: Zentrale Positionen zu einer Schlüsselfrage des politischen Denkens [ed. O. Hidalgo, C. Polke;

Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017] 23-34, at 29); Diotogenes apud Stobaeus 4.7.61; Cicero, *Rep*. 1.54-64; Musonius

Rufus 8. Cf. also Philo, *Abr.* 5 (on the Patriarchs as living law); Philo, *Mos.* 2.4 (on kings).

[16] Seneca's example is the cruel punishment against parricide; cf. S. Krauter, "Is Romans 7:7-13 about

akrasia," in *Christian Body, Christian Self: Concepts of Early Christian Personhood* (ed. C.K. Rothschild, T.W.

Thompson; WUNT 284; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 113-122, at 120-121.

[17] Cf. Sevenster, *Paul*, 171-172.

is merciful also for reasons of political advantage: especially *clementia* toward prominent members of the elite can be used for propagandistic ends and to disarm opponents (*Clem.* 1.9-10; 1.21.4).

Seneca also does not conceal that he talks about a monarchy. In contrast to the official ideology of the principate, he calls Nero a *rex* and his rule a task given by the gods (*Clem.* 1.1.2).[18] *Clementia* is an "imperial virtue"[19] that underlines the power of the ruler over his subjects. Seneca makes clear that there is no alternative to this new and in the eyes of the aristocratic elite utterly un-Roman, political system: as the civil wars have demonstrated, people are incapable of self-restraint (*Clem.* 1.4.2). They need a leader. Only Nero's peace can stop thousands of swords (*Clem.* 1.1.2).[20]

In most part of the second book Seneca wants to refute objections against this model of a monarchy that is based on mercy. For Stoics, as already mentioned, it was far from clear that *clementia* was a virtue and not an extremely unwise behaviour, namely following an emotional impulse and acting arbitrarily instead of according to the law (*Clem.* 2.3.2).[21] Correspondingly, Seneca differentiates between *clementia* and *misericordia*, the latter being irrational pity (*Clem.* 2.4.4-2.6.4),[22] as well as between *clementia* and *venia*, i.e., the remission of a just punishment

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[18] Schofield, "Monarchy," 70-71.

[19] Braund, *De clementia*, 32.

[20] Cf. Wallace-Hadrill, "Golden Age," 30-31.

[21] Braund, *De clementia*, 69; Schofield, "Monarchy," 75.

[22] D. Konstan, "Senecan Emotions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca* (ed. S. Bartsch, A. Schiesaro; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 174-184, at 179-181. This philosophical distinction has its

(*Clem.* 2.7.1-2.7.5; cf. also 1.2.2).[23] So, *clementia* becomes an instance of self-mastery (*Clem.* 2.3.1): its opposite is not *severitas* but *crudelitas*, i.e., giving free rein to one's anger (*Clem.* 2.4.1; cf. already 1.1.3).[24]

The stress on the self-mastery of the ruler points to a central problem in Seneca's attempt to give a philosophical basis for monarchy: in the Roman republic, law was one element in a system of checks and balances that restrained one member of the senatorial elite (or one family) from having permanently more power than the others. In Seneca's – and most of his contemporaries' – eyes this system of power balance had ultimately broken down in the civil wars. Not only the masses of common people but every individual needed to be held in check by a leader who was above the laws. But who controlled him? The only possible answer within this system is: he controlled himself by his self-mastery (cf. *Clem.* 1.1.6-7), of which *clementia* was the most important aspect since it prevented him from becoming a cruel tyrant and at the same time could improve the moral condition of the people. This means that philosophical paraenesis under the disguise of panegyric – i.e., what Seneca does in *De clementia* – is the only way political activity is still possible.[25]

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basis in the linguistic usage of the two lexemes, where *misericordia* denotes an emotion, while *clementia* denotes a habit; cf. Konstan, "Clemency," 342-343.

[23] Braund, *De clementia*, 70.

[24] Braund, *De clementia*, 32, 39.

[25] Braund, *De clementia*, 40; M.T. Griffin, "Political Thought in the Age of Nero," in *Neronia VI: Rome à l'époque néronienne: Institutions et vie politique, économie et société, vie intellectuelle, artistique et spirituelle* (ed. J.-M. Croisille, Y. Perrin; Collection Latomus 268; Brussels: Latomus, 2002) 325-337, at 328.

