

## FREE FROM ALL MEN: STOIC INFLUENCE IN THE WRITINGS OF SAINT PAUL

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“Surely it is never wrong at any time or in any place for a man to love God with his whole heart and his whole soul and his whole mind and to love his neighbor as himself? Sins against nature, therefore... are abominable and deserve punishment wherever and whenever they are committed.”<sup>1</sup> Just following this quotation in Book III of his *Confessions*, Augustine explains that most laws are human conventions, to be regarded only in rendering to Caesar what is rightfully his. This discussion sets up a distinction between laws of nature and laws of human contrivance. And apparently, understanding the difference between Natural Law and convention was part of Augustine’s own conversion, for he tells the above to show what he didn’t know that was damning him from receiving the full grace and pleasure of God. Augustine’s incorporation of the Stoic idea of Natural Law into Matthew 22 is no real surprise; Augustine was hardly a Tertullian, condemning philosophy in all its connection with Christianity. Augustine was the great father of introducing foreign elements into the Church. But, it has been argued, Stoic influence in Christianity actually goes back three centuries earlier, to a certain Paul of Tarsus, an apostle of Christ Jesus, duly ordained and sent to preach the gospel of the Gentiles. Such is the claim of many biblical scholars and exegetes. In this paper, I engage this scholarly opinion, that Paul accepted (and fully embraced?) the Stoical doctrine of Natural Law,<sup>2</sup> and show that the most reasonable reading of Paul’s epistles shows him not to be “influenced” by the Stoics at all.

### The Source: Romans 2

“For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts,

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine. *Confessions*. Pine-Coffin, R. S., trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 64-5. Italicized portions are quotations from Matthew 22:37 and Matthew 22:39 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will not engage parallels between Paul and the Stoics in terms of allegorical interpretation, such as Paul’s radical allegorization of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians. To do such would require more space and time than this paper allows. The subject of the present work is simply to defend Paul against claims of Stoical beliefs about Natural Law.



things that are in accordance with nature."<sup>13</sup> There follows a lengthy discussion of the nature of the Good, what exactly the *telos* is, or *to what* nature draws man. Naturally, the individual born into life seeks that Good; "all who are wise necessarily live happy, perfect and blessed lives."<sup>14</sup> This early focus on individual desires for good eventually gives way to a "wider" *telos* of rationality, for "The Stoics hold that the universe is ruled by divine will, and that it is virtually a single city and state shared by humans and gods."<sup>15</sup> Annas adds in a footnote, "A human, in so far as she is rational, will think of herself as part of a rational community rather than as primarily a promoter of her own interests."<sup>16</sup> The Stoic idea is that nature draws one toward rationality, and rationality draws one toward universal or communal good, somewhat akin to Pauline charity. Man, guided by nature, moves from selfishness to selflessness. But as Cato continues in the dialogue, this selflessness is countered by the perfect medium, unselfishness: "Now although a theatre is communal, it can still rightly be said that the seat which one occupies is one's own. So, too, in city or universe, though these are communal, there is no breach of law in an individual owning property."<sup>17</sup> Once the self has disappeared into community, it returns to itself, recognizing the give and take, the "'benefits' and 'losses'" necessity of existence.<sup>18</sup> The individual reappears, but has become unselfish through nature and rationality. Engberg-Pedersen simplifies the process from start to finish, since both ends emphasize the individual: "an earlier, bad state of an individual is exchanged for a new and good one."<sup>19</sup>

Summarized, the model is that an individual moves from his or her own desires by the draw of nature, losing his or herself in a community. This communal dissolution is eventually forgone as well, and a form of altruism arises, where the individual returns to his or herself and yet focuses on others. Individuals move beyond and then back to the "I," but in the end, each is still connected to the "We." According to Cicero and the Stoics, this is the process of progress in mankind. The individual must make these two moves, landing in the perfect happy medium, becoming "cosmopolitan." And it is this model

<sup>13</sup> Cicero. *De Finibus* III:12. All quotations are taken from Cicero. *On Moral Ends*. Annas, Julia, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Citation will remain standard.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., III:26.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., III:64.

<sup>16</sup> *On Moral Ends*, 85.

<sup>17</sup> *De Finibus*, III:67.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., III:69.

