

# WHY WITHOUT EXCUSE? AN INQUIRY INTO THE SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC RELATIONS OF ROMANS 1:18–21

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## **Abstract**

This study aims at ascertaining what can be inferred from the linguistic evidence about what Romans 1:20 “said” within its primary context, viz. as part of the introduction to Paul’s letter. Due to the controversies that the interpretation of this verse has caused, a critical assessment of various translations and commentaries is given before proposing and motivating an alternative interpretation of *voούμενα* and its syntactic and semantic relations to the rest of the sentence and the pericope.

## **1. Introduction**

Romans 1:20 is perhaps one of the most frequently discussed verses in the NT—“well-trodden” in the words of Cook (1994, 494). Since the Patristic age and up to the recent past, it has been interpreted from various theological perspectives, and quoted and utilized in a variety of arguments. Among the church fathers, the comments of Tertullian, Origen, and John Chrysostom may serve as examples of the various ways in which this verse has been put to the service of theological discourse (cf. Horn & Niens 1982). In modern theological discussion, this verse has served the interests of adherents and opponents of ‘natural theology’ (cf. Dunn 1988, 56; Caragounis 1988, 226-227; Mussner 1992, 147-148; Young 2000, 695; 701-703), enlightenment and post-enlightenment theologians (cf. Fitzmyer 1993, 274), and those concerned with questions of universalism (cf. Caragounis 1988, 230-232) and religious pluralism.

Much of the controversy surrounding verse 20 is focused on the passive participle *voούμενα* and its syntactic and semantic relations to the rest of the

sentence: does it support a notion of ‘mental perception’ distinct from the sensory perception implied in the main verb καθοράται, or does it restrict the meaning of the main verb itself (marking καθοράω as a figurative term for “knowing”), and what role does the human νοῦς play, according to Romans 1:20, in the process of attaining knowledge of God?

This study is modest in scope, limiting itself to an investigation of the syntactic and semantic relations that seem to exist among the different sentence elements (words, phrases and clauses) and among the different sentences of which the larger sections of the pericope consist. Its aim is to ascertain as much as can be inferred from the linguistic evidence about what this verse “said” within its primary context, viz. as part of the introduction to Paul’s letter to the Romans.

It would perhaps be appropriate to “apologise” beforehand for painstakingly exposing what seems to me to be flaws in the arguments of many commentators. More than a century ago, a reading of Romans 1:20 was published that agrees to the one I am proposing, at least in its interpretation of the syntax (Schjött 1903). This reading was summarily rejected by Fridrichsen (1916), and since then it has been flatly ignored, despite many indications that it may be accurate. I hope to be able to demonstrate that Schjött’s views had at least some merit.

## 2. The Greek Text and some Translations of Romans 1:18–21

It seems in order to approach these issues by first quoting the Greek of verse 20 within its immediate context, i.e. from verse 18 to 21. Note the indentation: lines in “hanging indent” style represent the remainder of syntactic units extending beyond one line of text:

18 ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ  
ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων

19 διότι τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστιν ἐν αὐτοῖς

ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφάνερωσεν

20 τὰ γὰρ ἄοράτα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα  
καθοράται ἢ τε αἶδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης

εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογήτους

21 διότι γνόνητες τὸν θεὸν οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν ἢ ἠψυχάριστησαν

ἀλλ’ ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν

καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδιά

The *New King James* version (NKJ, 1982) represents a line of interpretation begun by the *King James Version* (KJV, 1611) and still followed by many modern English translations of verses 20 to 21a:

*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, ...*

The *New International Version* (NIV), *Today's English Version* (TEV) and *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) are further examples of this tradition:

NIV – *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without any excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, ...*

TEV – *Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen. Men can perceive them in the things that God has made. So they have no excuse at all! They know God, but they do not give him the honour that belongs to him, nor do they thank him. ...*

RSV – *Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, ...*

### **3. Interpretation of the Sentence Elements and their Mutual Relations**

When the KJV's rendering of verses 20 to 21a is closely examined, it seems to represent the Greek as follows:

*For* (γάρ – marks the sentence as an explanation of the preceding) *the invisible things of him* (τὰ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ – subject: the adjective understood as substantive) *from the creation of the world* (ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου –

temporal clause) *are clearly seen* (καθορᾶται – main proposition of the sentence), *being understood* (νοούμενα – participle understood as modifying the verb καθορᾶται) *by the things that are made* (τοῖς ποιήμασιν – means), even *his eternal power and Godhead* (ἢ τε αἰδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης – appositional noun phrase understood as identifying τὰ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ); *so that they are without excuse* (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογίτους – consequence): *Because that* (διότι – reason), *when they knew God* (γνόντες τὸν θεὸν – concessive clause), *they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful* (οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν ἢ ἠύχαρίστησαν – completes the causal clause beginning with διότι); ...

