

Who Searches Hearts and What Does He Know in Romans 8:27?

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Who is “the one who searches hearts” in Rom 8:27 and what is it that he “knows”? A glance at the secondary literature on this verse reveals that most interpreters have understood the searcher to be God and the content of what God knows to be the thoughts of the Spirit. There are two lines of reasoning supporting this common understanding: 1) God is often described as examining people’s innermost selves in the Hebrew Bible; thus the expression “he who searches hearts” in Rom 8:27 should be understood as a reference to God. 2) The “mind of the Spirit” should be taken as a reference to what the Spirit is thinking. Consequently, the one who “knows” what the Spirit is thinking cannot be the Spirit; the knower must be God. These two ideas form the basis of the argument for the most common interpretation of this clause. But there are good reasons for rejecting the standard interpretation, reasons that will be detailed below.

That the main actor in these verses is the Holy Spirit is clear from v. 26 where the Holy Spirit is the one who helps our weakness and who intercedes for us with unspoken groanings (στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις): “Likewise also the Spirit joins to help in our weakness; for we do not know what it is that we should pray, but the Spirit himself (αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα) intercedes with unspoken groanings.” Then in verse 27, Paul continues with the clause we are considering: ὁ δὲ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας οἶδεν τί τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος, and finishes the sentence with “because he intercedes for the saints according to [the will of] God (κατὰ θεόν).”¹

1. All translations into English are my own unless marked otherwise. The personal pronouns “he” and “him” have been employed in references to the Spirit in vv. 26–27 because of the very personal characteristics of the Spirit described in v. 26. In this regard, it should be noted that it will not do to claim that because the gender of the participle is masculine, ὁ ἐραυνῶν, it cannot be a reference to the Spirit (on the assumption that Paul would have to use the neuter participle, τὸ ἐραυνῶν, if it were the Spirit). In a passage (vv. 26–27) in which the work of the Spirit is described with more intensely *personal* characteristics than any other passage in Paul (a Spirit who *helps* our weakness, *intercedes*, *groans*, and here *searches hearts*), it should not be surprising at all to find a masculine gender in a participle that describes what the Spirit does. By analogy, a significant part of the textual tradition of Eph 1:14 includes the masculine relative pronoun ὃ where its antecedent is “the Holy Spirit of promise.” (Similarly, John 14:26, 15:26, and esp. 16:13–14, have the masculine demonstrative pronoun ἐκεῖνος in reference to the Spirit, even though one might have expected the neuter, as occurs in the

The premise of the present study is that “the one who searches hearts” (ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας) is the same main actor of the previous verse, that is, the Holy Spirit, and that what the Spirit “knows” is that a believer has a Spirit-focused mindset.² For the sake of clarity, two loose translations of verse 27—one reflecting each position—are included here to highlight the differences between the two views.

Traditional interpretation: “And God who searches hearts (ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας) knows (οἶδεν) what the Spirit is thinking (τί τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος).”

Alternative interpretation: “And the Spirit who searches hearts (ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας) knows (οἶδεν) what is the [believer’s] mindset on the Spirit (τί τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος).”

A cursory glance at recent commentaries will show that beyond the two assertions mentioned in the first paragraph (both of which will be challenged below), scant attention has been given to this clause.³ The present study is an attempt to rectify the

pronouns in 14:17. (Cf. Mark 9:26 for masculine participles for evil spirits). The use of a masculine participle in Rom 8:27 also eliminates a possible misunderstanding that could have been created had Paul employed a neuter instead of a masculine. Had Paul used the neuter participle, readers might have thought he was referring to a person’s breath or life-force which searches out that person’s inner self.

2. George MacRae (“A Note on Romans 8:26–27,” *HTR* 73 [1980]: 227–30) moves in the same direction that I am arguing here. His comments are brief and are not limited to the issue discussed here, but MacRae flags two important issues regarding this clause that are relevant to our present analysis: the earlier usage of τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος in Rom 8:6–7 and the thematic/semantic connection between ὁ ἐραυνῶν (Rom 8:26–27) and ἐραυνᾶ in the context of 1 Cor 2:10. MacRae’s suggestions have not, as far as I know, been followed by any major commentary or peer-reviewed article. One key reason MacRae may not have been followed is his suggestion that Paul is referring to the human spirit rather than to the divine Spirit when he employs the word πνεῦμα in the expression τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος in Rom 8:6 and 27. Most interpreters (the present interpreter included) think this suggestion unlikely. Another reason he may not have been followed is his apparent desire to challenge trinitarian readings of this passage. See his comments on pp. 228 and 229. Nevertheless, MacRae puts his finger on a couple of issues that have not been clearly heard because of his tangential comments. Thus, my method will be to start with his two observations (even while diverging from him at some points), strengthen those observations (which are undeveloped by MacRae), and add six other arguments in favor of the thesis.

3. The following are representative commentaries that take the traditional position on this specific clause. But these commentaries can also be consulted to demonstrate how little attention has been given to this clause. Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; HNT 8a (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 242; Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer, vol. 2: Röm 6–11* (EKKNT 6/2, Röm 6–11; Zürich: Benziger, 1980), 161; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (trans. Scott J. Hafemann; NTD 6; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 135; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 524–25; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 519; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 526–27; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 446–47; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; vol. 1; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 424; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 479–80; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988),

situation. It is my contention that when the following eight considerations are taken together, they argue against the traditional understanding of this clause and for the alternative, that is, that the searcher and knower is the Spirit, and that what he knows is that the believer has a Spirit-focused mindset.