<sup>19</sup> *Paul and the Stoics*, 35.

that Engberg-Pedersen finds in Paul's epistles. *And the model is clearly there.* Pauline charity is not selflessness, but unselfishness, in the purest sense. The pathway to charity found throughout Paul's writings is exactly like Cicero's pathway to cosmopolitanism. For example, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Romans 8:16-17). Here nature teaches the individual that there is a greater unity to achieve, the city "shared by humans and gods." The individual who follows that nature, "the wise," unifies his or herself with Christ, suffering with Him, giving selflessly. What follows from that process, however, is that the individual finds his or herself again – a kind of apotheosis – through the inheritance of being a son or daughter of God. In this simple example, the individual transcends the self and then returns to the self with a wider awareness of the needs of others: Pauline deification in Stoical terms.

Hence, the model is indeed Paul's, Romans 8:16-17 being only one example among many. Engberg-Pedersen's exegesis covers three entire epistles, in fact. To defend Paul against claims that he was a Stoic, it must first be shown that the model illustrated above is not unique to the Stoic school of thought, and it must secondly be shown that some other source for the model is a more likely one to have reached Paul.

### Hebrew Cosmopolitanism: Yom Kippur

The model can indeed be found in another tradition, and one much more likely to have influenced Paul heavily: the Hebrew tradition.

The Jewish Day of Atonement (יום כפר) model was comparable to Engberg-Pedersen's model. At the Day of Atonement, the people of Israel were to gather as a collective group outside the sanctuary of Jehovah. "Yom Kippur is the anniversary of Moses' second descent from Mount Sinai after having received the Ten Commandments,"<sup>20</sup> bringing Israel as a whole to the moment of the grand covenant that united twelve separate tribes or families. Like the *panegyris* of Greece, *this* was the holy day that brought all peoples to one point, uniting them in a solemn pact through the ritual that unified their beliefs. The very fact that the ceremony is ritual suggests that those coming up to the holy place transcended themselves by dissolving into the larger community:

<sup>20</sup> Szink, Terrence L. and John W. Welch. "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals." In *King Benjamin's Speech: That Ye May Learn Wisdom* (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1998), 175. See also Botterweck, G. Johannes, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 7:298: "This action [the culminating ritual of the Day of Atonement] can be understood as a type of the original event at Sinai in Ex 24:15."

“By conforming to models or paradigms that refer to the primordial past and that can be shared by many people, ritual also enables each person to transcend the individual self and thus can link many people together into enduring and true forms of *community*.”<sup>21</sup> Hence the first step in the holiest day of the Jewish calendar was to move from the individual to the community – the first step in Cicero’s model.

Once the ritual began, the focus shifted to a much higher plane, for the focus of the ritual was “the sprinkling of blood on the *kapporet* [the mercy seat or throne of atonement] as a meeting between the God who reveals himself and the human agent who offers himself.”<sup>22</sup> The tension of Israel’s sin was to be “neutralized and relieved by an act of atonement in order to restore the original [natural?] order.”<sup>23</sup> In the rituals of Yom Kippur, God and humans were brought to the same communal plane. The powerful, higher plane of the ritual reality of Yom Kippur allowed each Israelite (who would have come to the holy day as an individual) to transcend his or her self as he or she approached God in His way. Yet the ritual eventually closed and so restored the (almost too physical) reality of the self. In other words, the height of the ritual allowed the self to be forgone (selflessness), but only in the end to return one to one’s self. This return was not, however, a return to selfishness. Rather, the power of the higher plane – the ritual presence of the God of Israel – imbued itself into the restored self so that selfishness was replaced with a sort of unselfishness. Individuals before and after transcending the self, the Israelites went through a sort of change that alerted them to a higher, wise state of individual existence, a *communal* existence. The Hebrew model fits Paul’s doctrine as well as – perhaps better than – Cicero’s.

After all, Paul had been a Pharisee under Gamaliel, and it is clear that Paul’s history in Rabbinical Judaism would have provided him with plenty of understanding in the ritual of Yom Kippur. The simplest explanation for Paul’s model of cosmopolitanism is not Stoicism, but Hebrew philosophy, the characteristic ideal of the Old Testament. Charity demands that Paul’s doctrine be attributed to the Jewish tradition. Therefore, Engberg-Pedersen’s wider Pauline Stoicism is unfounded. It now remains to deal with the particular passage in Romans 2.

