

KEEPING CLOSELY TO PAUL, THE "EARLY" USE AND EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 2:14-16, v. 20 SOME EXAMPLES

Introduction

This paper discusses the use and, to the extent that the concept is applicable in the chosen cases, exegesis, of Romans 2:14-16 in early, which in this case means pre-fourth century, Christian literature. The focus will be on a selection of texts by three authors, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Origen. The treatment will not be exhaustive, but in order to remain within the limits of this paper I will restrict myself to the discussion of a few significant examples from each author, and a brief conclusion.

I will begin with some remarks on the Biblical text and its context, mainly the chapter in which it is embedded.

Romans 2:14-16: the text, its immediate context, and some observations from some first and early second century sources

The topic of Rom 2 can be termed as 'God's judgment', specifically as applying not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. Rom 1 introduced the theme of 'God's wrath' against humanity, because men had ignored God's revelation in creation and resorted to worship of creatures and, subsequently, to unnatural behaviour. Later on in Rom 2 Paul will outline the function of the Mosaic law for the Jews, but here, in Rom 2:12-16, he describes the situation of the Gentiles who do not have the Mosaic law.

Two things are striking here: First, the universal, cosmic, scope of Paul's reflection. Jews and Gentiles are tied into a cosmic order established by God, i. e. creation. God's judgment is not about the transgression of a few commandments, though the individual commandments are important and Rom 1 ends with a catalogue of transgressions and a particular focus on sexual transgressions as a metaphor for the corruption of humanity, i. e. its 'un-natural' state, in general. But in a deeper sense God's judgment is concerning the whole cosmos, the universe, as God's creation. There is a very fundamental, basic, 'feel' to the argument in Rom 1 and 2, which is not lost on early Christian writers. It is simple, even 'primitive', 'archaic', and it has a powerful ethical impact.

Two examples from the earlier second century may illustrate this. They do not refer to Rom 2:14-16 specifically, but to other parts of Rom 2. Yet they may be interesting in the present context in several respects. Both hint at themes and phrases from Rom 2, but are also developing them. The first is from the Epistle of Barnabas, Barn 4.12: 'The Lord "judges" the universe (τὸν κόσμον) "without regard for the person" (ἀπροσωπολήμπτως κρινεῖ) [this could hint at Rom 2:6; notice the incongruity between ἀπροσωπολήμπτως and τὸν κόσμον.]. 'Everyone (ἐκαστος),' it continues, 'will receive his due (κομιεῖται) according to his deeds (καθὼς ἐποίησεν). If he was good (ἀγαθός), his righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) will precede him (προηγέσεται), if he was bad (πονηρός), the reward (μισθός) for his badness (πονηρία) will be before him.'

The second example is taken from 2 Clement 11.6: 'For credible is only the one who holds that everyone will receive the exact reward for his or her deeds' (πιστὸς γάρ ἐστιν ὁ ἐπαγγειλάμενος τὰς ἀντιμισθίας ἀποδιδόναι ἐκάστῳ τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ).

My observation here is that the message is forceful and universal, and to some extent even automatic, mechanical. It is not some wrathful person who exacts this mechanism of deed and reward, but rather some kind of natural order, a law of nature, natural law and legal nature, as Tertullian would later call it. Personal circumstances will be excluded. Note the predominance of the passive voice in these passages. Things are being done to men, not by some divine agent, but by a quasi natural process.

The second observation regarding Rom 2 is its rather bleak outlook. It does not focus so much on the reward for those who might fulfil the law, but rather on the fate of those who won't. V. 12 focuses on the condemnation of the sinners, not on the justification of the righteous. The reason for that focus is spelled out in v. 13: Not those who hear, but those who do the law will be justified. The question lurking beneath these phrases, which Paul addresses elsewhere, is: Is there anyone who can 'do' the law without fail? Is there anyone who is or could become righteous in that full sense, without any additional, as it were, divine input?¹

This is probably what has to be kept in mind when Paul now introduces the Gentiles, in v. 14: 'For whenever Gentiles, who do not

¹ For the text see Rom 2:12-13: ὅσοι γὰρ ἀνόμως ἥμαρτον, ἀνόμως καὶ ἀπολοῦνται, καὶ ὅσοι ἐν νόμῳ ἥμαρτον, διὰ νόμου κριθήσονται· οὐ γὰρ οἱ ἀκροαταὶ νόμου δίκαιοι παρὰ τῷ θεῷ, ἀλλ' οἱ ποιηταὶ νόμου δικαιωθήσονται.

have the law, do quasi by nature what the law requires, they, not having the law, are the law for themselves.² The implication here does not seem to be that Gentiles might actually be able to render themselves righteous by fulfilling by nature what the law requires. Rather, what Paul seems to try to establish here is that Gentiles have the same bottom line as Jews when it comes to their ability, or inability, of fulfilling the law, or rather, the justification on God's part to judge them. The mechanism of recognising what is right and wrong and then acting rightly (sometimes) is the same for everyone. The question is: Does it work for anyone by nature or law alone? Rom 2:14 does not indicate that it does. Further on in Romans Paul does quite explicitly say that it does not. However, the fact that he does not do so here in Rom 2, and the way he relates the two complexes, nature/law and grace, in other parts of his work may have contributed to the development of disagreements among later exegetes about the precise understanding of the role of law and nature in the salvation process.