Despite the use of more idiomatic expressions and a slight shift in word order, the NIV seems to interpret this verse exactly the same as the KJV and the NKJ.

TEV—*Ever since God created the world* (ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου – temporal clause), *his invisible qualities* (τὰ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ – subject: the adjective understood as a substantive), *both his eternal power and his divine nature* (ἢ τε αἰδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης – identification of τὰ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ), *have been clearly seen* (καθορᾶται – main proposition of the sentence). *Men can perceive them* (νοούμενα – participle presumably understood as modifying the verb καθορᾶται, but presented as an independent statement re-formulating its meaning) *in the things that God has made* (τοῖς ποιήμασιν – means or instrument). *So they have no excuse at all!* (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογίτους – consequence) *They know God* (independent clause), *but they do not give him the honour that belongs to him* (independent [contrasting] negation), *nor do they thank him* (independent [paratactic] negation).

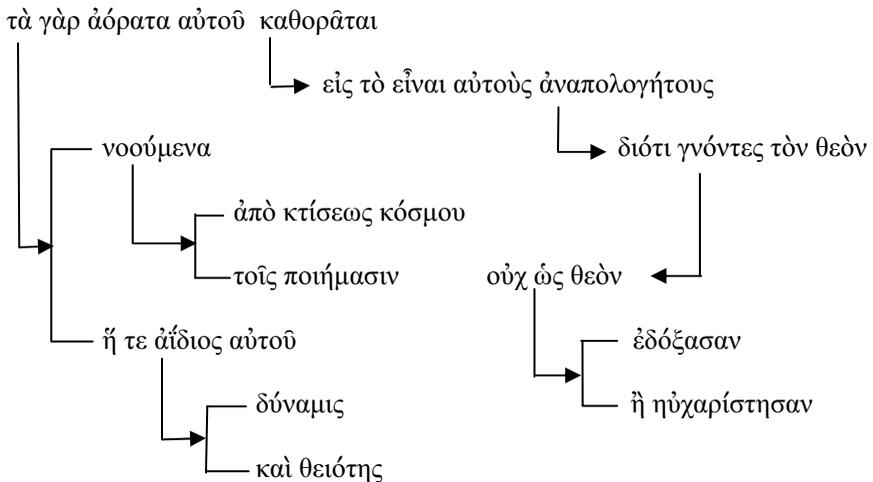
The RSV is, in general terms, more formally concordant to the Greek text than the TEV—note that RSV retains the nominalization “creation of the world” and the passives “has been clearly perceived” and “the things that have been made”—but it underplays the distinction between καθορᾶται and νοούμενα by rendering both together as “has been clearly perceived”. Perhaps the RSV simply ignores νοούμενα, which in itself may be an indication that the translators regard it as synonymous with καθορᾶται.

#### 4. Louw's Semantic Discourse Analysis of Romans

A detailed exposition of the syntactic and semantic relations among the textual elements of the passage in question is given by Louw (1979), who says in his commentary:

Colon 2 has as matrix τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ καθορᾶται = God's invisible qualities can be known (ὄραω applies figuratively to knowing), i.e. though God cannot be seen, he can be known. In (νοούμενα...) and (ἢ τε ἀίδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης) God's qualities are commented on: they can be perceived (νοούμενα) and they involve his eternal power and divinity (ἀίδιος + δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης). That is to say: God's nature can be known. It can be known ever since the world was made (ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου) in the things God has made (τοῖς ποιήμασιν). Therefore: people can know God because of the things God has made. In (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογήτους) the result of τὰ ἀόρατα καθορᾶται is given: because man can know God, he has no excuse for his sins. (Louw 1979, II.42)

Louw (1979, I, pericope no.3) further explains these textual relations by the following schematic presentation:



Note, especially, the relation seemingly indicated by the first arrow on the left: the participle *νοούμενα* is presented as a qualifier of *τὰ ἄόρατα αὐτοῦ* (the latter being understood as a noun phrase). This interpretation differs from the general tendency to regard *νοούμενα* as a modifier of the main verb, *καθορᾶται*.

There seems to be at least three questions posed but not answered by Louw's exposition. Firstly, if it is God's *ἄόρατα* that are said to be "knowable", should this not alert us against reading a rational or intellectual process into *καθορᾶται*? The obvious word play would tend to restrict the meaning of *καθορᾶται*, would it not?

A second problem is the supposition seemingly underlying the statement "God's nature can be known. It can be known ever since the world was made... in the things God has made". This statement repeats the main proposition, merely substituting *νοέω* for *καθοράω*. Does this imply that these terms are semantically equivalent? If so, it would introduce a redundant repetition into the sentence.