1. *The connection of τί τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος with Rom 8:5–7.* The first argument that this clause ought to be understood as the Spirit searching the mindset of a believer is the earlier use of τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος in Romans 8. MacRae comments: “. . . the expression τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος is rare in the NT, found only in Romans 8. (In the LXX the word φρόνημα is found only in 2 Macc 7:21; 13:9.) Given the rarity of the expression, it is most unlikely that it changes its meaning between vv. 6 and 27.”⁴

The rarity of the expression combined with the contextual proximity of the same expression only twenty-one verses earlier is a substantial challenge to the traditional interpretation. This is because τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος in Rom 8:6 refers to the Spirit-focused mindset, that is, the thinking of a believer.⁵ The immediate context of Rom 8:6 makes this apparent. Paul refers to those “who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (v. 4b) and then continues in vv. 5–7:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds (φρονούσιν) on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds (φρονούσιν) on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh (τὸ φρόνημα τῆς σαρκὸς) is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit (τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος) is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh (τὸ φρόνημα τῆς σαρκὸς) is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot.” (NRSV)

That these verses refer to the mindset of humans is apparent. The comments about the thinking (φρονούσιν⁶) of “those who live according to the flesh” in contrast

329; Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 585–86. Many commentaries treat this clause as interpretatively settled or skip it altogether, for example: F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (TNTC; Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity / Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 165–66; Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 191; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1957; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 168–69.

4. MacRae, “A Note on Romans 8:26–27,” 229.

5. I have employed the word “thinking” alongside of “mindset” throughout this section for the sake of clarity. But Jewett (*Romans*, 525, following BAGD, 866) is probably correct to point out: “The intentionality and modus operandi of the Spirit are in view here, not the objective content of its ‘mind’” Or, as BDAG summarizes, it is “the faculty of fixing one’s mind on someth., way of thinking, mind-set . . . aim, aspiration, striving” (BDAG, 1066) that is in view.

6. The cognate verbal form of φρόνημα is φρονέω, a verb that appears 26 times in the NT, 23 of which are in the Pauline corpus. In every case the verb is applied to humans, never to God or his Spirit. For example, regarding φρονούσιν (Rom 8:5), Danker cites Paul’s use of φρονέω as applying to an explicit focus of thought or attitude of interest in τὰ τῆς σαρκὸς (Frederick William Danker,

with “those who live according to the Spirit,” combined with the references to death, hostility toward God, and being subjected to the law of God make it clear that τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος in v. 6 refers in some way to the Spirit-oriented thinking of a believer.⁷ And although a subjective genitive (“the flesh’s mindset” or “the Spirit’s mindset”) is possible, most translators and interpreters have taken the genitive in v. 6 to be an objective genitive, that is, as the believer’s mind focused on the Spirit. Perhaps the most compelling reason to take the objective genitive reading is the obvious parallel between the verbal cognate φρονούσιν in v. 5 and τὸ φρόνημα in v. 6.⁸

So, then, if τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος in 8:6 is correctly understood by most interpreters to be an objective genitive, why is it that this same (rare) expression is assumed by many of the same interpreters to have become a subjective genitive in 8:27 that refers to the Spirit’s thinking? Of course, it is not theoretically impossible that a genitive could function as an objective genitive in one verse and then as a subjective genitive only a few verses later. But granting this possibility, it must still be deemed unlikely, for the following two reasons. First, this is a rare expression (as has already been pointed out). Such polyvalence would be more likely for an expression that is more common. But secondly, and more importantly, to the best of my knowledge, there is not one example in Paul where he clearly changes from an objective to a subjective genitive (or vice versa) for the identical expression within the same thematic context.⁹

2. *The Parallel with 1 Corinthians 2:10.* The second argument that the searcher and knower is the Spirit and that what he knows is the believer’s Spirit-focused mindset is the one passage in Paul’s writings outside of Romans 8 that contains clear verbal and conceptual parallels to Rom 8:27. 1 Cor 2:10 reads: τὸ γὰρ πνεῦμα πάντα ἐραυνᾷ, καὶ τὰ βάθη τοῦ θεοῦ (“for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God”).

The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago, IL; University of Chicago Press, 2009), 376.

7. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (vol. 1; NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960, repr. 1997), 284, comments: “Verse 5 is, therefore, confirmatory, or perhaps explanatory, of the contrast at the end of verse 4. Verse 6 is confirmatory, preferably explanatory, of verse 5. And verse 7 gives the reason for what is stated in verse 6.”

8. If someone were to search for a way out of this by claiming a less-specific genitive than an objective genitive (that is, if one were to posit a Spirit-led way of thinking or a Spirit-like way of thinking) it still would not resolve the problem. Regardless of the specific genitival category, the focus in vv. 5–7 is the mindset or thinking of the believer, whereas the traditional understanding of v. 27 concentrates on the mindset or the thinking of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the loss to our general understanding of the nature of subjective and objective genitives becomes acute if an alternative genitive is posited, since φρόνημα is one of the clearest examples of a noun with verbal qualities in the NT, and this is the key issue in how a subjective or objective genitive is defined.

9. I am not denying that such a combination might occur. But even one or two counter-examples—if they do in fact exist—does not weigh against the validity of the thesis herein argued. There are precious few examples of nouns in the genitive case that can be objective genitives in one context and subjective genitives in a different context, even if a few examples may exist (perhaps “love of Christ” [Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 5:14; Eph 3:19] or “love of God” [Rom 8:39; 2 Thess 3:5; Jude 21], though even these are disputed).

Unlike the Hebrew Bible “parallels” listed in commentaries (see point 3 below)—none of which utilizes the verb ἐραυνάω—Paul in 1 Cor 2:10 actually uses the same verb, ἐραυνάω, that he employs as a participle in Rom 8:27 for “the one who searches.”