Paul's interest in Rom 2 is God's judgment, and his interest in Rom 2:14 is how God's judgment can also apply to Gentiles, since they have not been given the law. The answer is that they find in themselves rules which are basically the same as those which the Jews find in the law. And thus the Gentiles fulfil certain requirements of the law by following certain rules (equal to the commandments formulated in the law) which they discover in themselves. For this reason they can be judged by the law, whether they have the law or not. But how do they access this law 'in' themselves?

This is what v. 15 is about: The Gentiles, Paul argues, witness (ἐνδείκνυνται) to the fact that the work of the law (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου), i. e. what the law prescribes and what the Gentiles sometimes happen to fulfil, even though they do not have the law – that this work is 'inscribed in their [i. e. the Gentiles'] hearts' (γραφτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν), quasi as a Gentile version of the law.³ And how do the Gentiles witness to that? What is the evidence, aside from the fact that they occasionally, and perhaps merely incidentally, fulfil the

² Rom 2:14: ὅταν γὰρ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν, οὗτοι νόμον μὴ ἔχοντες ἑαυτοῖς εἰσιν νόμος. Vulgate: *cum enim gentes quae legem non habent, naturaliter quae legis sunt faciunt, hi legem non habentes ipsi sibi sunt lex...*

³ For the entire text see Rom 2:15: οἵτινες ἐνδείκνυνται τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, συμμαρτυρούσης αὐτῶν τῆς συνειδήσεως καὶ μεταξὺ ἀλλήλων τῶν λογισμῶν κατηγορούντων ἢ καὶ ἀπολογουμένων. Vulgate: *qui ostendunt opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis testimonium reddente eis conscientia et inter se inuicem cogitationibus accusantibus aut etiam defendentibus...*

requirements of the law, that Gentiles do indeed respond to such a law? Paul's answer is: They have a conscience, συνείδησις, which accompanies their actions as what can be called its 'co-witness': συμ-μαρτυρούσης; while at the same time in their thoughts they constantly accuse and defend themselves, as if they participated in an inner court of law at which their actions are judged.

Some brief remarks on the background of this verse. There are three significant motifs here, the inscription of the law in the heart of the Gentiles, the concept of συνείδησις, and the court motif, which I interpret as an inner-court motif disregarding for the purpose of this paper the eschatological dimension of the verse, which undoubtedly also exists, but had, to my knowledge, little impact on the earliest exegesis of the verse. It comes in with v. 16.⁴ But this verse receives surprisingly little attention in the earliest use and exegesis of the passage.

The idea of the law being inscribed in the heart of men can be found in Jeremiah 31:33 [LXX 38:33].⁵ Isaiah 51:7 has only 'being' rather than 'being inscribed' 'in the heart'.⁶ But note that these two references do not refer to Gentiles but to the people of Israel. On the other hand, the idea that moral principles are being implanted and then imprinted in the soul, is a Stoic idea. More on this further below. But Paul is not speaking here about imprints or souls, although it is possible to assume a philosophical background for his idea, as it is connected with the ideas of conscience and the inner court. These two ideas can be found combined several times in Philo and Seneca.⁷

⁴ For the text see Rom 2:16: ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ὅτε κρίνει ὁ θεὸς τὰ κρυπτὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου διὰ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ; Vulgate: *in die cum iudicabit deus occulta hominum secundum euangelium meum per Iesum Christum.*

⁵ For the text see Jeremiah 38:33LXX: ὅτι αὕτη ἡ διαθήκη, ἣν διαθήσομαι τῷ οἴκῳ Ἰσραὴλ μετὰ τὰς ἡμέρας ἐκείνας, φησὶν κύριος Διδοὺς δώσω νόμους μου εἰς τὴν διάνοιαν αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπὶ καρδίας αὐτῶν γράψω αὐτοὺς· καὶ ἔσομαι αὐτοῖς εἰς θεόν, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔσονται μοι εἰς λαόν·

⁶ Compare Isaiah 51:7aLXX: ἀκούσατέ μου, οἱ εἰδότες κρίσιν, λαός μου, οὗ ὁ νόμος μου ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν·