2. Paul and Seneca – Convergences and Differences

In the early 1980s the classicist Andrew Wallace-Hadrill described the obviously analogous basic structure of Seneca's and Paul's thoughts as follows: after a "fall" from innocence humankind is in a state of universal sinfulness. The only way out is salvation by a divinely destined mediator. He does not enforce the law but forgive trespasses out of grace. By his mercy he makes people just, so that they act according to high moral standards.[26]

Today, most New Testament scholars would sharply disagree with Wallace-Hadrill's interpretation of Paul. While he does take into account that Seneca's arguments have a political context and are used to legitimise Nero's monarchy, he does not (and perhaps in the 1980s could not) consider that Paul's letter is not a treatise on Christian doctrines but has to be read within the controversies between Judean and gentile followers of Christ concerning the observance of the Tora.

Thus, one has to admit that this analogous basic structure in Paul and Seneca is only seemingly analogous. They write in different contexts and they deal with different questions. This being said, one can still see, however, that they use some similar arguments for similar ends.

Rom 1:18-32 is certainly not a description of sinful humankind after Adam's fall. Nevertheless, Paul's aim is to explain to his gentile addressees that Christ is their only way to salvation. In order

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On Seneca's later disillusionment and withdrawal from politics cf. G. Reydams-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 107.

[26] Wallace-Hadrill, "Golden Age," 33.

to achieve this end he draws on widespread ideas of moral depravation.[27] Seneca's argumentation

at the beginning of *De Clementia* is not so different at all: he too draws a picture of universal moral

failure to make clear that his new political system – monarchy – is the only solution. He alludes to

the experiences during the civil wars but widens the scope from politics to a critique of the general

moral condition.[28] He even uses a similar rhetorical strategy as Paul: he starts with depicting the

unruly mob – traditionally an argument to legitimise the rule of the senatorial elite – only to

conclude that also the elite has failed and that "we all have done wrong" (*Clem.* 1.6.1-4). This is

indeed comparable to Paul's famous διὸ ἀναπολόγητος εἶ, ὦ ἄνθρωπε πᾶς ὁ κρίνων (Rom 2:1)

with which he blocks every way out of the universal moral disaster – except Christ.[29]

A second point of similarity are Seneca's and Paul's remarks about law(s). Of course, one must not

overlook the fundamental differences: Seneca talks about Roman criminal law and the right of the

princeps to interfere in legal cases (*cognitio extra ordinem*), Paul's topic is the Mosaic law which

was given by God. They have similar aims, though, and they use similar arguments to achieve

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[27] Cf. S.K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven/London: Yale University

Press, 1994) 83-125. The basic texts on moral depravation in Greco-Roman culture are Hesiod, *Erg*. 127-201

and Aratus, *Phaen.* 115-136.

[28] This is a common theme in late republican and early imperial Latin literature, cf. e.g. Catullus 64.397-406;

Livius, praef. 9; Virgil, *Aen.* 8.326f; Horatius, *Carm.* 1.35.33-38; Ovid, *Am.* 3.8.33-54; Ovid, *Met.* 1.127-150;

Silius 2.494-506; Ps.-Seneca, *Octav.* 412-434.

[29] Some New Testament scholars would object that this does not apply to Judeans (and so "universal" would

be the wrong word because only gentiles are meant). This might be a possible interpretation of Rom 1-2 but

it does not relate to my argument: what I want to say is that Seneca and Paul use a similar rhetorical

strategy to exclude every excuse for their intended audiences (whoever this may be).

them: both want to show that – in contrast to common assumptions – law(s) cannot help to overcome the disastrous state in which the addressees find themselves. Therefore, they appeal to traditions about paradoxical effects of laws: they incite people to do what they forbid. Both point out that the reason for this is not some inherent shortcoming of the law but the fault of humans (*Clem.* 1.24.2; Rom 7:7-24).