It is significant that it is the same verb, particularly since the parallel is in the Pauline corpus and in light of the fact that other literature does not usually use this verb in contexts of God searching. Although the context of 1 Cor 2:10 is a “like knows like” comparison (that is, God’s Spirit knows God’s thoughts like a human spirit knows a human’s thoughts), it should be pointed out that the immediate object of ἐραυνᾷ (“he searches”) is πάντα (“everything”). Accordingly, although the clause καὶ τὰ βάθη τοῦ θεοῦ (“even the depths of God”) particularizes what Paul wants to discuss, Paul first makes the general assertion that “the Spirit searches everything . . .” Since the particularized example is about the Spirit knowing the thoughts of *God*, there have to be other things-searched-out by the Spirit that are included in Paul’s understanding of the πάντα. When one pauses to consider what else might be included in the “everything” that the Spirit searches out (outside of “the depths of God”), among the first things that comes to mind—if not the very first—are human hearts. In fact, it is difficult to deny that Paul would have included the searching of human hearts as part of the “everything” that the Spirit searches.¹⁰

Another reason 1 Cor 2:10 is a helpful connection is because the contexts both of 1 Corinthians 2 and of Romans 8 are focused on encouragement, whereas almost all the so-called parallels in Hebrew Bible passages are warnings.

3. *The Spirit’s role in the theme of examining hearts outside of Paul.* The argument for the traditional understanding of this passage includes connections to Hebrew Bible passages that focus on God examining and knowing people’s hearts. Recent interpreters seem to have assumed that because such a theme exists (commonly cited references are 1 Sam 16:7; 1 Kgs 8:39; 1 Chr 28:9; 29:17; Pss 17:3; 26:2; 44:21; 139:1, 2, 23; Prov 15:11; Jer 17:10), this necessarily entails that God (rather than the Spirit) is the one who is doing the searching in Rom 8:27.¹¹

10. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1968; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 74, points out that the Spirit searching all things connects with 1 Cor 2:4 where “It is the Spirit who convinces the hearer of the truth of the Gospel” and 2:12 where “the Spirit . . . brings out the meaning of what is given in the Gospel,” as well as with John 16:8–15.

11. Note that such parallels, while indeed echoing some of the concepts represented in these Hebrew Bible verses, do not seem to be verbal allusions to any specific text. If there were a clear verbal parallel—that is, if somewhere in the LXX or other Jewish literature there were a specific *title* for God such as ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας (“the one who searches hearts”)—it might slightly strengthen the case of those who want to read Rom 8:27 as God (rather than his Spirit) searching hearts. But as Fitzmyer notes (*Romans*, 519), the actual verb Paul uses (ἐραυνάω), which is the operative word of this expression—and a very colorful word at that—does not even appear in the LXX in the passages cited by these commentators. This does not mean that Paul was unaffected by these verses when he wrote this passage, only that the Spirit’s role in searching hearts was primarily in mind.

But the observation that God tests and knows in the Hebrew Bible only argues for the traditional reading if it can be demonstrated that this expression should be exclusively applied to God and not to the Spirit. God, of course, is the searcher and knower of people's hearts as the references listed above demonstrate, but so is his Spirit. In fact, Paul should probably be viewed as living in an interpretive climate that would have allowed him freely to connect God's searching and knowing activity with the Spirit. Such a connection is suggested by a number of texts, both Jewish and Christian.

For example, Ps 139:1–2 and 23 (cf. 15–18) are verses often referred to in discussions of Rom 8:27 because God is said to test and know (δοκιμάζω and γινώσκω, not ἐρραυνάω). It is, however, often overlooked that in the same context (v. 7), the psalmist exclaims: "Where can I go from your Spirit?"¹² Indeed, there is no disjunction between the testing and knowing work of God and what his Spirit does, a disjunction that must be maintained if it is to be used as an argument that God—rather than the Spirit—is the one who is doing the "searching" and "knowing" in Rom 8:27.

Furthermore, Ezek 11:5 connects the falling of the Spirit of the Lord upon Ezekiel with the proclamation that the Lord knows the mind of the house of Israel: "Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon me, and he said to me, 'Say, Thus says the LORD: This is what you are thinking, O house of Israel; I know the things that come into your mind.'" Other Jewish texts that make a connection between God's wise knowing of the hearts or minds of people with the Spirit include Dan 4:8–9, 18; 5:11–14; Sus 45–49; Wis 1:7; 9:17.¹³

In 4 Ezra 16:54–63 there is conceptual overlap between God's searching and knowing and the giving of the Spirit of God to humans:

Behold, the Lord *knows* all the works of men, *their imaginations and their thoughts and their hearts*. He said, "Let the earth be made," and it was made; "Let the heaven be made," and it was made. At his word the stars were fixed, and he *knows* the number of the stars. It is he who *searches* the deep and its treasures, who has measured the sea and its contents . . . who formed man, and put a *heart* in the midst of his body, and gave him breath and life and understanding and the spirit of Almighty God; who made all things *and searches out hidden things in hidden places*. Surely he *knows your imaginations and what you think in your hearts!* Woe to those who sin and want to hide their sins!¹⁴

12. The relationship of the Spirit to the searching theme in Psalm 139 may be viewed as even more pronounced if Terrien's division of the Psalm into four six-verse-strophes is accepted. His divisions are 1–6, 7–12, 13–18, and 19–24. Verse 7 is at the head of one of those divisions, cf. Samuel L. Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 874–75.

13. See also Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 517, for examples in the Qumran literature that highlight the importance of the Spirit working in and through the lives of the sectarians. Note esp. 1QH 7:6, 1QH 12:11–12, and 1QH 16:11–12. In the Rabbinic literature, cf. Sotah 9:6.

