Jew, Greek and Christian: Some Reflections on the Pauline Revolution

RÉMI BRAGUE

The Sorbonne, Paris

Paul of Tarsus addresses a central human problem: Why do we not do what we know we should? This presumes that we know what we should do. Paul's claim that even those without the revealed law know what is right by means of "nature" and "conscience" may seem to impose Greek notions onto Hebrew religion, but in fact articulates suggestions already present in the law and prophets, namely that the revealed law codifies and concretizes the law already written on the human heart by the Creator. Since this core of universal principles lacks specific normative content, Pauline Christianity necessarily seeks to absorb what is good from the content of existing civilizations. In so doing, it separates the literature, thought and practices of the civilizations it absorbs from their religion, thus giving birth to the very notion of "culture," and specifically to Greekness as a cultural entity that could be preserved and passed on without losing its otherness.

If we propose to reflect upon Jews, Greeks and Christians at the beginning of our era, this should not be understood as taking for granted that these three groups were already there during the period that we will explore. For one could claim that this period is precisely the one in which the three groups came into being or, more precisely, were defined either from the inside of from the outside, from themselves or from one another.

   That the Christian group did not arise before this period, but precisely during it (Acts 11.26) will come as no surprise: in order to get Christians, you must have a Christ. Yet the other two groups received some new features, too, that gave them a decisive twist.

Three groups

A central figure in that story of mutual definition is Paul of Tarsus. I should like to make some very introductory statements about what he introduced into the Ancient world in the first century of our era. This revolution of sorts has something to do with the three human groups mentioned above. Paul articulated the three elements relative to one another in a new configuration that proved stable.

To begin with, the very way in which the topic is named has a Pauline ring. For we say: "Jews and Greeks." We do not say "Jews and Pagans" more generally. This would be anachronistic, since the word "pagan" was coined when Christianity had already seized power, as a term of abuse lampooning those rednecks down in the sticks who still clung to their ancient gods. But it would make sense to say "Jews and Romans," since our story takes place when the whole Mediterranean area was under the Roman Empire. The formula "Jews and Greeks" is almost a quotation from Paul (Rom. 1.16 *et al.*). The very fact that we choose to put things this way already betrays the depth of Paul's influence over our parlance.

But more importantly, Paul's revolution launched a process that was due to produce one of the three groups, the Christians, out of an original identity with the people of Israel. Furthermore, this separation may have contributed, along with other factors, to the shaping of what was then crystallizing as "Judaism." This point is difficult to assess, so that it can be claimed that, without Paul, Judaism probably would have evolved along very much the same lines as the ones along which it really did. The Rabbis applied to the new religious group their usual tactics of "killing by silence." As a consequence, it is pretty difficult to pinpoint a precise allusion to Paul's teaching in the whole Talmud. One of them, however, may be Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi's famous sentence about the only free man being the one who sticks to the Torah.[1]

Finally, the Pauline revolution had an effect on the "Greek" element. It enabled it to enter the Christian synthesis in a certain way. Greek is the name of a language and of a culture, not of a religion. Greek is, as it were, what is left of Ancient culture when it is shorn of its religious dimension. Greek is the first example of what we now call "culture."

Now, my claim is that this rump Hellenism was the indirect result of the Pauline revolution.

The problem

Paul's problem is not what to do, but: how is it that we do not do what we should do?

Paul casts it in the form of a personal confession: "For to will is present in me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom. 7.18–19). Probably, we should not take this too literally or too psychologically as a sigh of "Mr. Paul of Tarsus." The literary "ego" stands for the situation of each and every son of Adam. Little wonder that Paul echoes well-known formulas in the "pagan" literature, Greek and Roman in expression, of roughly the same period, like Ovid, Seneca or Epictetus.[2]

We do not have to ask what to do, for we somehow know that already. What we have to look for is the reason why we do not abide by a law that we are perfectly familiar with.

Paul's positive answer moves in two directions, towards the past and towards the future. Towards the past, there is God's mercy that forgives our trespasses. Towards the future, there is God's grace that enables us to do what we could not do if we were left to our own resources. This would lead us deep into Paul's theology, where I cannot follow him here.

Instead, I will focus on Paul's first thesis, i.e.: we know what we should do.

Norms

In order adequately to appreciate the breadth of Paul's revolution, we have to cast a glance at the whole realm of human action.