Finally, the frequent repetition of the verb "can" in Louw's commentary on this passage prompts the question whether knowledge of God is presented here as a mere potentiality, rather than as a common fact of human existence. This may have a notable effect on the logic of Paul's argument in this section of the letter.

## 5. The Views Prevailing in Commentaries on Romans

Bruce (1963, 84) seems to follow the KJV's rendering: "*Are clearly seen, being understood*. Gk. *nooumena kathoratai*, where the former verb refers strictly to the intelligence and the latter to physical sight." He does not explicitly comment on the syntactic relationship between *nooumena* and *kathoratai*, but two points are worth noticing: (a) The way he quotes and renders the two words would suggest that he understands *νοούμενα* as an adverbial modifier of *καθορᾶται*, and (b) by quoting the verb forms without *τὰ ἄόρατα* and *τοῖς ποιήμασιν*, he detaches the verbs from their context – a shift that allows him to think in terms of man "contemplating God's works" being able to "grasp enough of His nature" to be prevented from the error of identifying created things with the Creator. Careful consideration of the syntax of the Greek sentence should warn one that this reading is not accurate. In fact, a reading such as Bruce's would require a genitive absolute — *τῶν ποιημάτων νοουμένων*.

Cranfield (1975, 105) translates: “For his invisible attributes are clearly seen since the creation of the world, being perceived by means of the things he has made, even both his eternal power and divinity, ...” He is more explicit than Bruce about the syntactic relations:

... some understand *νοούμενα* as virtually equivalent to an adverbial expression modifying *καθορᾶται* (indicating that the seeing referred to is a seeing with the mind’s eye) and connect *τοῖς ποιήμασιν* with the combination *νοούμενα καθορᾶται* as a whole; while others regard *τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα* as an ordinary participial clause explanatory of *καθορᾶται*, some of them taking both *νοούμενα* and *καθορᾶται* to refer to physical sight, others taking them both to refer to mental perception. (Cranfield 1975, 114-115)

This exposition, however, merely serves to present the diverse interpretations of his predecessors. Cranfield considers the latter reading, but decides against it: “But the fact that the oxymoron *ἀόρατα ... καθορᾶται* is clearly deliberate should probably encourage us to understand *καθορᾶται* (and therefore also *νοούμενα*) as referring to physical sight ...” (1975, 115). A further option—interpreting the two verbs differently, as Bruce does (see above)—is dismissed by Cranfield as being “hardly possible”, on the objection that “it is natural to understand the action denoted by the participle to be either prior to, or contemporaneous with, and not subsequent to, that denoted by the indicative” (1975, 115 n.1). The temporal indicators associated with *καθορᾶται*—its present form (or: imperfective aspect) as well as the phrase *ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου*—warrant the interpretation “ever since the creation of the world ... have been (and still are) clearly seen”. This neutralizes Cranfield’s objection, since *νοούμενα* can either way not be construed as denoting action subsequent to this.

The flaw in Cranfield’s argument is that he repeats the flaws of those with whom he disagrees. Even if *νοούμενα* is understood as “an adverbial expression modifying *καθορᾶται*”, this is no compelling reason to take it as an indication that *καθορᾶται* refers to “a seeing with the mind’s eye”. To infer that is to confuse syntax with semantics. Cranfield himself does the same when he suggests that “*καθορᾶται* (and therefore also *νοούμενα*)” refers to physical sight. Even if he is correct in seeing *ἀόρατα ... καθορᾶται* as a deliberate oxymoron, with direct implications for the meaning of *καθορᾶται*, this does not necessarily provide any indications about the meaning of *νοούμενα*. Anyway, this whole argument is rendered irrelevant

by the interpretation that I will suggest and motivate in the next part of this paper.

Harrisville (1980, 35) seems to interpret *voούμενα* similarly to the way Bruce does (that is, as referring strictly to the intelligence), since he explains: “In other words, God’s invisibility, his eternal power and deity are seen by bringing to consciousness or reflection what is before the eye—the created order.” In his following comment, however—“For the one who understands the things that have been made in their appeal and claim, God is Lord and oneself a creature” (1980, 35)—he seems to miss the important point that—even if he were correct in taking *voούμενα* to be an adverbial participle—*τὰ ἀόρατα*, not *τὰ ποιήματα*, is presented in the Greek text as the grammatical subject of the passive *voούμενα*. It may also be noted that this comment is an unacknowledged paraphrase of Käsemann: “Wer die *ποιήματα* kritisch in ihrem Anruf und Anspruch versteht, dem sind sie nach Pls Hinweis auf seinen Herrn und damit auf die eigene Geschöpflichkeit” (cf. Käsemann 1973, 37).