14. Translated from Latin by B. M. Metzger, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol 1: Literature*

Just as conspicuous is another text written about the same time as 4 Ezra, the Christian text *1 Clem.* 21:2–3, 9 (ca. 95 C.E.)¹⁵ in which a use of Prov 20:27 (but understood as the Holy Spirit rather than the human spirit) is combined with the themes of searching hearts, thoughts, plans, and desires. It reads:

^{2–3}For it says somewhere, “The Spirit of the Lord is a lamp searching (ἐρευνῶν) the depths of the inner parts.” Let us realize how near he is, and that nothing of our thoughts escapes him, nor of the plans that we make
⁹For he is the searcher (ἐρευνητής) of thoughts and desires; his breath is in us, and whenever he desires, he will take it away.¹⁶

This text is noteworthy in that it actually employs (obtained from Prov 20:27) an alternate spelling of the same verb for searching that Paul uses in Rom 8:27¹⁷ and attributes the searching activity to the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ This is interesting since many commentators interpret Prov 20:27 in its own setting as about the human spirit.¹⁹ Thus, based in part upon this first-century Christian text that affirms the searching activity of the Spirit (via its use of a Hebrew Bible text), at the very least it can be confidently affirmed that in the first century the idea of the Spirit searching was in the interpretive air.²⁰

⌘ *Testaments* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1983), 517–59 (559). Italics and bold added for clarity.

15. Cf. also Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4:17, which clearly is dependent on *1 Clem.* 21, not independent of it.

16. That the Holy Spirit is still in view here in v. 9 is supported by the reference to the Holy Spirit in the next verse, *1 Clem.* 22:1.

17. In light of this, it might be worth exploring in the future whether Paul might actually have been consciously alluding to Prov 20:27 in Rom 8:27, but with an understanding of that passage that was more similar to what is done with it in *1 Clem.* 21:2 than what we see in most of our English translations of Prov 20:27. (Most modern interpretations of Prov 20:27, like the NIV, are akin to the NRSV, “The human spirit is the lamp of the LORD, searching every inmost part.” Some interpreters, like the New Living Translation, render Prov 20:27 as: “The LORD’s searchlight penetrates the human spirit, exposing every hidden motive.”) See comments in R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 303, and David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1988), 128, n. 10. In light of the “lamp/light” searching metaphor of Prov 20:27 and the “eyes” searching metaphor of Zech 4:10, there is an interesting constellation of these two metaphors with “Spirit” in Zech 3–4. See Zech 3:9 and esp. 4:10 for “eyes,” 4:2 for “lights,” and 4:6 for “Spirit.”

18. It is also worth noting that only 36 verses later (though in a different context), “Clement” clearly cites from Psalm 139:7–10 (138:7–10 in the LXX). He writes in *1 Clem.* 28:2–3: “For the scripture says somewhere: ‘Where shall I go, and where shall I be hidden from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the ends of the earth, your right hand is there; if I make my bed in the abyss, your Spirit is there.’”

19. Translators, of course, are doing the best they can with a difficult Hebrew text (נִרְיָהוּהוּ נִשְׁמַת אָדָם חִפְשׁ כָּל־חֻדְרֵי־בֶטֶן). But note that the relative pronoun ὅς in the LXX indicates that the Greek translator understood the Lord rather than the human spirit to be the searcher of the innermost parts of a person. So: φῶς κυρίου πνοὴ ἀνθρώπων ὅς ἐρευνᾷ ταμίεια κοιτίας.

20. “Clement”’s non-specific introductory formula in 21:2 (cf., 28:3) “it says somewhere” (λέγει

Other Christian texts make similar connections. It is by the Spirit that Peter knows about Ananias and Sapphira's lie (Acts 5:3–9); it is the Holy Spirit who perceives the dullness and lack of understanding of Isaiah's listeners (Acts 28:25–27; cf. Isa 6:9–10); it is the Spirit who knows that in the last days some will renounce the faith (1 Tim 4:1); it is he who knows the hardness of heart of the wilderness-wandering generation and warns against following their example (Heb 3:7–12); and it is by the Spirit that we know that we abide in him (1 John 4:13). Furthermore, although not stated explicitly, can there be any doubt that when the believers prayed in Acts 1:24–25—"Lord, *you know everyone's heart*. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place"—that in Luke's theology, the "showing" was via the Spirit (cf. Acts 1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4; 10:19; 11:12, 28; 13:2 etc.)?²¹

Lest the force of what is being argued here be lost, let us view it from a slightly different angle. To argue that God—and not the Spirit—is the one who searches hearts in Rom 8:27, one must hold that God alone and not his Spirit is consistently the one who searches and knows people's hearts in literature outside of Paul. If it can be demonstrated, as it has been above, that the Spirit is sometimes understood to be involved in that searching, the argument that it must be God and not the Spirit in Rom 8:27 collapses.²² All that can legitimately be claimed about Rom 8:27 based upon comparisons to other Jewish and Christian literature is that the subject could be either God or the Spirit. And since the actor of v. 26 is the Spirit, we should start with the

γάρ πού) suggests that the Spirit as searcher was common enough of an idea that "Clement" could assume that others would recognize it.

21. For further information on the Spirit's role as searcher in the Apostolic Fathers (late first century to middle second century C.E.) note 1 *Clem.* 42:4, "testing by the Spirit;" *Barn.* 6:14, "See, therefore, we have been made next, as he says again in a different prophet, 'Behold, says the Lord, I will take away from these,' (that is, from those whom the Spirit of the Lord foresaw), 'their stony hearts, and I will put hearts of flesh in them . . .';" *Barn.* 12:2, "the Spirit says to the heart of Moses;" *Ign. Phld.* 7:1, "but the Spirit is not deceived . . . for he knows from where he comes and where he goes, and exposes that which is hidden;" *Herm. Mand.* 10.2.5, "and do not oppress the Holy Spirit who lives in you lest he intercede against you to God and depart from you" (cf. 10.3.2–4; 11.9–10). Note also one of the Montanist prophetic sayings as recorded in Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4: "(The Spirit says:) Thou wilt be publicly displayed: that is good for thee; for whosoever is not publicly displayed before men will be publicly displayed before God" (translation by Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* [ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; vol. 2; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1964], 686).