Whatever we do or make is regulated by a set of rules. No human society is devoid of such rules. They extend from phonology and grammar to limitations of marriage, prohibiting the wedlock between some parents, and include cooking recipes, table manners, etc. In each case, some behavior is supposed to be the right one, whereas the other ones

are excluded and punished in various ways, from a sneer to death pen-alty. I am not allowed to marry just any female; some are excluded. I cannot utter meaningless sounds while pretending to make sense. I cannot do whatever I want to my body, but I have to paint it, tatoo it, cut it, wash it, clothe it in a definite way, etc.

The presence or absence of *some definite* rules may define the identity of a human group, hence, the identity of the person who belongs to this group. Judaism, by the way, is the paramount example of a human group defined by its abiding by a definite Law and only thereby.

The presence of rules in general defines humanity, because it defines culture at large. The basic question is Kant's second query in the Cri-tique of Pure Reason: "what should I do?" As Kant himself observed, this question branches off from the more fundamental one: "what is man?"[3]

Paul's revolution implied a full-fledged new anthropology.

For the Jews of the first century, the question "what should I do?" was not a central issue. If they were pious, they had a ready answer with Moses' law and in the "right path" [*halakha*] that was already evolving from it. Paul, himself an observing Jew, is no exception. Jesus' original message already supposed that the rules were known: "change your heart" [*metanoeite*] supposes some knowledge of the direction in which we have to turn in order to find God; "the reign of God is at hand" [*èg-giken hè basileia tou Ouranou*] supposes that we know what the laws of His kingdom will be; "God forgives your sins" supposes that we know which sins are forgiven, etc.

The problem already took a trickier turn when the Christian mis-sion turned towards larger circles—first, probably, towards half-Pagans standing on the threshold of Judaism but hesitating in front of some unpleasant commands like circumcision, the so-called "God-fearing" [*seboumenoi, metuentes*] who did not accept the Law in its entirety, but chose *à la carte*.

Ultimately, the most difficult question arose: What about real pa-gans, who simply do not have Moses' law to tell them what to do?

The answer

According to Paul, non-Jews possess another principle by which to distinguish the right from the wrong:

> For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature [*phusis*] the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves [*heautois … nomos*]: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience [*suneidesis*] also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another (Rom. 2.14–15).

From the point of view of the historian of ideas, Paul introduced into the religious view of moral life concepts that are philosophical in origin: nature and conscience. He may have borrowed them from the kind of popular philosophical literature, mainly Stoic in origin, that flooded the Roman word. It looks like Paul is "Greek to the Greeks," as he claimed to be Jew to the Jews (1 Cor. 9.20). He thinks in Greek terms while addressing Greeks. The problem that Paul answered by bringing onto the stage ideas from the outside, "Greek" ideas, was solved by the Talmudic Sages in a purely immanent way, on the basis of inner-biblical history: there are, prior to Moses' Law, seven commands that were given to Noah and that hold good for whoever left the Ark, i.e. the whole mankind.[4]

Are Paul's two basic ideas utterly foreign to the Bible (the "Old Testament")? As for words, this is clear. The Old Testament has no word for "nature"; the Hebrew word for that is not to be found earlier than in the Mishna. Furthermore, this word [*teva'*] hasn't anything to do with the idea of growth that Greek ears felt in the word φύσις (nature), despite scientific etymology (see Aristotle 1957, 4.4 (1014b16–18)). Paul knew enough Greek to feel this (Rom. 11. 21–24). But the Hebraic word meant rather the cast, the mold, the type that gives a thing its character. The idea of a moral conscience is expressed in modern Hebrew by a medieval word [*matspûn*], which in turn is a loan translation from an Arabic word [*damîr*]. The oldest example quoted in Klatzkin's philosophical Thesaurus is to be found in Judah Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of Bahya Ibn Paquda's *Duties of the Heart*, in the prologue. With that we are as late as the twelth century already (Klein 1987,

376b; Klatzkin 1968 (vol. 2), 260). Whether the *idea* itself is extant in earlier times is controversial. Y. Leibowitz flatly considered conscience as a pagan idea that has no place whatsoever in Judaism (quoted in Falk 1981, 66).

I will endeavor to show that Paul develops some possibilities contained in the Old Testament.[5] Pagan conceptions played the part of the midwife and helped out what was implicit.

Conscience

In the Old Testament, some passages suggest that rules of conduct need not be formulated, because they are there already and have always been there. A well-known passage reads: "He hath shewed thee, o man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Mic. 6.8). The verse is never explicitly quoted in the New Testament, but it may be alluded to, rather obscurely, in the First Gospel: a harsh critique of the scribes and Pharisees is put into Jesus' mouth, who taunts them with stressing minute details of the law and neglecting the weightier elements [*ta barutera*], i.e. judgment [*krisis*], compassion [*eleos*] and faith [*pistis*] (Matt. 23.23).