Dunn (1988) notes that the language of verse 20 is “scarcely characteristic of earliest Christian thought”, and cites various parallels to illustrate that it is “familiar in Stoic thought” (1988, 57). From this he concludes: “Paul thus is clearly and deliberately following Hellenistic Judaism in using this kind of language as an apologetic bridge to non-Jewish philosophy” (1988, 58), but adds that “Paul is trading upon, without necessarily committing himself to, the Greek (particularly Stoic) understanding of an invisible realm of reality... which can be known only through the rational power of the mind”. Dunn translates verse 20: “for his invisible characteristics ... are perceived intellectually in the things which have been made, ...” (1988, 57), and explains: “it is scarcely possible that Paul did not intend his readers to think in terms of some kind of rational perception of the fuller reality in and behind the created cosmos” (1988, 58).

Fitzmyer (1993) translates: “... his invisible qualities... have been perceived by reflection on what he has made” (1993, 269), and comments:

*his invisible qualities.* Lit., “his unseen things,” i.e., the sum of his divine being... *his eternal power and divinity.* The examples of God’s invisible qualities are abstractly expressed... *have been perceived by reflection.* Lit., “being intellectually apprehended are perceived.” Although God cannot be seen with human senses, he is perceived in his works by the human mind... Paul does use an oxymoron... *aorata*, “unseen things,” and *kathoratai*, “are perceived”; i.e., though *in se* invisible, they are nevertheless perceptible by

the human *nous*. In the contemplation of the created world and in reflection on it, a human being perceives the great “Unseen” behind it all – the omnipotence and divine character of its Maker... *on what he has made*. Lit., “(by reflection) on (his) works,” i.e., on what God has produced in creating the world. Although God is essentially invisible, his qualities are mirrored in the great “works” (*poiēmata*) produced by God. (Fitzmyer 1993, 280)

Regarding the syntactic relations among the sentence elements, Fitzmyer says: “The words *tois poiēmasin* can be understood to modify either *nooumena*, ‘being intellectually apprehended in what he has made,’ or *kathoratai*, ‘are perceived in what he has made.’ The second seems preferable” (1993, 281). Though Fitzmyer does not motivate his preference, the present author would agree with him in taking *τοῖς ποιήμασιν* with *καθορᾶται* (see below).

Moo (1996, 104) notes the same two possibilities—taking *τοῖς ποιήμασιν* either with *καθορᾶται* or with *νοούμενα*. Contrary to Fitzmyer (see above), however, he prefers to take the phrase with the participle:

Two different connections among the main elements in the verse are possible: (1) “his invisible attributes... have been seen through the things he has made, being understood”;<sup>59</sup> (2) “his invisible attributes... have been seen, being understood through the things he has made.”<sup>60</sup> Probably the latter makes better sense because, on the former rendering, the word “being understood” is somewhat redundant.

59. See NEB. On this reading, *τοῖς ποιήμασιν*... is an instrumental modifier of the main verb, *καθορᾶται* (“have been seen”), with the participle *νοούμενα* (“being understood”) modifying the main verb.

60. See NIV. On this interpretation, *τοῖς ποιήμασιν* goes with *νοούμενα*, the whole modifying *καθορᾶται*.

(Moo 1996, 104, with footnotes)

German commentaries generally interpret *νοούμενα* as an adverbial modifier with *καθορᾶται*, and translate it with “(wird) vernünftig (wahrgenommen)” or “(wird) mit (den Augen) der Vernunft (erschaut)”.

Three examples would suffice for illustration—Schlier (1977), Wilckens (1978), and Schmithals (1988):

In welcher Weise hat er sich bekanntgegeben, so dass er den Menschen bekannt ist?

So – *V 20* –, dass τὰ ἄορατα αὐτοῦ... νοούμενα καθορᾶται. Der Plural des Neutrums... steht... auch deshalb, weil im Folgenden zwei Substantive gebraucht werden, δύναμις und θεϊότης, die das Erkennbare näher kennzeichnen... eine nähere Bestimmung durch νοούμενα... ein verständiges oder einsichtiges Sehen. (vgl. Hebr 11,3; auch Eph 3,4. 20)... “denkend wahrgenommen”... (Schlier 1977, 52)

Paulus [sagt] in *V 20* ... von Gottes unsichtbarem Wesen als ganzem, es stehe für vernünftiges καθορᾶν der Menschen offen.

... Gott... ist also *als ἄορατος zugänglich* und kann als solcher in Gottes Schöpfungswerken “vernünftig-wahnehmend” (νοούμενα) “geschaut” werden (καθορᾶται)<sup>174</sup>.