22. If the same logic that is normally applied to these verses—namely, that this must be God because God is often said to examine people's innermost selves—were applied to Rev 2:23, ". . . and all the churches will know that I am he who searches (ὁ ἐραυνῶν) minds and hearts . . ." one would have to conclude that Rev 2:23 is a reference to God simply because similar expressions are used for him in the Hebrew Bible. But that context makes it clear that it is "the Son of God" who is speaking these words, even though the reference to him is five verses earlier (v. 18). So just as in Rev 2:23 there is no problem in a New Testament context with the Son of God (rather than God the Father) being called the searcher of minds and hearts, neither is there a problem with the Spirit being referred to as "he who searches hearts," particularly when the Spirit is the subject of both clauses in the previous verse (v. 26) and of the following clause in v. 27.

assumption that the searcher and knower is the Spirit until solid evidence overturns that assumption.

For most interpreters, that “evidence” is none other than their assumption that the object of the “knowing” is the Spirit’s thoughts. Thus, how could the Spirit be the one who knows about his own thinking? But it has already been argued above that it makes more sense to understand the expression τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος in continuity with its earlier appearance in Rom 8:6 as the Spirit-oriented thoughts of a person than to read it in a completely different way from its earlier usage. But without that assumption in place, there remains no good reason to affirm the traditional understanding of the clause.

Fitzmyer, like many modern interpreters, acknowledges the possibility that the Spirit could be “the one who searches” hearts, but does not accept it because of Hebrew Bible connections that point to God searching, testing, or knowing hearts and minds. He says: “This interpretation is not impossible, but is there any evidence elsewhere for the idea of the Spirit as the one ‘Who searches hearts?’”²³ The examples above should be sufficient evidence that Paul and his contemporaries could have viewed the Spirit as the one who searches hearts and knows people’s thoughts:

4. *The unstated subject of v. 27.* Since many interpreters seem to think that “he who searches hearts” has the ring of a title for God, it appears that they assume such an understanding of v. 27. But as has already been noted, “he who searches hearts” does not seem to appear as a *title* for God, despite the fact that the concept of God examining people is fairly common. Nor is it clearly an allusion to any specific Hebrew Bible passage (unless Prov 20:27 interpreted in line with 1 Clem. 21:2–3 is in view). Until it can be demonstrated that this is a specific title for God (and not his Spirit), or until a definite connection can be made between Rom 8:27 and some specific Hebrew Bible passage, the simple fact that Paul left the actor unstated in v. 27 has to be accounted for somehow. In such cases, the most difficult explanation is that the main actor *changes*. The easiest explanation, of course, is that Paul is continuing to use the same actor—the Spirit—that he has employed twice as subject in the previous verse. Though God becomes the main subject from v. 28 onward (or perhaps 29 onward²⁴),

23. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 519.

24. If the contention of the present study is demonstrated, it adds plausibility to the argument made by a minority of leading interpreters that the πάντα of v. 28 should neither be viewed as the subject of συνέργει in v. 28, nor as the object with God as the subject (as in p46, B, and A). Rather, they argue that the *Spirit* is the implied subject of the verb συνέργει and that πάντα is the object of the verb. See esp. James P. Wilson, “Romans viii.28: Text and Interpretation,” *ExpTim* 60 (1948–49): 110–11; M. Black, “The Interpretation of Romans viii 28,” in *Neotestamentica et Patristica* (NovTSup 6; Leiden: Brill, 1962), 166–72; F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (revised edition; (Leicester: Inter-Varsity / Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 166; John A. T. Robinson, *Wrestling with Romans* (London: SCM, 1979), 104–105; Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 588–90; Jewett, *Romans*, 526–27; and the translations NEB and REB. This is not the place to argue for or against this idea (though its greatest difficulty is how such a suggestion connects with the subject of v. 29, but see the response to that difficulty by Jewett, *Romans*, 527). However this idea

God has not been the explicit subject of *any clause* in Romans 8 up until this point *since verse 3*.²⁵

Thus, in light of the emphatic use of the Spirit as subject in the previous verse (and also in the clause that follows the clause we are studying), and the lack of God as subject in most of Romans 8 to this point, the burden of proof seems to be upon the one who would claim that “the one who searches hearts” in 8:27a is God rather than his Spirit.

5. *The function of ὅτι*. This point is less a positive argument than a necessary clarification, though it functions as a soft argument by pointing out one of the weaknesses of the traditional understanding. In the traditional understanding there are two ways that the ὅτι of Rom 8:27b is viewed, either as “because” (reason/basis for the “knowing”) or “that” (content of the “knowing”). Morris explains the difficulties with each view:

Those who favor “because” maintain that Paul is clearly giving us the reason and further that “that” would tell us very little (“God knows that the Spirit intercedes”; how could it be otherwise?). Those who argue for “that” hold that the following is insufficient as a reason; God cannot be said to know the mind of the Spirit only because he intercedes.²⁶

Though Morris seems not to have questioned the traditional understanding as a result of this observation, I agree that the “that” interpretation of ὅτι in the traditional

has been noted here because one of the points regularly made by those who understand the Spirit to be the subject of v. 28 is that the Spirit has been the main subject in the previous verses, and indeed of much of the chapter.

