

# JESUS AND THE LAW IN ST. PAUL'S LETTERS\*

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I took a title which is somewhat general because it allows me to combine certain themes and at the same time to treat certain things separately. I would like to begin with the last part of the title: Paul's letters. If I want to study the Law and Jesus, and then the relationship between the two, I first have to determine as best I can what Paul actually wrote. This is not my theme here and so I will treat this very briefly. By and large, Catholic Scripture scholars today would agree that while fourteen pieces of literature in our New Testament have the name of Paul on them, seven are surely Paul's. They are the first letter to the Thessalonians, the letter to the Romans, the letter to the Galatians, the first letter to the Corinthians, the second letter to the Corinthians, Philippians and Philemon. The others that come under greater discussion and draw certain encouragement from some scholars are Colossians and Ephesians. When I search after Paul's thinking, I will concentrate on the letters I think he wrote. The other letters are called deuteroPauline letters; they are written by people greatly influenced by Saint Paul, therefore contain some Pauline theology but they are not written by Paul. Therefore you will find in them developments of Pauline theology by further theologians.

In particular whenever one brings out the question of Law, particularly since the Reformation times, two of the seven letters get special attention: the letter to the Galatians and the letter to the Romans. Often we describe in brief terms that the letter to the Galatians is a miniletter to the Romans, so if you understand the letter to the Romans, you will by and large understand the letter to the Galatians. *Providentissimus Deus* and especially *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and *Dei Verbum*,

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all emphasise that we have to understand the humanness of the documents in order to understand eventually the divine message. This means, for instance, that we have to consider that when St Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians and the letter to the Romans, he did not think of them as Sacred Scripture. The only Sacred Scripture that existed for him was the Jewish Scripture (our Old Testament). He was writing to specific audiences and particularly the letter to the Galatians is difficult because it presupposes a major problem that has occurred. We do not have a definition of the problem. We can guess at the problem by reading the letter which is a response to the problem. The letter to the Galatians is a letter which is written in anger, a letter written in frustration, a letter written by a person who has tried to create something, expending his energies and his love in doing it, convinced that what he did is right, and then, while he is over two hundred miles away, he is suddenly hearing that people who had followed him are now changing the truth he thought he had implanted. He cannot pick up a phone, he cannot have a fax machine, he has to write something brief, but something which will be convincing, something which will stop this disintegration of the community that he thought he had founded so well. The letter to the Galatians is an appeal on Paul's part to respect his authority. It is a repetition of many things Paul had taught to the Galatians, but in certain ways it is a little too brief for us who are now unaware of the full problem. It presents a number of arguments about the relationship of the Law to Jesus, but they are brief. They are the arguments of someone who is trying to provide a multiplicity of arguments rather than one well thought out discursive presentation. So the preference then is to go to the letter which contains a greater synthesis, a greater development, and a greater logical presentation of the teaching of Paul on the Law and Jesus. And so we come to the letter to the Romans.

The letter to the Romans was written at a time, we can say, when Paul had about ten years of missionary experience behind him. He is ready to leave the middle part of the Mediterranean. He has done his work in Greece and in modern-day Turkey and is ready to move to Rome and, as chapter 16 of Romans indicates, he hopes to use Rome as a base for reaching Spain and still further communities. So he takes this opportunity to reflect and put down in an orderly way what he thinks God did in Jesus and then put it against what he understands God has done through Israel in the Old Testament. He also takes the opportunity to introduce himself to the Roman community he did not found (other people founded it whose names we do not know any more), introducing himself to this community in a way that they would understand how he looks at what God did in Jesus.

Just a brief word about St Paul. St Paul is, if I may use this word somewhat freely, a fanatic. He is a Pharisee by upbringing. St Paul became a Christian only in middle age, about thirty, thirty five years old. His whole training had been from