174. νοούμενα gehört zu καθορᾶται und kennzeichnet dieses als vernünftiges Wahrnehmen, durch welches im Sichtbaren das Unsichtbare geschaut wird. Dabei wird dem νοῦς durchaus das Vermögen zugeschrieben, das Corp Herm *V 2* so definiert wird: νόησις γὰρ μόνον ὁρᾷ τὸ ἀφανές. (Wilckens 1978, 105, with footnote)

... wahrgenommen... mit Hilfe der menschlichen Vernunft... im Sinne eines rationalen Rückschlusses vom Werk auf den Werkmeister. (Schmithals 1988, 78)

For a detailed critical discussion of the predominant views among German scholars, beginning with Martin Luther’s (Latin) commentary on Romans, see Mussner (1992, 138-144).

Mussner argues that the generally accepted interpretation of νοούμενα (as illustrated in the above citations) would be better suited to a Greek text reading *νοῖ καθορᾶται* or *νοοῦντες καθορᾶται* (though he admits that the latter would leave the participle syntactically “hanging in the air”). His main objection to the generally accepted view is that commentators often neglect a synchronic exegesis in favour of a diachronic one—that is, one which primarily considers and implements religio-historical and philosophical material (1992, 144). (Cf. Dunn 1988, 57-58; Fitzmyer 1993, 272-273.)

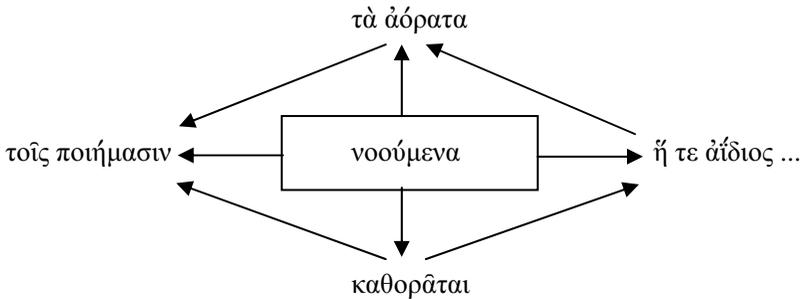
Mussner’s own proposal (1992, 144-148), however, rests on a rather sketchy syntactic-semantic analysis. Starting with the syntax, he notes that verse 20 is marked by the particle γὰρ as “Begründung” of the assertion in verse 19 (τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστιν ἐν αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανερώσεν). He regards the aorist ἐφανερώσεν and the present φανερόν ἐστιν as jointly indicating a long past revelatory event (coinciding with the creation of the world) that has continuing relevance. Up to this point his

analysis seems convincing; but the comments that follow are not particularly enlightening. From the explanation in verse 20, he says, it can be seen that the invisible features of God (“*ἀίδια* Gottes”), which are seen in the created things, are concerned with the creation of the world. Since its creation, two aspects of the invisible God—namely his eternal power and divinity (ἢ τε *αἰδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης* as explanatory apposition to τὰ *ἀόρατα*)—have become visible to mortals. Though one may agree with his interpretation of τοῖς *ποιήμασιν* as both *dativus instrumenti* and *dativus causae* for seeing God’s eternal power and divinity in the works of creation, this neuter plural noun can not convincingly be presented as the reason why Paul wrote τὰ *ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ* in stead of ὁ *ἀόρατος θεὸς... νοούμενος καθορᾶται*. Mussner seems to be confusing the subject and instrument of καθορᾶται, identifying τὰ *αἰδια αὐτοῦ* (Mussner’s term for τὰ *ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ* and adjuncts) with τὰ *ποιήματα* (“die Schöpfungswerke”). Obviously the works of creation are discernible—but this is the basic assumption underlying Paul’s sentence, not the point he is making.

With regard to the semantic relations of Romans 1:20, Mussner focuses attention on the neuter passive participle νοούμενα. This, he says, is to be taken in the causative sense of the passive: “da sie sich... wahrnehmen lassen” (“by letting themselves be discerned”). He explains that the possibility of discerning does not come about by the νοῦς of mortals, but is given to the *ποιήματα* themselves by the Creator. Here again it should be noted (a) that the discernibility of created matter is an assumption on which the statement is based, not the content of the statement itself, and (b) that τὰ *ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ*, not τὰ *ποιήματα*, are said to be seen.