Perhaps the most interesting analogy between *De clementia* and the Letter to the Romans lies in the role of mercy for the improvement of morality. As I said before, *clementia* is not a favourite topic of Stoic moral philosophy. Seneca's thoughts about the effect of forgiving the behaviour of perpetrators are highly original. He defends them against the objection that too lenient punishments benefit the worst people and lead to ever more crimes (*Clem.* 1.2.1; cf. Rom 3:8; 6:1).

Modern scholarship on Paul points out that the subject of Romans is not a doctrine of sin, grace, and righteousness but the question of how gentiles can be made just without observing Judean rites like circumcision. Nevertheless, one should not deny that Paul does speak about God's forgiving of human trespasses and its effect on the believers, who are "made just," i.e., change their habits and live a life of faithful obedience (Rom 3:21-26; 6:12-23). When Paul describes this as a work of the spirit which enables the Christ-believers to live together in a community shaped by mutual love (12:1-20), this is not so far from Seneca's metaphor of the ruler as head of a body from which a life-giving breath flows into all members.[30] In Seneca's model, the ruler is almost in a

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[30] For other instances of the body as metaphor for society in Seneca's writings cf. Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity*, 32-33. However, in Seneca's model of the effect of the merciful king's reign on society, there is no exact equivalent to the spirit, which, according to Paul, dwells within the Christ-believers and enables them to lead faithful and obedient lives (Rom 8:3-4).

position analogous to that of Christ in Paul's reasoning: this is a position as a mediator of divine benevolence to all human beings (*Clem.* 1.5.7; 1.7.1-2; 1.8.3; 1.19.8; 1.21.2; 2.6.3).[31]

If we now look somewhat closer at this position, we can sharpen the comparison between king and Christ. Seneca defines *clementia* as one aspect of the virtue of *temperantia*. It is the form of self-mastery appropriate for a monarch. The king's *only* control is self-control. So, on the one hand, this picture of an ideal ruler is influenced by the Stoic concept of the "moral sage" – one could even say that there is a touch of "divinity"[32] in this concept.

On the other hand, Seneca is very clear about the fact that the ruler is a human being and not a god (*Clem.* 1.7.2). Insofar as the ruler is a human not (yet) in the state of a "wise man," he needs philosophical guidance. The philosopher can help the ruler to obtain self-mastery by giving him public advice in the form of hortatory panegyric. He presents him his treatise as a mirror in which he looks with pleasure at his virtue in order to make further progress in his moral development (*Clem.* 1.1.1; 1.1.6-7).[33]

For Paul, Christ is a human being but does not in any respect participate in human sinfulness (Rom 8:3; cf. 2Cor 5:21). So, in this respect, the nearest analogy for him would not be Seneca's king but

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[31] Cf. Winkler, "Clementia," 214-215. This implies being even a servant for the sake of others (Seneca, *Clem.* 1.8.1-5; for this concept of ἔνδοξος δουλεία, cf. e.g. Seneca, *Dial.* 11.7.2; Isocrates, *Or.* 2.31; Aelianus, *Var.* 2.20).

[32] Braund, *De clementia*, 39, speaks of "divine arbitrariness." This, however, is problematic since Seneca wants to exclude arbitrariness from *clementia* and arbitrariness is probably not what a Stoic philosopher would associate with divinity.

[33] On the metaphor of the text as a mirror cf. Schofield, "Monarchy," 68-69.

the ideal "wise man."[34] With regard to God, Paul strictly rules out all questions and all doubts: one

cannot give advice to God, one cannot argue with God, one cannot even understand God's

mysteries (Rom 3:1-8; 9:14, 20; 11:33-36). Nevertheless, although he stresses God's

incomparability, he tries to avoid depicting God as acting irrationally. Like Seneca he differentiates

between grace and arbitrariness. After all, he wants to show that one can trust in God. Thus, God

must be trustworthy, which means that God is faithful to God's own promises (Rom 11:29; cf. 1

Thess 5:24; 1 Cor 1:9).

The equivalent for the moral status of the king would rather be the situation of the Christ-

believers: Paul reminds them that they have been made just and this is the basis for the call to

behave accordingly (Rom 6:1-11). The basic structure of this argument is not the same but similar

to or at least reminiscent of Seneca's combination of panegyric (showing that the ruler is virtuous)

and paraenesis (telling him that he therefore should act virtuously).