25. Subjects of clauses in Romans 8 include: ὁ νόμος τοῦ πνεύματος τῆς ζωῆς (v. 2); ὁ θεός (v. 3); δικαίωμα (v. 4); οἱ κατὰ σάρκα ὄντες and οἱ κατὰ πνεῦμα (v. 5); τὸ φρόνημα τῆς σαρκὸς (2x) and τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος (vv. 6–7); οἱ ἐν σαρκὶ ὄντες (v. 8); ὑμεῖς (v. 9); πνεῦμα θεοῦ (v. 9); τις (v. 9); οὗτος (v. 9); Χριστὸς (v. 10); τὸ σῶμα (v. 10); τὸ πνεῦμα (v. 10); τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἐγείραντος τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐκ νεκρῶν (v. 11); ὁ ἐγείρας Χριστὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν (v. 11); implied “we” (v. 12); implied “you” [pl.] (v. 13); ὅσοι (v. 14); οὗτοι (v. 14); implied “you” [pl.] (v. 15); implied “we” (v. 15); αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα (v. 16); implied “we” (v. 16); implied “we” (v. 17); implied “I” (v. 18); τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ (v. 18); ἡ γὰρ ἀποκαταδοκία τῆς κτίσεως (v. 19); ἡ κτίσις (v. 20); αὐτὴ ἡ κτίσις (v. 21); implied “we” (v. 22); πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις (v. 22); ἡμεῖς αὐτοὶ (v. 23); implied “we” (v. 24); ἐλπὶς (v. 24); τίς (v. 24); and implied “we” (v. 25).

And then, of course, the subject of both clauses in v. 26 is the Spirit, and emphatically so. Jewett (*Romans*, 527) draws upon a similar line of argumentation to support his view that the Spirit is the subject of v. 28, but does not seem to see that such reasoning also holds implications for the first clause of v. 27. He writes, “The most likely option is that Paul intended τὸ πνεῦμα (‘the Spirit’) to be supplied by the reader in v. 28b, because this requires no change of subject from the end of v. 27. This option is strongly suggested by the repetition of the prefix -συν in συνεργεῖ (‘it cooperates with’), following συναντιλαμβάνεται (‘it lends assistance with’) in v. 26, where the subject ‘the Spirit’ is explicitly supplied. The same subject is also stated for the next verb in v. 26, ὑπερεντυγχάνει (‘it intercedes’), and must be supplied for the final verb in the immediately preceding v. 27, ἐντυγχάνει (‘it intercedes’).” What Jewett does not bring out is that his reasoning also supports the notion that the Spirit is the unstated subject of the first clause in v. 27.

26. Morris, *Romans*, 329.

view is pedestrian enough that it is unlikely that Paul intended it. Can the Spirit's thoughts that God is purported to know in this verse be reduced only to the thoughts that the Spirit thinks when he is interceding on behalf of the saints? Is there not more to the Spirit's own mindset that God knows? I also agree with Morris that the "because" interpretation in the traditional view is not very likely since interceding for the saints cannot be the only basis upon which God knows what the Spirit is thinking. So granting that each of these is possible, neither approach fits very comfortably with the passage.

But what if the contention of the present study is correct, that it is the Spirit who "knows" the Spirit-mindedness of the believer? How does the ὅτι function in this revised understanding? The ὅτι clause gives the basis (i.e., "because"²⁷) for the Spirit "knowing" the believer's mindset; namely, he knows it because of his mediatorial role as an intercessor on behalf of a believer before God. In order to be effective in his intercessory role, the Spirit has to both know the mindset of the one for whom he intercedes (the believer) and the will of the one (God) to whom he intercedes. The ὅτι, then, functions to explain that the Spirit knows the mindset of the believer via his intercessory role. But why does it matter to Paul's readers that the Spirit's intercession forms the basis for him knowing the believer's mindset? It matters because the Spirit must *know* the believer's mindset to be able to *help* in his or her weakness.

Thus, it is the fact of the Spirit being in an intercessory role that forms the basis both for him *helping* us in our weakness (v. 26) and him *knowing* that we have even in our weakness a mindset dependent on the Spirit (v. 27). That is, the basis both of the helping and the knowing (the second of which is necessary to helping us) is his intercession.

Functionally, this means that the emphasis of v. 27 moves from the expression "according to the will of God" (lit. "according to God") to the intercession of the Spirit.²⁸ But the intercession of the Spirit is *in fact* Paul's chosen emphasis; the explicit mention of this function both in v. 26 and again in v. 27 indicates that this is the case.

6. *The use of τί both in verse 26 and 27.* Though it is easy to miss when reading in English, the striking use of τί in v. 26 and then again in v. 27 links these two verses in a way that argues against the traditional reading and for the alternate reading suggested here. Similar uses of the article in indirect questions such as we find both in v. 26 and v. 27 do appear in Paul, but are rather uncommon, so there must be intentionality on Paul's part in employing these back to back.²⁹ In fact, Paul could have left

27. Clearly with the subject being the Spirit, the "that" interpretation is impossible.

28. This was pointed out to me by Scott Swingle in a personal conversation.

29. See A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1934), 1045–46 for a few examples of the article with indirect questions. I looked a long time without coming across any examples in Paul (though I freely admit I could have missed some) of τὸ τί, where the article modifies the τί as in v. 26. There are a few examples of the indirect question τί working in tandem with an article on another noun, as in our τί τό of v. 27. See Rom 12:2; cf. Eph 1:19; 3:18; 5:17.

out the τί in the second clause (ὁ δε ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας οἶδεν τί τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος) and made the sentence smoother had he wanted. Why, then, was it included? The easiest explanation is that it was added to connect the first τί with the second and to signal that the ideas are related.³⁰ The traditional understanding lacks a satisfactory explanation for the inclusion of the second τί.

Furthermore, in the traditional reading of this clause, the problem of not knowing what to pray for is resolved by the intercession of the Spirit's wordless groanings found in the last line of v. 26.³¹ The problem, however, is that in the traditional understanding this is the *only* resolution Paul gives to the problem of what to pray for. Moreover, Paul is said to move on to a somewhat different topic in the next verse, the topic of God knowing what the Spirit is thinking. But for Paul, there are *two* solutions to the problem of not knowing what to pray for, not just one. The repetition of τί in both verses strongly suggests that this is the case. The first resolution, as in the traditional view, is the Spirit's intercession with wordless groanings (v. 26). The second, which is a continuation of the same thought and the basis of the intercession, is the Spirit's *knowing* the nature of the believer's mindset (literally, the *what*). In the traditional reading of these verses, the τί of v. 26 does not connect to the τί of v. 27 because the τί of v. 26 is about the believer and the τί of v. 27 is about the Spirit. But since the τί connects v. 26 with v. 27, and in fact is part of the answer to the problem of what to pray for in v. 26, we should understand that both the τί of v. 26 and the τί of v. 27 are about the believer. This also supports the alternative interpretation and argues against the traditional understanding of v. 27.