The flaws in Mussner’s argument are not redeemed by his insistence that all lexemes in Romans 1:20 (as in every other sentence) stand in syntactic and semantic relation to each other; nor are the inconsistencies expelled by the schematic presentation that he adds:

Selbstverständlich stehen alle Lexeme in Röm 1,20 (wie auch in jedem anderen Satz) in syntaktischer und semantischer Relation zueinander; so auch das Partizip νοούμενα, dieses besonders aber zu τὰ *αἰδια*, zu τοῖς *ποιήμασιν*, zu καθορᾶται, zu ἢ τε *αἰδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης*. Ein Schaubild möge das noch verdeutlichen:



(Mussner 1992, 147)

Ironically, this schematic presentation reflects the prevailing scholarly confusion about Romans 1:20—with *νοούμενα* occupying the central position of focused attention, but variously related to every other item around it—more closely than it reflects the relations among elements within the text itself.

Although he explicitly denies that *νοούμενα* directly modifies *καθορᾶται* (“kein participium coniunctum zum regierenden Verbum *καθορᾶται* im Sinn eines ‘mit Vernunft schauen’”), Mussner ultimately does not escape the pitfalls of reading it as a modifier to the main verb.

Since the publication of Mussner’s article (1992), the predominant interpretation of *νοούμενα* has been repeated by Stuhlmacher (1998, 36): “Seit Grundlegung der Welt spiegelt sich nämlich Gottes Schöpfermacht und Grösse in den Werken der Schöpfung und wird so für das Auge der Vernunft sichtbar”.

A rare—though often misunderstood—exception to this general pattern among German commentators is Käsemann (<sup>2</sup>1980). He warns against interpreting the passage as if it contained a parenthetical clause with *τὰ ποιήματα* as subject of *νοούμενα* paralleling the main clause:

*νοούμενα* bezieht sich auf *ἀόρατα*. So lässt sich... in *τοῖς ποιήμασιν* *νοούμενα* nicht eine parenthetische Parallele zum übrigen Satz erblicken. Man kann hier nicht einmal die verklausulierte Paradoxie finden: Wir sehen den Unsichtbaren, indem man die modale Bestimmung des Verbs... aktivisch wendet und einem *ᾧ [sic] καθορῶμεν* gleichsetzt. (Käsemann <sup>1</sup>1973, 36)

The reading of *voούμενα* against which Käsemann warns is quite evident in the following piece of e-mail correspondence (dated March 2, 1997), containing Fred Nofer's response to an inquiry by Jonathan Robie:

I would suggest you might want to consider NOOYMENA as being the instrumental use of the adverbial participle. This would view the participial clause (TOΙΣ ΠΟΙΗΜΑΣΙΝ ΝΟΟΥΜΕΝΑ) as in agreement with the subject (ΤΑ ΑΟΡΑΤΑ) of the leading verb (ΚΑΘΟΡΑΤΑΙ) and modifying the latter in an instrumental capacity, i.e. "His invisible things... are being seen by means of understanding the things that are made", with the dative being translated as a direct object in English (see H.P.V. Nunn, *A Syntax of New Testament Greek*, p. 48). (Nofer 1997)

Nofer does not seem to realize that he is conflating the potential instrumental force of the dative case with the instrumental use of the participle; nor does he heed the problem of reading the dative (*ποιήμασιν*) as direct object of *voούμενα*—a passive verb form.

## 6. Romans 1:20 in Other Studies and Essays

Cook (1994, 502) conducted a *TLG* search but found no exact parallels to what he calls "the expression *voούμενα καθορᾶται*"—except in patristic commentaries on Romans 1:20 (where the combination occurs in direct quotations of this passage). He concludes that the "expression is (at least in its precise grammatical form) a creation of Paul", without noticing that the juxtaposition of the words *voούμενα* and *καθορᾶται* does not necessarily imply that the combination constitutes a fixed "expression".

Cook also asserts that "τὰ ἀόρατα [θεοῦ] used to refer to God's qualities or God in God's invisibility appears to be an original formulation of Paul" (1994, 509). Again, he seems not to realize that the non-occurrence of this usage elsewhere may be an indication that the string of text he used as search term does not constitute a meaningful unit in these contexts.

Both these observations, considered jointly, should at least prompt further investigation into the possible relations among the diverse elements of Romans 1:20. There seems to be a distinct possibility that the search results are unreliable due to the syntactic association of *voούμενα* with an element to which it does not belong (*καθορᾶται*), and the corresponding separation of this lexeme from other elements (*τὰ ἀόρατα*, etc.) to which it does belong.

Young (2000) regards the process of acquiring knowledge of God as involving both divine initiative (1:19) and a human role. The latter, he says, is depicted by Paul (in 1:20) “as perceiving (καθορᾶται) by means of mental reflection (νοούμενα) on the things that God made” (2000, 701-702). He paraphrases this verse as follows: “Ever since the time of creation, humans have mentally perceived something about the invisible God by means of observing things that are made” (2000, 703).