the Pharisaic tradition. Now the fact is that the Pharisees themselves are a kind of oddity in Judaism. As far as we can guess there were about eight thousand Pharisees living in Israel while Jerusalem itself would have had, around Jesus's time, some thirty thousand people. The Pharisees were a minority; a violent, strong group of people who were different from the ordinary people of the time. There is a peculiar relationship between the ordinary people and the Pharisee. The ordinary people admired the Pharisees for their devotion, the dedication to the one goal of their life: to keep the Law of their God. The Pharisees looked down, in a sense, on the ordinary people, because these did not keep the Law, they did not know the Law (the laws just given to Moses, not counting the laws that were added through tradition, were six hundred and twelve). The ordinary people certainly did not know all the laws and therefore obviously did not keep them all. We can trace the Pharisaic tradition back to about 185 B.C. Some of them helped the Maccabees against Syria in 167 B.C. In their long history the Pharisees had a number of martyrs for their fidelity to the Law of God. St Paul was one of these strong, unique individuals who went against his society. St Paul says that he was of the strictest group of the Pharisees. There is no other record than that of St Paul of someone who went outside Israel in search of Jews who had become Christians, all the way to Damascus to get them to come back to Jerusalem, stand trial and repent their Christianity. St Paul's personality is a very strong one and when he is upset you will sense that he is upset. He is very strong in expressing his personality. In the letter to the Romans we see one of the aspects of being a Pharisee. Paul is through and through a person trained in the Jewish Scripture and you can expect that you almost have to know the Old Testament very well to appreciate the position from which St Paul is coming. The first attempt to interpret Jesus and the one that had lasted the longest is in terms of the Old Testament. Today, if you talk to someone who does not know anything about the Old Testament and you say Jesus is the Messiah, that means nothing. Only someone who understands the hermeneutical elements that Paul and other Jews used, understands what it means to call Jesus Messiah. To a Jew, he will be impressed that he is the Servant of Yahweh, that he is a new Jeremiah, a new Elijah. But to someone who does not know the Jewish tradition those terms mean nothing. Paul operates from the Jewish tradition. Let us then move to the discussion of the Law and Jesus using particularly the letter to the Romans.

The term "*the law*" does not refer to natural law, to positive law, ecclesiastical law, secular law. It applies to only one kind of law: the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law is probably best characterised as a revelation of the mind of God. It is put in law form: "do this", "do not do that"; but it is a revelation of how God thinks human beings live in a most dignified way a human life. That is why people loved the law, because it was an insight in a world of doubt and uncertainty into how God thinks I can best be a human being. It was a precious gift: a revelation from God.

Now when St Paul talks about the law, sometimes that is what he means by *the law*. It is good, St Paul never says "the law is bad". What he means by *the law* is the Jewish law, the Law of Moses. It is a gift, a revelation. Yet we do not follow *the law*. Why? Because *the law* all of a sudden like an accordion has now expanded in meaning. He is not talking about *the law* simply as a revelation of the mind of God. He is now talking about, under the same terminology, a system of salvation which excludes Jesus. You may immediately jump to say: "Why do we not talk about *the law* including Jesus?" You can, but Paul does not do that. For Paul, *the law* sometimes means just guidance from God, but sometimes it means a system of salvation. If you draw an imaginary circle and put into it the elements that contribute to your salvation, what will you put? A Jew will put in "I", myself, (I have to choose, I have to obey, I have to listen to God) and the law — these are the two elements of the system without Jesus.

Paul begins his letter to the Romans (cf Romans 1;1832) with a description of those who never had the revelation of God: the gentiles. St Paul like most of the people of his time, divided the world into two kinds: Jews and everybody else. Everybody else had an opportunity to look at the true God, but they refused, he says, and they created gods for themselves and you can see in the chapter, from the way human beings developed in their moral lives, how false their gods were. It is a truism of St Paul and others: "Show me how you live and I will tell you what your god is". There is a relationship between God and action. So St Paul here is not giving us peculiar revelation. St Paul claims that all he is doing is reciting from his history book, the Old Testament, what it is saying about the gentiles. All there was in Thucydides, in Xenophon, and other historians is not what Paul reads. Paul reads the Jewish Scripture, which is not only a story about facts, but an evaluation of history. St Paul, in the first part of his letter to the Romans, draws on this evaluative history that the gentiles had followed idols and had begun to live in accordance with false gods: they do not have a revelation of God. This then allows St Paul one half of what he wants to argue first. He then moves (in the second chapter) to a rhetorical style. He really is not talking to anybody in particular, but he pretends to do so (it is a way of writing at the time) and he says, "Oh you, you agree with me in writing down the gentiles as our own Old Testament condemns the gentiles; but now I say to you (and now he is clearly talking to the Jew) that you too, even if you may have various privileges (you have Abraham, you have the Law, you have the prophets, you have the promises and the land, you have the covenant); for all that you too have failed, in your own way, to keep God's Law.

This allows Paul to get to Chapter 3 v.10ff where he puts together a number of sayings from the Old Testament. The first one is perhaps the best one, the most typical one. "There is no one just person, not even one". The system has not produced justice; it has not produced just people. What does he mean by "just"?