In Micah, the context is an attempt at playing down the importance of the sacrificial cult. The verb that is translated here by "to show" is often used for the instructions given by priests on the right way to offer sacrifices. Micah may have played on the word of art and given it a twist that runs counter its original context.

The subject of the sentence is not that clear, however: who does the teaching? I have quoted the Authorized Version. It translates the Masoretic text that has in fact the active form [*higgîd*], "he has told you"; but the Septuagint supposes the passive form [*huggad*], understood as an impersonal: "it was told to you." If we stick to the Masoretic text, we still have to ask who the subject is, and the context does not help us a great deal. A further question is the content of the teaching: it might be that each of the three keywords alludes to the basic message of earlier prophets, i.e. Amos (justice), Hosea (love), Isaiah (humility). But this does hardly more than push back the question: *what* those

three forerunners have preached is alluded to only vaguely. We do not know *how* to act justly, *how* to love, *how* to walk humbly. To put it in quite anachronistic terms: we do not receive any law-book, any hand-book of ethics, any treatise on spirituality. Now, this very imprecision may be essential and emphatically positive in nature.

A similar question occurs in Deuteronomy:

> And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul. To keep the commandments of the Lord and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good? (10.12–13).

Again, the verses are never quoted in the New Testament, at least in a recognizable way. The first verse sounds very much like the passage from Micah. The second, which many commentators consider as simply a later addition, definitely bears the stamp of Deuteronomic style. It introduces the idea of divine commands. Hence, the text that began with rather sketchy indications, shifts to a more precise focus and ends with a circular reference to the content of the book in which it is to be read.

By so doing, the movement of the text mirrors on a smaller scale the whole evolution of later Judaism: the rather vague appeal of the Prophets crystallized into a whole "teaching" [*torah*]. And the torah was to become a code of behaviour that is supposed, at least in principle, to answer any possible question about the right path [*halakha*].

Nature

The idea of nature is delineated in another complex of ideas. We have just seen that the basic rules of decency are known to mankind. Let us ask at present what kind of attitude God can have towards this set of rules.

Let us have a look at the famous Song of the vineyard in Isaiah. The peasant does not spare any effort and does for his vineyard everything that can be done. Then it is said: "and he looked that it should bring forth grapes" (5.2). As we know, he was bitterly disappointed. But I will leave this aside and focus on his attitude. The formula is repeated

in the dialogue of reproach [*rîb*] in which the wine-grower addresses the men in Judah: "wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" (5.4). Finally, we are given the key of the parable: this peasant is nobody less than the God of Israel in His dealings with his chosen people: "He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry" (5.7). The verb here translated by "look that, look for" [*le-qawwoth*] frequently means, in other contexts, "to hope." In the former passages, other verbs were used. Micah said that God "requires" [*li-sh'ol*] something from man, i.e. justice, pity, humility. The *Deuteronomy* passage in the King James version has "to require" too, though for a different Hebrew word [*li-drosh*].

The difference between "expecting" and "asking" can be accounted for by the different identity of the addressee: God can talk to the people and tell him what he expects. But you simply cannot speak with a vineyard. Nevertheless, there is a common feature. What Isaiah stresses is that the wine-grower was not expecting something extraordinary. As a rule, a vine produces grapes and not, say, bananas. Growing grapes is what the vineyard spontaneously does, and the grapes should taste good provided the soil was well tilled, etc. It is the *nature* of plants to yield seed and fruit "after its kind [*mîn*]" (Gen. 1.11). This example enables us to draw a line between two kinds of actions.

Let us call them "asking" and "expecting." We can *ask* a person to do something; we can *expect* from him that he will do something. In this second case, we hardly need to ask. At most, we can remind a person to do things: do not forget to do this or, more politely: I am sure that you will do that, etc. When we really must ask is when some behaviour is not natural, not spontaneous.

Even when God asks something from mankind, He only recalls what He expects from it.

To expect is what we do when we are facing the *nature* of something. Even when God addresses His people and gives commands, he is not looking forward to miracles, but to plain decency. This involves that good behaviour is somehow "natural" to mankind. As a matter of course, this does not mean that we spontaneously perform just actions,

without our having to go through a process of education, of self-improvement, etc. This means that such behaviour is nothing more than the way in which mankind can reach its own fulfilment, by developing the features that make it specifically human up to their fullness.