Note the haphazard way Young renders the Greek: καθορᾶται by “perceiving” as well as “mentally perceived”; and νοούμενα by “mental reflection”, but also by “observing”. Could one blame him, in the light of the confusing picture presented by the different commentaries?

## **7. Objections to the Prevalent Interpretations of νοούμενα in Romans 1:20**

The different translations either interpret νοούμενα as a mere adverbial modifier with καθορᾶται, or simply ignore it. The problem with this may be more clearly illustrated by presenting the different steps of Paul’s argument in reverse order:

5. conclusion: people are without excuse before God
4. why? – because they do not honour and thank him as they should
3. but how can they? – because they know him
2. how? – his invisible attributes have always been seen in his works
1. which attributes? – his eternal power and his divinity

This argument is logical only if one supposes that mere awareness of God’s power and divinity would lead to honouring and thanking him. This is an unfounded supposition, however, because both honouring and thanking are forms of communication; they occur within an interpersonal relation that is not established merely by becoming aware of characteristics. Stated differently—what must men know of God, for thanking and honouring him to be their appropriate (expected and required) reaction?

Even if people can infer God’s character from his deeds, their reaction to it would remain their own affair. Only when they “see” from God’s deeds what he is thinking does it mean that he has communicated to them through his deeds. Then he may expect from them an appropriate reaction.

The missing link in the argument, then, the element that would guarantee its inner logic, seems to be some communicative aspect of God's nature that is evident to man when regarding his works of creation. This element seems lacking in all interpretations that assign *νοούμενα* to the verbal rather than the nominal part of the sentence.

On the other hand, the connection of *νοούμενα* to *καθορᾶται* as an adverbial modifier, in whatever sense, seems problematic—witness the many controversies surrounding this verse. The most popular reading, viz. that God's invisible attributes are seen when his works of creation are being considered, stumbles on the case usage in this sentence: the dative *τοῖς ποιήμασιν* can hardly be construed as grammatical subject of *νοούμενα*, which is passive voice; and if *τὰ ἀόρατα* is taken as the subject, the interpreter faces an awkward double instrument—both the noun phrase in the dative case and the possibly adverbial participle (requiring us to read: “God's invisible attributes are seen by being considered by the things that have been made”).

These, then, are the problems that seem to defy satisfactory explanation in terms of the generally accepted interpretation. Can a better alternative be proposed?

## 8. Proposed Alternative Interpretation

The present author suggests that the participle *νοούμενα* should be interpreted as a substantive (“what is thought” = “thoughts”) and should be read as the first in a series consisting of three elements: *τὰ νοούμενα ἢ τε δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης*.

Note that this interpretation of the syntax has already been suggested a century ago by Schjött (1903, 75-78). His proposal was rejected by Fridrichsen (1916, 159-168), followed by Fitzmyer (1993, 280), on the basis of the objection that “God's ‘eternal power and divinity’ are hardly his ‘thoughts,’ and *nooumena* are scarcely the same as Platonic *noêta*”.

The interpretation proposed in this study makes neither of these claims. I do not read *ἢ τε αἰδῖος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης* as an apposition to *νοούμενα* (an interpretation of which Schjött seems to be falsely accused), and I do not identify *νοούμενα* with the Platonic—or, for that matter, Philonic or neo-Pythagorean (cf. Cook 1994, 504)—concept of *νοητά*. However tempting such associations may be to some (cf. Dunn 1988, 57-58; Wilckens 1978, 96-100), I am restricting myself in this paper to

consideration of the syntactic relations among different elements within the text of Romans 1:18–21.

## 9. Motivation on the Basis of Syntax

In view of the general and persistent refusal among commentators and translators to consider the alternative suggested here, it seems necessary to provide a thorough motivation of it, beginning with the syntactic relations between textual elements.

The paratactical conjunction of three sentence elements is usually expressed as follows: *A καὶ B καὶ C*. This may, however, be expressed equally well by a combination of *τε* and *καί*: *A B τε καὶ C*. In this way a closer link is suggested between the respective elements—something like “A as well as B and C” (cf. Blass & Debrunner 1961, par. 444).

The sentence in verse 20—with its subject expressed according to the formula *A B τε καὶ C*—is expanded by the addition of other sentence elements: the descriptive terms *ἀόρατα* and *ἀίδιος*, the genitive *αὐτοῦ* (2x), as well as the adverbial modifiers *ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου* and *τοῖς ποιήμασιν*. Each of these additions is semantically significant. The first, *ἀόρατα*, contrasts directly with *καθορᾶται*, but also with *φανερὸν* and *ἐφανέρωσεν* (1:19). The adjective *ἀίδιος* emphasizes the greatness of God’s power and divinity, and is reflected in *οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν* (1:21) and again in *τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ* (1:23). The pronoun *αὐτοῦ* refers to God—*οὐ θεοῦ* and *ὁ θεὸς* (1:19) as well as *τὸν θεὸν* and *ὡς θεὸν* (1:21). The adverbial extension *ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου* attaches to the semantic content of *ἀίδιος*; and *τοῖς ποιήμασιν* resolves the seeming paradox in *ἀόρατα καθορᾶται*.