He does not mean someone who is fair. He means someone who can stand before God at the time of the judgement when justice will be meted out; to those who are just, reward; to those who are unjust, the Old Testament says, punishment. St Paul, the child of the Old Testament, expects the judgement. He hopes to be found just and yet Scripture stands there saying that there is no just person, no, not even one. Now, having established that history and that reality, Paul asks himself what is the value of the Law. I have been giving you two meanings of the Law. One is understanding it as a revelation of the mind of God; the value here is great. The second is that of the Law as a system of salvation: a failure. Is it the Law's fault? No, it is my fault; I have not accepted the Law. Now this is all an opportunity to ask, "What then will bring me justice, if I and the Law together do not co-operate to produce a just person, a person who can stand justly before God, what will produce this?"

To understand better St Paul's argumentation we have to add another element. St Paul boasted of not going to places where Christianity already existed. In fact he did, but his boast was that he preferred to go to new territories to begin to plant the seeds of Christianity. What did he experience when he went to those lands? His preaching was of Jesus crucified and risen. The experience was one of acceptance, not by Jews only, but also by pagans who had no training in the Old Testament. Salvation was occurring outside the Jewish Law. How was this happening, that people were accepting Jesus, but were outside the Jewish Law? When Paul begins to reason about the relationship of the Law system to Jesus, he already has a grounding in pastoral experience. Not only are the gentiles accepting Jesus without knowing the Jewish Law, therefore without being able to keep the Law; but they are even enjoying the gifts of the Spirit which we know are so prominent in many of the communities of the first century: speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, and so on. Those gifts are present in these Churches. How do you account for all this divine activity, divine guidance, divine gifting, when these people do not know and therefore do not keep the Jewish Law.

One must add another factor to the sense of *the law*. The Law is not only a system of salvation, and it is not only a revelation of the mind of God; it also stands for that system which rejected Jesus, which put him to death. This is why when Paul, in Galatians in particular, says that you cannot accept the Law and accept Jesus, he understands *law* there as that which happens separately from the divine revelation to the gentiles and as a system that has positively and willingly rejected Jesus. There is no combination of the two, you are one or the other.

With this changing understanding of *the law* — sometimes just revelation, sometimes a system, sometimes a system which has opposed Jesus — Paul proceeds with his arguments in Galatians and Romans. As he proceeds, in Chapter

3 of the letter to the Romans, he lays down what he thinks is justifying: if I and the Law do not work to produce a just me what will produce a just me? He says that it is the death of Jesus. He gives four human experiences to help understand what the death of Jesus means: reconciliation, redemption, expiation or atonement, and justification. Each one is first of all a human experience. Reconciliation has a three stage process. First there was a conciliation, then there was a breaking of that bond, and then there is a reconciliation. You can see the Old Testament pattern: Adam, when we were "conciled" with God; Adam's sin, when we were separated from God; now Jesus has died and we are reconciled with God. Redemption was a very popular image for Jew or gentile in the first century. For a gentile to be redeemed was to suggest slavery: you buy yourself back, that is what redemption means. That too was a three stage process. In the first stage, God is my master, he is my creator, to some degree he is my Lord, and I enjoyed being his servant. Second stage: another master took me over and now I know that under that master I die. Who can save me from that master? My first master paid the price to buy me back; Jesus is the price. Thirdly you have atonement or expiation and what Paul is depending on there is especially the day of atonement, the *Yom Kippur*. There, to put it very briefly, the High Priest takes the blood of the animal sacrifice, sprinkles it on the ark of the covenant, and then sprinkles the people with the hope that this ark of the covenant, which is the seat of mercy, will then give mercy to the people to forgive their sin. Jesus is now the priest who takes the blood of the victim (himself), sprinkles it not on the wood of the box but on the wood of the cross from which comes the mercy through which we can be forgiven and considered just. The final experience is that of justification. Justification is a legal metaphor (again another human experience). Let us put it briefly in the form of a story: In the United States certain crimes automatically strip the one who commits them of certain rights as a citizen. If the crime is serious enough one loses the right to vote, the right to own property, and so on. Now let us imagine that I committed one such crime and I am brought to court. I enter the court room. The judge knows that I am guilty, I know I am guilty and everybody else knows I am guilty, but for some inexplicable reason, the judge, who is the only one who determines reality, says, "Innocent!" or "Just!" and I walk out of that courtroom knowing that I am guilty, he knows it, everybody else knows it, but he has declared me innocent and therefore I have my rights as a citizen.