3. Parallels, Contrasts, Influences and Shared Traditions – An Assessment of the Relationship

between Paul and Seneca

Although scholarly opinions differ on the relationship between Paul and Stoicism in general and

Paul and Seneca in particular, with some seeing broad agreement while others claim that Paul's

and Seneca's thought-worlds are quite far apart, I believe there is a consensus that the

convergence is large enough to make the analysis of similarities and dissimilarities a reasonable

task. I hope to have shown in the previous paragraph that Seneca's short political treatise *De*

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[34] Cf. Thorsteinsson, "Jesus Christ and the Wise Man."

clementia demonstrates a considerable number of interesting and specific agreements with Paul's reasoning in the Letter to the Romans, even more than Seneca's other writings, which have been in the focus of scholarly investigation. How can we explain and understand this phenomenon?

One prominent strand of contemporary New Testament scholarship explains Paul's concept of divine mercy as a deliberate alternative to Roman imperial ideology. Neil Elliott has made Nero's propagandistic and humiliating "mercy" toward the Judeans, whom his predecessor Claudius had banished from Rome, one central aspect within his interpretation of Paul's Letter to Rome. In his view, Paul criticizes this pretentious imperial "mercy" severely and contrasts it to God's grace, i.e., God's salvation for the oppressed.[35]

Setting the serious flaws of Elliott's historical reconstruction of the return of Judeans to Rome aside for a moment,[36] I think that Elliott makes two important points: first, Paul of course did not know Seneca's treatise but he encountered its basic ideas in Roman imperial propaganda everywhere on his journeys through the Eastern Mediterranean.[37] So, it is indeed plausible that Paul heard about *clementia principis*, that this influenced his reasoning about God's grace, and that he used allusions to prominent topics in the political discourse of his days to make his

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[35] Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 87-119.

[36] The main problem is that there are no sources about the alleged propagandistic abolition of Claudius' decree by Nero. It is not even clear that it took place at all. Claudius' decree could also have gradually come out of use during the last years of his reign.

[37] On *clementia* in Roman imperial iconography cf. Winkler, "Clementia," 215-217.

arguments understandable for his addressees.[38] Secondly, it is clear that Paul's addressees

experienced imperial *clementia* very differently from Seneca and other members of the elite.

Seneca relates the story that Nero said "I wish I could not write" when he had to sign the

execution of two bandits (*Clem.* 2.1.2). Although he praises Nero for his words (*Clem.* 2.1.3-4), he

tells him tactfully that he should not act out of such irrational pity (*Clem.* 2.2.3-2.3.1). With the

medical metaphor that "sometimes it is necessary to shed some blood" he glosses over capital

punishment. In the perspective of Paul and his addressees, i.e., seen from the "ground level" of

Roman society,[39] *clementia principis* would at best be an arbitrary exception of the usual brutality.

Thus, there is certainly a contrast: *real* mercy is to be found with Christ and not the Roman

princeps.

Nevertheless, I think Elliott's comparison between Paul and Seneca is in the end not very helpful. It

leads to a black-and-white-picture and it prevents him from reading Seneca's (and other Roman

authors') texts carefully[40] and assessing their relationship to early Christian texts fairly. One can

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[38] So already Wallace-Hadrill, "Golden Age," 34 – several years before this idea became prominent in (parts

of) New Testament scholarship.

[39] Cf. P. Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,

2009).

[40] The dismissive summary of Seneca's *De clementia* (Elliott, *Arrogance*, 91) is, frankly speaking, in many

parts simply wrong. E.g., he claims that Seneca considered inciting terror as legitimate means of rule,

although in the passage to which he alludes Seneca tells Nero *never* to submit to the maxim of *oderint dum*

metuant (*Clem.* 1.12.4; 2.2.2).