A contrary behaviour would thwart the progress of mankind; it would even endanger its survival in the long run. Hence, Deuteronomy can make at the same time, almost in the same breath, two statements: (a) the choice between good and evil is not a trifle, what is at stake is ultimately life or death (30.15), and (b) the criterion of choice is "not hidden from thee, neither it is far off," far-fetched, but "very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart" (30.11, 14). Curiously, this formula echoes Seneca's later words about conscience as the inner God: "God is near to you, with you, in you [*prope est a te deus, tecum est, intus est*]" (*Letters to Lucilius* (in Seneca 1965), 41.1–2).

A shift in the origin of norms

What the Pauline revolution achieved did not amount to simply casting away the yoke of the Law. What Paul did discard was the idea according to which God has to dictate rules of conduct. Paul kept the idea of a set of rules, and even the idea of a divine origin of those rules, but he put the idea of a divine origin of norms at one further remove. Norms are not dictated by God through the mediation of a Prophet at some point of history; they are inscribed in the "heart" of man (Rom. 2.15). If I may bring to bear an anachronistic opposition, they do not belong to the realm of history, but to the realm of something like "nature," such as it was understood as God's creation.

This has to be brought back to our memories, because the Pauline revolution was misunderstood by many, from the beginning, as if it boiled down to simply casting away the yoke of the commands. Now, the frequently levelled accusation of anomianism is hardly fair. Paul himself, probably, had coined the catchword that "everything is permitted" [*panta <moi> exestin*]. He had to qualify it by adding a rider: "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful to me, but all things edify not" (1 Cor. 10.23; see 6.12). "Everything is permitted" does not mean that the boundary between good

and evil, between life and death is erased. This means that this limit is not adequately expressed by the opposition of the permitted and the forbidden. When we address children who have no idea of electricity, we can take a short cut and say that it is forbidden to put one's fingers into the electric outlet. What we really mean is that this is dangerous. Some things are allowed because they are intrinsically good, whereas some other ones are forbidden because they are intrinsically bad.

The basic idea is that God does not replace our judgment of the right way to do things. No doubt, He sheds light upon it, He reminds us of some basic principles, but He never dictates what is to be done.

What remained after Paul's razor was the basic survival kit of mankind. The content of this kit is already part of the seven commands given to Noah and the ten given to Moses (Exod. 20.1–17). We could even say that it is nothing more than the eternal Tao without which mankind could not lead a human life or even, perhaps, could not live *tout court*.

Culture

Those basic rules of decency are admittedly not enough for us to answer the manifold questions that arise from human life in its personal and social dimensions. This is obvious as for legal systems and political organisation. This is all the more blatant if we think of the ways in which human life can flourish in the different realms of higher culture, which involves artistic creativity, religious imagination, care and control of the body, refinement of mores, etc.

About all this, Paul has nothing very much to say, barring some elementary principles about the necessity of a government to which obedience is due (Rom. 13.1). As for the other elements of culture, Paul probably had some smattering of Greek popular literature and philosophy. He can quote from Aratos (Acts 17.28), Epimenides (Tit. 1.12) and Menander (1 Cor. 15.33)—all stock-phrases, anyway. But his writings betray scarcely any *interest* in those issues. Nevertheless, the religious revolution he introduced had among its most lasting consequences a new stance towards culture, not to say the birth of the very idea of culture.

Why? Pauline Christianity lacks a definite content, it is empty, it produced a momentous ebb that left bare the whole realm of norms. Precisely for this reason, it had to fill itself with a content that it had to borrow from the outside. Christianity has to suck into itself what was already available on the market of civilizations. This is what it later did, first with Roman culture, i.e. the Roman system of law and of administration, together with what the Roman world already had borrowed from Greek scientific, literary, philosophic, etc. lore.

This brings me back to my first remark on things "Greek." There is something like Greek culture only since the Pauline revolution. What undoubtedly existed previously was the Greek παιδεία (education, formation). It was a way of life. To be sure, παιδεία included what we call "culture," i.e. literature and art, and even culture of the body: it was inseparably gymnastic and music, two pursuits that are, in Plato's words, "sisters." But the package included at the same time what we call "religion," wherefore Plato is careful to sketch a "theology" too.[6] This cult addressed the gods of the πόλις (city) or, later, of the κόσμος (world) as the Stoics experienced it and as it was mirrored in the Roman Empire. This cult was not palatable for Jews and, for that matter, not for Christians either.

We cannot capture the essence of the Pauline revolution by simply saying that it built a synthesis between the Greek and the Jewish by enabling the Greek element to enter the Christian synthesis. At the same time, it allowed the Greek element in culture to develop as such, i.e. while keeping its otherness with regard to the synthesis in which it entered without its melting away in it.