### Romans 2:14-15, Stoically Read

It has already been shown that terminology and context in Romans 2 suggest ties with Stoicism. It must now be determined

<sup>21</sup> Eliade, Mircea, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1987), 12:406, emphasis added

<sup>22</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 7:298.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:292.

whether it is justified, to conclude that there is a Stoic influence peeking through Paul’s prose. The wealth of recognition of Stoic elements suggests that it ought not be read in any other light; no Hebrew model presents itself to save the day. Rather, the passage *must* be read in a Stoic light. It is in doing exactly this that Paul is redeemed. Traditionally, the passage has been interpreted as claiming that when the Gentiles live the Torah (at least to some limited extent) simply by nature, they are as good as the Jews who live by the Torah. It is this reading that demands that Paul be labeled as influenced by Stoicism. If this is how the passage should be read, it would appear that Paul holds Greek philosophy on the same level as the crass Law of Moses. Jewish salvation was in the Law, and Greek salvation was in the Academy. Both traditions were placed there by divine providence. This interpretation of the passage goes back to the early Christian Fathers. Origen interpreted this verse: “If he [the Gentile] keep justice or preserve chastity, or maintain prudence, temperance, and modesty; although he be alien from eternal life, because he does not believe in Christ... still it seems, according to the Apostle’s words, that the glory and honour and peace of his good works cannot perish utterly.”<sup>24</sup> Such a reading may depend on Origen’s predecessor, Clement of Alexandria: “But it may even be that philosophy was given to the Greeks directly; for it was ‘a schoolmaster’, to bring Hellenism to Christ, as the Law was for the Hebrews. Thus philosophy was a preparation, paving the way for the man who is brought to perfection by Christ.”<sup>25</sup> Both of these interpretations, however, are based on poor readings of the Greek text.

John W. Martens pointed out that the first word of verse 14 is poorly translated: ὅταν. He explains that the term should be translated as a strict conditional antecedent.<sup>26</sup> Given the change, the verse should read, exaggerated somewhat to clarify the point: “For, if, perchance, some Gentile, not having the law, were to do by nature the things contained in the law...” If ὅταν is translated as a mere “when,” the conditional nature of Paul’s statement disappears, and the passage seems to suggest that any “god”-fearing Greek was being prepared by philosophy for the gospel of Paul. Conversely, understanding the statement to be a strict conditional, it appears that Paul might be suggesting that Greeks seldom – or never – lived up to the Natural ideal.

If Paul is suggesting this, perhaps the passage is more

<sup>24</sup> Origen. *Comm. In Ep. ad Romanos* III:6. As quoted in Bettenson, Henry, ed. *The Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 200.

<sup>25</sup> Clement of Alexandria. *Stromateis* I:v (28, 1). Also in *The Early Christian Fathers*, 168-9.

<sup>26</sup> Martens, John W. “Romans 2.14-16: A Stoic Reading.” *New Testament Studies* 40:63.

thoroughly Stoic than has been let on. Martens explains that “only the wise man does the natural law;... [and] according to both the Stoics and their enemies there had either never been a wise man, or only a handful.”<sup>27</sup> Here, the key to the passage is unlocked. The Stoics did not believe that salvation by Nature was an easy thing at all. Nature urged the individual to rationality, but who that reached the loftiest spheres of rationality were few, or as intimated above, none. Looking at the wider context of Paul’s teachings about the Torah, the Stoical elements fit at last. Indeed, Paul hardly believed that the Torah was a preparation for Christ’s gospel: it is in the same epistle to the Romans that Paul emphasizes the *utter and universal depravity* of man – even (and perhaps especially) of the Jews. Just as the Stoic could only wish that he had the pure rationality to live by the Law of Nature, the Jew could only sit in frustration at the 613 laws from Sinai, some one of which he or she was inevitably bound to break.

The contextual reading of the passage, then, suggests that the Torah damned the Jews, while Stoicism damned the Greeks. This forces another look at the passage from Clement. As he understood Galatians (an abbreviated Romans), Paul taught that the Law was a preparatory track for the Jews, and this allowed Clement to claim that philosophy was likewise preparatory for the Greeks. This passage should be looked at more carefully: “But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster [*παιδαγωγός*] to bring us unto [or until] Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:23-24). The italicized words in the KJV should be noted. There is no verb in the Greek text for “to bring.” More honestly, the translation should read: “Wherefore the law was our *παιδαγωγός* until Christ....” Further, the translation of *παιδαγωγός* as “schoolmaster” is slanted. The word means literally, “child-leader,” but in context, ought to be translated “warden” or “jail-keeper.”<sup>28</sup> This is clear from the context of verse 23: “But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith....” The Law of Moses was a jail cell for the Jews, not a teacher, and under it they were locked up. Hence, the Law was no teacher; it was the warden, keeping the Jews locked up *until* Christ would free them. The KJV “interpretation by translation” may reflect a desire to maintain the tradition of Clement; it has not been avoided in more recent translations either: “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (NIV Galatians 3:24). The meaning in the NIV

remains in the Clementine tradition: the Law led to Christ.