If you understand what the four experiences Paul calls upon (reconciliation, redemption, atonement, justification) are in human life you can then understand what God did in Jesus. You not only understand, but you rejoice, you will believe that what the old system could not produce, God has produced through his free will and through the free will of another human being, Jesus. They have done for me what I could not do with the Law system. That the Galatians want to return to the

Law system and give up Jesus is for Paul just nonsense. You are committing yourself to another way of salvation which will not save you. It has been proven that it cannot save you. The Scriptures say, "There was no just person, no, not even one." That is one affirmation Paul makes: Jesus is the remedy for what the system could not accomplish. Paul then goes on to what is happening in the Mediterranean in his experience. People believed in Jesus and enjoyed the spirit of God; the gifts of the spirit are so visibly present. Evidently, without being born Jewish, therefore no circumcision; without knowing the Law, therefore no Mosaic revelation; without those that were looked upon as key elements of this salvific system, these people by faith in Jesus enjoyed the benefits of Jesus, the most visible of which is the gift of the Spirit. How do you account for this happening outside the Jewish system?

We are coming near to the end of this first essential part of our reflection. At this point we have arrived at Chapter 6 of Romans, and Paul says, as he often does in his letters, "I think I hear you say, I think I sense your objections... It sounds like you are saying that if Jesus's death is how I can be just and not the Law, then do I have to change my way of life? Can I not go on sinning? Because salvation is now being given to me from the outside, all I have to do is respond. It is Jesus who has to decide whether to save me or not, not I. Fortunately he said, 'I will do it.' That is what pleases God, and somehow justice is attributed to me if I will believe in Jesus that he is the one to save me. But do I change at all?" Martin Luther said something like this: "You go out in the fields when many of them are still dirt with no grass, you look at them and say, 'That is just dirt.' God looks on us and what does he see? Disobedience." "There is no one just person, not even one", the Psalm says. Jesus dies for us. It snows. And all of a sudden God looked down and he did not see the field any more the way he saw it before. He now sees this nice pleasant snow and he is happy. But underneath it is still the same dirty, ugly field. And that is what Luther thought Paul says. That is why in the hymn we now sing too *Amazing Grace* you still call yourself a wretch, wretched, wretch that I am. That is not the Catholic view. The Catholic view is that not only does Jesus cover us, and we are not just declared just, but that the Spirit is given to us and the healing process begins so that we are not the same old dirty field before conversion. Under the guidance of the Spirit we begin to heal, we become something beautiful, as Paul says, a new creation. Therefore when in Romans 6;1.15 the question is put "can I not go on sinning?", since it is up to somebody else to save me, Paul mentions two elements of Christian practice.

One of them is your baptism: what is your baptism about? What did it mean? Your baptism means not just that you believe that Jesus is the representative of God who dies for you, but that you died too, so that you may rise too with Jesus. When looking at baptismal practices in Christian Churches of the second and third

centuries, you will see that the baptised is supposed to take off the old clothes, walk down into the water just like a tomb, through the waters, and then out the other side and put on the white garments, especially at Easter, which he or she wear till the next Sunday, *Dominica in Albis*. The symbol is of dying and rising. That is what baptism is. Therefore it is not just (as in Romans 3) that I profess belief in Jesus, now it is a type of unity, imitation of Jesus, that I die as he died so that I rise as he rose. Obviously the Resurrection of Jesus is a bodily resurrection, to put it this way a total resurrection, whereas my baptism does not yield a total new person. What is supposed to happen is a moral death and a moral resurrection so that I begin to be a new creature and a new person. I leave behind the old. Belief in Jesus even for those who never knew the Jewish Law is becoming not only belief but also a kind of life.

St Paul says, secondly, that everybody always has a master. In the United States we like to say that we are free, I am not the slave of anybody. If I was to think as well as these people think, I have to discipline myself, I cannot do everything I want to do. I have an ideal and I obey that ideal. St Paul says, "You always choose a master, you always have ideals." Who is your master? Baptism says, "It is Jesus".

Both these arguments are starting to say that we are to fulfil the Law of Christ (cf Galatians 6;23). All of a sudden for the person who said that the Law is the antithesis of Christ (you either follow the Jewish system or you follow Christ), after having shown you the weakness of the Jewish system, now he says, "Follow Christ but there is the Law." Another meaning of *the law* as he says in Galatians 5: the goal of God in presenting Jesus to us is to elicit from us faith, which is operating in love, faith expressed in love. Therefore, not just faith, but love. From this you can see why it is not so strange in your reading of St Paul to see occasionally that he will say that we all still have to stand before the judgement. Belief in Jesus did not eliminate the judgement. Belief in Jesus, therefore, while it is an improvement over the original plan of God — saving people through the Jewish Law — it still demands the judgement. There is still a lot to follow. What then has Jesus accomplished?