surely find many examples of elitism in Seneca's treatise[41] as well as traces of a use of mercy as mere tactics to disarm opponents.[42] One should, however, not deny that Seneca's claim that the wise ruler essentially acts for reasons of humanity and altruism is meant seriously (*Clem.* 1.1.3; 1.5.2; 1.7.2; 1.18.2; 1.25.1).[43] When Seneca puts the basic idea as "the ruler should treat the citizens as he wants to be treated by the gods"[44] (which implies that the citizens should in their turn imitate the ruler), this is not so far from some passages in the Letter to the Romans (cf. e.g., Rom 15:7).[45]

Thus, the especially close proximity of Seneca's political treatise *De clementia* to the Letter to the Romans can at least partly be explained in light of the influence of Roman imperial ideology on Paul. This, however, is not a one-way relationship. Seneca's political philosophy in *De clementia* combines Stoic doctrines with ideas taken from the so called Neo-Pythagorean kingship tractates and elements of the Augustan ideology of salvation from (or even expiation of) the disaster of the civil wars and the return of a golden age. The kingship tractates of Diotogenes (Stobaeus 4.7.61-62), Sthenidas (Stobaeus 7.63), and Pseudo-Ecphantus (Stobaeus 4.7.22, 64-66) have a Judean

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[41] Seneca, *Clem.* 1.5.7: mercy underlines the superiority of the merciful (albeit it is not meant to humiliate the other); *Clem.* 1.21.4: mercy toward members of lower classes is likened to avoiding crushing annoying little insects.

[42] Cf. above section 1.

[43] Cf. esp. Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity*, 182-184, 189-191.

[44] Cf. Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity*, 28-29, for similar ideas in Seneca's other philosophical works.

[45] Διὸ προσλαμβάνεσθε ἀλλήλους, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς προσελάβετο ὑμᾶς. In Paul's reasoning the believers' behaviour toward each other should imitate Christ's behaviour toward the believers. In contrast to Seneca, he cannot say that Christ's behaviour toward the belivers reflects god's behaviour toward Christ.

counterpart in the Letter of Aristeas (Let. Aris. 187-300).[46] The "messianic" idea of a renewed

golden age of justice and faithfulness that came up under Augustus (Virgil, *Ecl*. 4) and remained

prominent during the reigns of the Julio-Claudian *principes* has almost certainly Judean roots.[47]

Thus, although it is not possible to trace direct influences, convergence need not be mere

coincidence. Along with the impact of Roman political ideology on Paul, these shared traditions

might also be a plausible explanation for the fact that *De clementia* shows more similarities to Paul

than Seneca's other, more "purely" philosophical Stoic works.[48]

The above-mentioned classicist Wallace-Hadrill judged these similarities very negatively: in his

eyes, the ideology of guilt and mercy – in Seneca's as well as in Paul's "Christian" version – served

to underpin despotic power over against equality and democracy.[49] This is perhaps not fair.

Neither Seneca nor Paul would ever have thought of – not to say have approved of – their texts

serving to such ends. Nevertheless, Wallace-Hadrill makes a point: some scholars tend to interpret

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[46] On them cf. H. Thesleff, *An Introduction to the Pythagorean Writings of the Hellenistic Period* (AAAbo.H

XXIV 3; Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1961).

[47] N. Horsfall, "Virgil and the Jews," *Vergilius* 58 (2012) 67–80. It is reasonable to suppose that the more than

2000 prophetical books (*libri fatidici*) that Augustus collected and burned (Suetonius, *Aug.* 31.1) included

Judean texts (or texts with Judean influence). Concerning the role of messianic prophecies in the rise of the

Flavian dynasty at the end of the first century CE, cf. Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4.5; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13.2.

[48] Wallace-Hadrill, "Golden Age," 34.

[49] Wallace-Hadrill, "Golden Age," 19-20, 32. Cf. also the somewhat exotic and mostly neglected work of B.

Blumenfeld, *The Political Paul: Justice, Democracy and Kingship in a Hellenistic Framework* (JSNT.S 210;

Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2001), who claims that Paul *wanted* to give a theological foundation for

the Roman Empire.

Paul's thoughts as opposing Roman imperial domination, others tend to emphasize Paul's and Seneca's shared humanitarian values. While neither assessment is *entirely* wrong, both are prone to overlook the fact that in Paul's as well as in Seneca's argumentation, mercy and monarchy are combined in a way that proved to be highly problematic in European history.