The matter is complicated here, however, by the order in which these added elements are presented. Therefore the following exposition will focus on the stylistic effect of the word order of Romans 1:20.

The modifiers *ἀόρατα* and *αὐτοῦ* are presented in relation to *τὰ... νοούμενα* in exactly the same order as *ἀίδιος* and *αὐτοῦ* are placed in relation to *ἡ... δύναμις*. This reinforces the internal cohesion of the whole sentence—a sentence that would otherwise seem to lack cohesion due to the great number of sentence elements (all of them contextually relevant, as explained above).

What is more, the position of the verb *καθορᾶται* is significant. The usual position would be at the beginning of the sentence (cf. Blass & Debrunner 1961, par. 472). Since the subject is placed first here, however,

the normal position of the verb would now be at the end of the sentence, that is, after θεϊότης. (Remember that, with the passive form καθορᾶται, the matrix of the sentence is merely N + V [subject plus verb].) Placing the verb in this final position would neutralize the intended effect of the paradox ἀόρατα καθορᾶται, however; therefore the verb has been placed where it is: rather than writing *A B τε καὶ C καθορᾶται*, Paul wrote *A καθορᾶται B τε καὶ C*.

A single syntactic objection to the interpretation proposed here should be noted. It concerns the position of the prepositional phrase ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου and the noun phrase τοῖς ποιήμασιν. Such elements, if placed between a noun and its article, normally should be taken as modifying that noun. This would mean that ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου and τοῖς ποιήμασιν here modify τὰ... νοούμενα, yielding the awkward meaning “his thoughts since the creation of the world in (or “by”) what he has made”.

This is indeed a valid objection, meriting serious consideration. However, the collective force of the other syntactic considerations discussed in this section seem to outweigh this objection. Therefore, my proposal remains to read (τὰ) νοούμενα as “thoughts” and to take ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου and τοῖς ποιήμασιν as adverbial modifiers of καθορᾶται, despite their position between τά and νοούμενα.

## 10. Implications of the Proposed Interpretation of νοούμενα

In what follows, attention will be focused on the implications that this proposal has for the interpretation of the pericope.

Paul’s argument runs as follows: All humanity is guilty of ἀσέβεια and ἀδικία before God, since knowledge of God is attainable also by those who have not been given the law of Moses. Indeed God himself has made this knowledge manifest to them (ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανερώσεν—1:19b). How? His eternal power and divinity, just as his invisible thoughts, have since creation been known (“seen”) in his (presumably visible) works. Therefore people have no excuse not to honour and thank God as God (1:21a). This “being without excuse”—εἶναι ἀναπολογήτους—is a key element in the interpretation of verse 20. (Cf. Moo 1996, 105-106—though I do not agree with Moo’s view “that ‘natural revelation,’ in and of itself, leads to a negative result”.)

The argument in verses 18 to 21 is logical and compelling—but note: it does not presuppose anything beside the human capacity to see and to know.

Knowledge of God is presented as a basic fact of human existence—expressed in τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστιν ἐν αὐτοῖς (1:19) and γνόντες τὸν θεὸν (1:21a). If this knowledge were presented as contingent upon human intellectual prowess, it would offer a possible excuse of ignorance that would greatly weaken the argument.

*To honour and thank God as God* does not automatically follow from an awareness of God's eternal power and divine nature; but it does follow when notice is taken of God's thoughts (his will). Not to honour and thank God as God, is a punishable offence—since not only his eternal power and divinity, but also his thoughts, are known. This latter component of the knowledge of God is brought into focus again in 2:14–16, where Paul argues that the gentiles, when doing naturally that which is in agreement with the law, thereby show that the law “is written in their hearts”. The law not only defines God's power and nature, but also prescribes how man is supposed to react to this knowledge. Having this law written in one's heart comes very close to knowing God's thoughts.

## 11. Conclusion

If the interpretation of νοούμενα in Romans 1:20 proposed in this paper is correct, it means that this verse simply says nothing about the role human νοῦς plays in the process of acquiring knowledge of God. This element, so central to the way this verse is interpreted and applied in theological discourse from the Patristic age to the present, plays no part in Paul's argument in this section of the epistle. What is important to his line of argumentation is the knowledge itself—the fact that man can not claim ignorance as an excuse for not honouring and thanking God.

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