If the Greek text of Galatians reflects Paul’s contempt for the Law, the attitude might be extended, in Clement’s manner, to philosophy as well: Paul saw the same futility in Greek philosophy that he saw in Mosaic Law. What does this mean for Romans 2? If the Law “was added because of transgressions” (Galatians 3:19), Stoic philosophy cannot be held to a different standard. The chapter preceding our passage in Romans 2 is one long treatise on the way of apostasy among both Jews and Gentiles. The chapter following the passage contains the quotation: “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Romans 3:10-12). Romans 2:14-15 is literally surrounded with the idea that Gentiles and Jews are nothing without Christ; *all* is utter depravity without Him. “But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). Christ was salvation to those that accepted the doctrine; apparently all others were damned.

### Paul the Eclectic

Allowing for a Stoic reading of Paul’s short passage, then, does not seem to commit him to any Stoic influence, and it answers to the Stoic reading forced by historical and philological context. But the exegesis above does not force the conclusion that Paul has nothing to do with the Stoics. It does, however, seem that Paul employs the Stoic philosophy for a moment only to make a point. It now becomes my task to show that this is a common Pauline practice, not limited to Stoic philosophy, and hence, that a short citation of Stoic philosophy does not imply influence of doctrine.

To illustrate this point, it is instructive to look at Paul’s direct experience with the Stoics, found in Acts 17. Once Paul wins an audience of the Stoics and Epicureans, he takes opportunity to make himself at home with them by quoting one of their own poets: “as certain of your own poets have said, For we are also offspring” (Acts 17:28). Here Paul emerges as the learned eclectic, knowing enough about his surroundings to sound at home, the true “cosmopolitan.” The style in which Paul quotes the poet and then uses the poet’s point as a logical premise shows Paul to be using common grounds so that he might teach something higher. This pattern is of utmost importance. Paul does not commit himself to the poet’s message, nor to Greek poetic doctrine as a whole; he uses the allusion to give him leverage to teach what he knows may be

<sup>27</sup> “Romans 2.14-16: A Stoic Reading,” 66.

<sup>28</sup> “One must judge this ‘pedagogical interpretation’ unacceptable,” says Martyn, who translates the phrase, “The Law was our confining custodian.” Martyn, J. Louis. *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 362-3.

objectionable or shocking to his audience: the literal resurrection, in this case. Paul even played into the Stoic method of interpretation, taking the classic works as a basis for further discussion. All of this allowed him to open a floodgate of doctrine, which in Athens, as in other venues, proved too much for his listeners.

Here, then, we have the eclectic model of Paul: *A belief familiar to the audience is provided, whether or not Paul believes it to be true, and from that granted point, Paul leads into the more important doctrine, the mystery he desires to unfold.* This shows up in a several contexts. In chapter 8 of 1 Corinthians, Paul turns to a less inviting subject: “Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge” (1 Corinthians 8:1). Paul takes up the point that meat offered to idols does no eternal damage to any soul (as in verse 8, “for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse”), but he uses this same point eventually to discuss the highest doctrine of all: charity. Paul explains that the liberty provided by knowledge can “become a stumblingblock to them that are weak” (1 Corinthians 8:9), thereby limiting the higher doctrine of charity. Paul makes an eclectic point in order to lead to a discussion of higher and more important doctrines.

The example in 1 Corinthians contains no objectionable doctrine for Paul. Other examples, however, may show that Paul allows premises with which he does not necessarily agree, in order to arrive at the more important doctrine. Such an example is found in 2 Timothy 3:8: “Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith.” One of the earliest documents providing the names of the magicians in Pharaoh’s court is the so-called “Damascus Document” or “Zadokite Fragments,” which were found with the Dead Sea Scrolls. There it states, “In days gone by, Moses and Aaron arose by the hand of the Prince of Lights, but Belial in his cunning raised up Yohana [Jannes] and his brother when Israel was saved for the first time.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps earlier is the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, which states both the names of Jannes and Jambres.<sup>30</sup> Neither of these sources was abundantly available in Paul’s day, however, and his citation of these names likely suggests that there was a verbal tradition at the time. Paul, comforting Timothy in a time of great difficulty, calls on then common Jewish folklore, as one might now cite Shakespeare in such a situation. Paul’s mention of the names hardly makes him a Qumran sectary or student of fragmentary targums. Paul merely spoke in the language familiar to his audience, perhaps conceding a point that he did not truly believe.