Well, think of it this way: the Jewish Law, once I did sin, does not provide adequate reparation animal sacrifice will not make up for human failure. The death of Jesus did. Just as my free choice separates me from God, so free choice of Jesus brought me the opportunity of union with God. Secondly, whereas the Law enlightens me (now we are back to that first meaning of *the law* — the revelation of the mind of God) the Law does not give me strength to keep it. It is almost as if someone gives you a marvellous gift and you cannot accept it. You say, "I wish you had never given me the gift", it becomes my jailer. I now see clearly what I cannot do. Whereas belief in Jesus unleashes the Spirit of God so that Romans 7



and 8 can begin to say that I know that even after baptism there is in me a law, a tendency towards evil, I also know in me another law driving me, enticing me, moving me to the good — it is the Spirit that God has given me by virtue of belief in Jesus. So again where the Law was weak and could not find reparation for the sins committed, and where the Law was weak and could not provide the power to keep the Law, belief in Jesus now allows for both of those things to take place. And finally the third element, if I go further and say blessed be God for giving me the revelation of what life should be like in the old Law, Jesus now perfects that Law so that Saint Paul can say in the letter to the Corinthians, “We have the mind of Christ”. Consider Matthew 5, for instance, the Sermon on the Mount, where you hear that repetitive teaching of Jesus: “You have heard it said... but I say to you...” Sometimes Jesus eliminates laws. For instance, Jesus does not oblige us to follow the law given by God on Mount Sinai of not eating certain foods. He has eliminated that whole aspect of Jewish law. Some laws he tightens up. The Pharisees allowed for divorce; Jesus says, “No divorce”. Otherwise he reworks laws so that he begins to unravel the real thrust of those laws. Eventually Jesus encapsulates everything under one major law which all the other laws are meant to support, namely to love God and love man.

All wisdom of God is summed up in “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. With this in mind I want to conclude my talk. So far I mentioned meaning of *the law* as a revelation. I have shown you that it is an imperfect revelation which needed Jesus’ perfecting of it. I have spoken about *the law* as a system, as a system which has weaknesses, as a system which rejects Jesus. I have also dealt with *the law* as something which continues as the law of Christ which is really summed up in love of God and love of neighbour and everything else is to support those commandments. That is *Paul, Law and Jesus*. But there is one other element and for this I must go through very quickly various letters but especially Philippians. What we have dealt with so far is an explanation of Jesus *vis-a-vis* the Law, trying to get Christians to understand Jesus as perfecting traditional Judaism. Now Paul talks in a more personal way and suddenly Jesus becomes something more than just redemptive, something more than just conciliatory, something more than just an atonement, there is something more than just his death. Suddenly we find St Paul saying, “I want to be with him, I want to know the power of his resurrection. When I look at him as Moses looked at God, suddenly I become changed, suddenly I am transformed by my being with Jesus” (cf 2 Corinthians 3). You begin to realise that what Paul is experiencing is not just a relationship of obedience to law or even trust with Jesus. Suddenly there is happening a symbiosis. This is not just *the Law and Paul*, this is now *another person and Paul*. There is an integration of two people now. St Paul uses marriage as an example of the relationship of Jesus to the Church. Marriage is a union of hearts, a union of people so that even at times it

happens that people will say, "They even get to look alike!" There is a profound sharing, a union, that is going on in the relationship between Jesus and the Christian which could not take body simply between law and believer. This is a thrust which Paul can hardly express. This thrust of Christianity exists beyond just the controversy of law versus belief in Jesus. It is not just that Jesus was the sacrifice. Jesus is now the thing I turn into. He becomes part of me as I become part of him. There are religions who believe that your happiness is losing your entire self, even your consciousness that you are who you are, because to the degree that you are aware that you are different from God that is a cause for unhappiness. The absorption into the divine is the only ultimate happiness of the human being. That is why with some of Paul's language about Jesus you begin to see that he is pointing from his own personal experience to a Christianity the object of which is not just to know the mind of God, or to know the glory of God, but rather to become one with God. So the object now is not simply to know God, but love. Christianity turns up far from what Paul says that the Law could achieve: I now end up in a union which is the absorption of my whole self in love with the divine expressed in Jesus. Suddenly Paul starts talking about wanting to be with God, wanting to be with Jesus.

That, ultimately, I think, is the best I can offer where Paul begins to show even in his own life how his understanding of what God did in Jesus is leading him far beyond what he ever understood he could accomplish by the system of the Law in the Old Testament. I started up by saying that I hope that what I say will help you go back and read again the letters of Paul, that you understand them better, and if sometime in the light of your room, when you are reading these things and you say, "Oh! I do see better", then say a prayer for me.

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