30. How are they related? The τί of v. 26 refers to the content of the believer's prayers, that is, the "what" we should pray (and which we often don't know). The τί of v. 27 refers to the content of the thinking of a Spirit-focused person.

31. Against the view that the "unspoken groanings" is tongues, a view most forcefully argued by Ernst Käsemann, "The Cry for Liberty in the Worship of the Church," in his *Perspectives on Paul* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), 122–37 and in *Romans*, 239–42, see a list of arguments by Peter O'Brien, "Romans 8:26, 27: A Revolutionary Approach to Prayer?," *RTR* 46 (1987): 65–73 (70–71).

[Martin Hengel, in his article on "Hymn and Christology," suggested that in the context of christological development and early Christian worship "The priestly intercession of the exalted Christ at the right hand of God (Romans 8:34) corresponds to the *glossolalic* intercession of the Spirit uttered in the assembly 'with sighs too deep for words' (Romans 8:26f)," in *Studia Biblica 1978, III. Papers on Paul and Other New Testament Authors: Sixth International Congress on Biblical Studies, Oxford 3–7 April 1978* (ed. E. A. Livingstone; JSNTSup 3; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 173–97 (193). Jewett, *Romans*, 523–24, insightfully sums up various components of this ongoing discussion to date. In his view "While some form of charismatic expression is implied, a direct link with glossolalia may be unlikely. . . . Paul is clearly suggesting that the 'weakness' of believers is addressed and sustained by the Spirit's intervention, so it is fair to conclude that he understands all prayer as arising from an inarticulate realm that expresses human vulnerability at its depth. . . . His point is a positive one, that the inarticulate groans of believers, whether glossology, frustration, or pain, are taken up by the Spirit's silent intercession on behalf of the children of God, whose dominion over a fallen world is not yet fully realized."] — Ed.

7. *The parallel structure of verses 26 and 27.* The suggestion that it is the Spirit who searches hearts and that what the Spirit knows is the believer's Spirit-focused mindset is reinforced in the structure that emerges between vv. 26 and 27 in this interpretation. Notice the parallels:

The Spirit helping because he knows

- A. (v. 26) the Spirit helps us in our weakness
- A. (v. 27) [the Spirit] who searches hearts knows

The τί of the praying Spirit-focused believer

- B. (v. 26) for the what (τί) we ought to pray we do not know
- B. (v. 27) what (τί) is the [believer's] mindset on the Spirit

The intercession of the Spirit

- C. (v. 26) but the Spirit himself intercedes with unspoken groanings.
- C. (v. 27) because he [the Spirit] intercedes according to [the will of] God for the saints.

Thus, in v. 27 Paul uses repetition to reinforce and expand upon what he has already been communicating in v. 26, that the Spirit who knows our mindset can help us in our prayers by interceding on our behalf before God.

8. *The overall function of this clause (v. 27).* One key issue is the overall function of v. 27 in what Paul is doing in Romans 8. Any exegetical explanation has to account for why Paul chooses to include this clause and how he expects it to influence his readers.³²

In the first scenario (the traditional reading of this verse), Paul explains to his readers that God knows what the Spirit is thinking. It is an interesting piece of information about the relationship of God to his Spirit, but it does little to help his readers. Why would Paul include this bit of information? Does it encourage, motivate, or any such thing?³³ The primary use of v. 27 in the history of interpretation seems to have been in systematic theological explanation of the interrelationship of the persons of the Trinity. But Paul's purpose in this section is not to write a systematic theology; his purpose is pastoral. The readers already know from v. 26 that the Spirit helps them in their weakness and intercedes for them. Would not one who reads that the Spirit intercedes for them before God assume that God knows the thoughts of his Spirit?³⁴

32. Note that in both scenarios the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to (the will of) God, so that is not the issue being discussed here.

33. Moreover, it is a piece of information about God's relationship to his Spirit that Paul does not write about elsewhere in his letters. Even in 1 Corinthians 2, the Spirit is the one who knows the mind of God, rather than vice versa.

34. Jack Cottrell, *Romans*, (vol. 1; College Press NIV Commentary; Joplin, Mo: College, 1996), 499, comments on this problem: "If God the Father can directly search our hearts, why is it necessary for the Spirit to intercede for us?" But he does not follow through on his observation. His next sentence is: "It is not a matter of necessity, but of choice."

In the standard way of interpreting these verses, what does v. 27 add that they would not already have assumed?

On the other hand, if the Spirit is the one who searches hearts and knows the Spirit-focused mindset of a believer, it is apparent why Paul would emphasize it here. First, this idea connects with his earlier discussion about the importance of walking according to the Spirit and having a Spirit-focused mindset (vv. 4–9), and with his emphatic statement that the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God (v. 16). (Notice that for the Spirit to confirm that we are children of God, the Spirit would have to first *search* and *know* that we are children of God.)³⁵ Furthermore, this clause also explains how the Spirit helps us in our weakness when we do not know what to pray. The Spirit sees that we have a mindset full of thoughts focused on him, and thus redirects our prayers so that they are according to the will of God. In other words, even if we do not know the specifics of what to pray, he knows that we have a Spirit-mindedness, and so makes our prayers effective anyway.