This enables me, let me say *en passant*, to build a bridge between the theses developed in my last book on divine law (Brague 2007b) and a previous book that I wrote more than ten years ago on nothing less than the essence of Western culture (Brague 2002). To cast the matter in the mold of the concepts that I coined there: "secondarity" towards Judaism enabled "secondarity" towards Hellenism; Greek culture could be "included" and not "digested."[7]

In conclusion, let me sum up my thesis: Paul's revolution may have helped Rabbinic Judaism to shape itself indirectly. It certainly gave

birth directly to Christianity as a group different from Judaism. At the same time, it produced indirectly Greek culture as an independent entity. Paul was the father of at least two of the three groups that we are concerned with.

Endnotes

1. *Pirqey Aboth* 6.2. For other examples, see Urbach 1979, 258, 295, 302, 427ff. On the context, see Pines 1984, 247–65, esp. 256–259; my translation in Pines 1997, 67–73.

2. See Ovid 2004, 7.20f; Seneca 1965, 21.1; Epictetus 1898, 2.26.4; for Jewish literature, see *Book of Secrets* (1Q 27), 8–12 (García Martinez and Tigchelaar 1967, 66–68).

3. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 804f. / B 832f. and Introduction to *Vorlesung über Logik.* In Kant 1921–23, vol. 8.

4. *Tosefta Avoda Zara*, 8 (9), 4 and b Sanhedrin, 56a; see Zuckermandel 1970, 473. Maimonides 2000, commentary on Sanhedrin 9.1.

5. For further discussion, see Brague 2006.

6. See Plato, *Republic* 404b4–5; 379a5–6. On the Greek idea of culture, see Jaeger 1934.

7. More on "inclusion" and "digestion" in Brague 2000; French version in Brague 2007a,167–185.

References

Aristotle

  1957   *Metaphysica.* Ed. W. Jaeger. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brague, R.

  2002   *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization.* Tr. S. Lester. South Bend: Saint Augustine's Press.
  2000   Inklusion und Verdauung: Zwei Modelle kultureller Aneignung. In *Hermeneutische Wege: Hans-Georg Gadamer zum Hundertsten,* ed. G. Figal, J. Grondin, D. J. Schmidt. Tübingen: Mohr.
  2006   Dieu ne nous demande rien. *Critique* 62.704–705: 179–191.
  2007a *Au moyen du Moyen Age: Philosophies médiévales en chrétienté, judaïsme et islam.* Chatou: Editions de la Transparence.
  2007b *The Law of God: The Philosophic History of an Idea.* Tr. L. Cochrane. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Epictetus

  1898   *Dissertationes.* Ed. H. Schenkl. Leipzig: Teubner.

Falk, Z.V.

  1981   *Law and Religion: The Jewish Experience.* Jerusalem: Mesharim.

García Martinez, F. and Tigchelaar, E.J.C.

  1967   *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition.* Leiden: Brill.

Jaeger, W.

  1934   *Paideia: Die Formung des griechischen Menschen,* Vol. 1. Berlin: W. de
         Gruyter.

Kant, Immanuel

1921–23 *Werke.* Ed. E. Cassirer. Berlin: Cassirer.

Klatzkin, J.

  1968   *Thesaurus philosophicus linguae hebraicae antiquae et recentioris,* Vol. 2.
         New York: Feldheim.

Klein, E.

  1987   *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Read-*
         ers of English. New York: Macmillan.

Maimonides

  2000   *Mishneh Torah.* Ed. S. Frankel. Jerusalem: Shabse Frankel.

Ovid

  2004   *Metamorphoses.* Ed. R.J. Tarrant. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pines, S.

  1984   On the Avatars of the Term 'Freedom' [Hebrew]. In *Between Theory and*
         Practice: Essays in Honor of N. Rotenstreich, ed. Y. Yovel and P. Mendes-
         Flohr, 247–265. Jerusalem: Magnes.

Pines, S., ed.

  1997   *La Liberté de philosopher: De Maïmonide à Spinoza.* Paris: Desclée De
         Brouwer.

Plato

  1976   *Opera,* Vol. 4. Ed. J. Burnet. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seneca

  1965   *Epistulae Morales.* Ed. L.D. Reynolds. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Urbach, E.E.
  1979   *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs.* Tr. I. Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes.
Zuckermandel, M. S., ed.
  1970   *Tosefta,* second edition. Jerusalem: Wahrmann.