<sup>29</sup> *Damascus Document* 5:17-19. As cited in Kugel, James L. *The Bible as it was* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997), 291.

<sup>30</sup> *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* Exod. 1:15-16. Also in *The Bible as it was*, 291.

A collection of like examples litters the Epistle to the Hebrews. A striking one suffices: Hebrews 7:2-3. Here Paul says of Melchizedek that he was “Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually.” This is a literal host of extra-biblical traditions that Paul uses to his advantage in this epistle. They seem to go back to 2 *Enoch*, in which “Melchizedek seems to be born to Sapanim, the wife of Noah’s (mythical) brother Nir, without any prior act of sexual intercourse.”<sup>31</sup> It would be hard to believe that Paul understood Melchizedek to be literally without descent, but he uses the commonly held Jewish belief, in order to gain leverage in convincing his readers that Jesus is the Messiah they have sought. Again, Paul’s hint does not make him a folklorist, but an eclectic polemic, with an ability to teach.

The picture this paints of Paul is the one he paints himself: “For though I be free from all *men*, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law... I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:19-21, 23, emphasis added). Paul is not influenced by Stoicism, but becomes a Stoic to the Stoics, exactly in the context suggested above: Romans needed to hear a Stoic voice, and Paul used it to shock them beyond themselves and into the gospel of his Christ. In short, Paul remains the character he puts forth in his own words. In the end, it may be that the question concerning Paul’s “Stoic tendencies” disclose more concerning the one asking the question than the one being questioned: the question might well be understood as a manifestation of a general puerile reluctance to take Paul’s words (or the words of any other text?) as they present themselves, a sort of reluctance to perform the sort of hermeneutic that can be called a conversation. Paul the Stoic can only stammer condemned before the dominating questioning of the young and virile investigator.

In fact, an interesting footnote to this whole discussion lends weight to this final interpretation of the entire situation. Though it is clear, as was shown above, that Augustine understood the text in Romans in the tradition of Clement and Origen, he later “corrected” this view in his *Retractions*.<sup>32</sup> Augustine later held “‘by nature’ to refer... to

<sup>31</sup> *The Bible as it was*, 157.

<sup>32</sup> Gathercole, Simon J. “A Conversion of Augustine: From Natural Law to Restored Nature in Romans 2.13-16.” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 38 (1999): 327-8.

the accomplishment of the Law by a renewed nature.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, Augustine eventually understood this scripture to mean that the way a Gentile (or a Jew for that matter) would accomplish any law at all, let alone the whole Law, would be by having a changed nature, hence, “by nature.” The Gentiles had the opportunity to receive salvation only when they lived the Law by having a changed nature, a nature changed in and by Christ. This more “mature” view suggests that Augustine himself grew beyond any pretensions to Stoic influence in the verse at all.<sup>34</sup> Though this reading might in some ways be considered rather poor as well, Augustine’s eventual concession to Paul’s central theme of grace is a significant token of submission on the philosopher’s part. At the very least, continued attention to Paul’s texts led Augustine eventually *from*, not *to*, Stoicism.

### Conclusion

In the above, several things have been shown. It has been shown that, though scholars almost universally admit some influence of Stoicism in Paul’s writings, such a view is not entirely founded. Paul has been shown (against Engberg-Pedersen) to fall into the wider and more ancient Hebrew tradition, rather than the Stoic tradition then still fresh in Rome. Further, it has been shown that Romans 2 does exhibit Stoic elements, but that these elements force the reader not to see Paul as influenced by and preaching the doctrines of the Stoics, but rather, as condemning the Stoics along with the Jews in their own tradition. Moreover, Paul’s general eclectic nature has been discussed, showing him to be willing to adopt and use doctrines and tales from a number of traditions, none of which he was very likely to have adhered to himself. Finally, it has been shown that Augustine himself, when more acquainted with the doctrines of Paul, read Romans 2 in a new light, not as a Stoical document, but as a decree of grace and how it may benefit the Gentiles in their search for salvation. From all of the above, I conclude that it is at least uncharitable—and perhaps irresponsible—to claim Stoic influences on Paul in terms of his ethical theory.<sup>35</sup> Paul emerges from behind the cloud of tradition at last in his own terms: “free from all men, yet... servant unto all... [to] gain the more” (1 Corinthians 9:19).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>35</sup> Again, it has not been shown that Paul’s methodology, using allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, was not influenced by Stoicism. This claim is far less widespread; regardless, it must be dealt with in another work.

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