Thus this clause functions as *encouragement*. Paul is in effect saying: “The Holy Spirit is the one who *searches* your hearts, dear believer, and *knows* that you have a mindset that is focused on him. Be encouraged, and continue to cultivate such a mindset as you pray.” Accordingly, Paul in this clause is once again encouraging the believers in Rome to continue praying with Spirit-focused mindsets.³⁶ The traditional reading is for the most part just *additional information about the Spirit*, whereas the reading suggested in the present study continues to extend and add to the encouragement that Paul has already been offering his readers in Romans 8.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us revisit the argument for the traditional reading of Rom 8:27, that is, that God is the searcher and that what he knows is the thinking of the Spirit. The traditional approach relies upon an enabling relationship between the line ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας and the line τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος. If ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας were to appear in the context in which it is found *apart* from τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος, I think it can confidently be asserted that most interpreters would understand the searcher to be the Spirit, particularly because the Spirit is the main subject

35. There are some interesting parallels between v. 16 and vv. 26–27. Both not only mention the Spirit, both refer to the Spirit as αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα. And in both, there is a compound verb with the σύν prefix: in v. 16 it is συμμαρτυρέω; in v. 26 it is συναντιλαμβάνω. Finally, both seem to use law-court language. In v. 16 the Spirit bears witness (cf. inheritance language in v. 17); and in vv. 26–27 the intercession of the Spirit is emphasized.

36. As many commentators have pointed out, Paul’s encouragement in Eph 6:18 “through every prayer and petition praying at all times in the Spirit” may be a short-handed way of describing the kind of praying he lays out in Rom 8:26–27. But the connection between Rom 8:26–27 and Eph 6:18 is strengthened significantly if the position supported in the present study is correct. For if τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος in Rom 8:27 is the believer’s (S)piritual mindset when he or she is praying, a straightforward way to describe this would be “praying in the Spirit.”

in the previous verse and because of the verbal parallel with 1 Cor 2:10. Similarly, if the line τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος were to appear without ὁ ἐραυνῶν τὰς καρδίας at this point in Romans 8, there is little doubt that it would be interpreted as the believer's mindset on the Spirit, because that is how most interpreters and translators have already interpreted it based upon contextual clues in Rom 8:5–7. This highlights the fact that the case for the way this clause is normally interpreted is somewhat *circular*—and thus not a very stable argument—since the *weaker* interpretation of each individual expression is preferred out of dependence on the other expression. This should give us pause. When we add in the other positive arguments for the alternative reading propounded here, including the presence of the Spirit in similar texts outside of Paul, the function of the ὅτι, the two uses of τί, the parallel structure of vv. 26 and 27, and the overall function of v. 27 in Romans 8, we are left to conclude that the searcher and knower is best understood as the Spirit and that what he “knows” is that the mind of the believer is set on the Spirit.

What are the implications of a revised understanding of Romans 8:27? Three are worth highlighting, the first theological, the second contextual, and the third practical. 1) In the history of systematic theological reflection, this clause has often been cited to illustrate something about the way the persons of the Trinity interrelate. A revised understanding of the verse does not necessarily call into question any of the conclusions about how God interacts with the Spirit, but understanding this clause in the way supported in the present study does remove a frequently cited verse from the discussion. 2) A revised understanding of this clause connects Paul's earlier discussion about having Spirit-focused mindsets in general with prayer in particular. In other words, Paul is not just interested that his readers develop Spirit-mindedness (Rom 8:5–7) as they “walk” (8:4) through life, he is concerned that they apply this same Spirit-mindedness to their prayers (8:27). This brings unity to Paul's discussions about the Spirit. 3) For those of us who think prayer matters but struggle to know what to pray for, there is encouragement in this clause to develop mindsets that are focused on the Spirit when praying. It is not that we pray about anything we want; our mindsets in prayer should be focused upon the Spirit who intercedes for us. And this brings encouragement to those who struggle in prayer, which appears to be one of Paul's main intentions in including this clause.³⁷

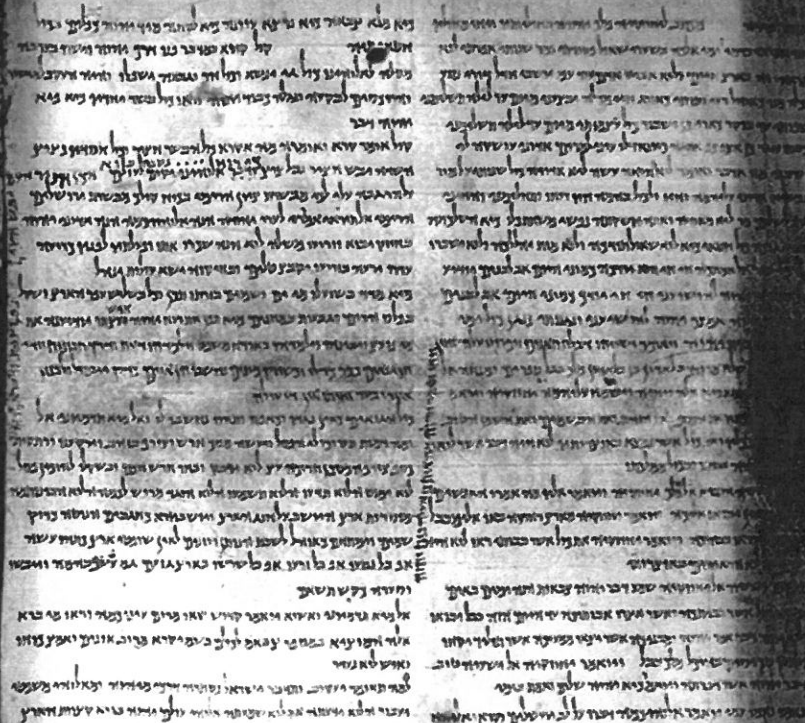
37. Special thanks to the members of the New Testament Colloquium at Biola University for interacting with me on an earlier version of this study, to David Huttar for offering a detailed response later in the process, and to Adam Day for helping me with the secondary literature search.

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