⁷ Compare Philo of Alexandria, *Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat* 23: 'This man, who lives in the soul of everyone, acts sometimes as a ruler and king, at other times as judge and jury member in the competitions of life; sometimes he also assumes the role of accuser; he convicts us of a crime invisibly, inside ourselves, and does not allow us to open our mouths, but takes us prisoner, ties us up and with the reins of conscience stops the unbridled arrogant run of the tongue.' οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἐν ἐκάστῳ τῇ ψυχῇ κατοικῶν τοτὲ μὲν ἄρχων καὶ βασιλεὺς εὐρίσκεται τοτὲ δὲ δικαστὴς καὶ βραβευτὴς τῶν κατὰ τὸν βίον ἀγώνων, ἔστι δ' ὅτε μάρτυρος ἢ κατηγοροῦ λαβὼν τάξιν ἀφανῶς ἡμᾶς ἐνδοθεν ἐλέγχει μηδὲ διαῖραι τὸ στόμα ἔων, ἐλλαμβανόμενος δὲ καὶ ἐπιστομίζων ταῖς τοῦ συνειδότης ἡνίαις τὸν αὐθάδη μετὰ ἀφηνιασμοῦ δρόμον γλώττης ἐπέσχευεν. Philo of Alexandria, *De Decalogo* 87: 'For the convictor who is innate to every soul and lives in it is not used

Yet again, Philo consistently uses the more sophisticated, philosophical, expression τὸ συνειδός rather than ἡ συνείδησις; Paul always uses ἡ συνείδησις, never τὸ συνειδός; and Philo sees conscience more as an accuser or 'convictor' (ἐλεγχος) at that inner court. For him conscience is primarily 'bad conscience'. Paul's interpretation of conscience as 'co-witness' in contrast seems softer. For Paul, at any rate, conscience does not assume God's place. For him Christ is the judge, as stated in v. 16. Tertullian will put it similarly. Philo and Seneca and later scholastic philosophy and theology are more philosophical, as they ascribe to conscience a quasi divine role as accuser and judge. With this I move on to Clement of Alexandria.⁸

Clement of Alexandria

In Book 1, Chapter 19, of his 'Stromateis', Clement develops the argument that Greek philosophy contains some element of truth (ἀληθῆ τινα δογματίζειν καὶ Ἑλλῆνες). This, he says, can be explored in the sources (ἐξεστι κἀντεῦθεν σκοπεῖν). He begins by citing Acts 17:22-28, Paul's speech on the Areopagus, a *locus classicus* of natural theology, but little to do with Paul himself, or Rom 2:14-16. The relationship between the two passages is externally constructed, by Clement. Clement's love of paradox and his comprehensive use and exegesis of paradoxical, parallel and chiasmic motifs from all sorts of scriptures, biblical, classical or apocryphal, emerges

to allow anything unjust. He only knows hate against the bad and love of the good. He is accuser and judge in one. Once he is awake he acts as accuser, he accuses and shames the accused. Then again, as judge he teaches, reproaches, exhorts, and if he is able to persuade, he is happy and reconciled. If not, he fights on, irreconcilably, day and night, inflicts stings and wounds, until he has finished off the miserable and wretched life.' ὁ γὰρ ἐκάστη ψυχῇ συμπεφυκὼς καὶ συνοικῶν ἐλεγχος, οὐδὲν εἰσὼδὸς παραδέχεσθαι τῶν ὑπαιτίων, μισοπονήρῳ καὶ φιλαρέτῳ χρώμενος αἰεὶ τῇ φύσει, κατήγορος ὁμοῦ καὶ δικαστῆς ὁ αὐτὸς ὢν, διακινηθεὶς ὥς μὲν κατήγορος αἰτιᾶται, κατηγορεῖ, δυσωπεῖ, πάλιν δ' ὡς δικαστῆς διδάσκει, νοουθετεῖ, παραινεί μεταβάλλεσθαι· κἂν μὲν ἰσχύσῃ πείσαι, γενηθὼς καταλλάττεται, μὴ δυνηθεὶς δὲ ἀσπονδεῖ πολεμεῖ μήτε μεθ' ἡμέραν μήτε νύκτωρ ἀφιστάμενος, ἀλλὰ κεντῶν καὶ τιτρώσκων ἀνιάτα, μέχρις ἂν τὴν ἀθλίαν καὶ ἐπάρατον ζωὴν ἀπορρήξῃ. Seneca, *Epistula* 105.7: *securitatis magna portio est nihil inique facere. Confusam vitam et perturbatam inpotentes agunt; tantum metuunt, quantum nocent, nec ullo tempore vacant. Trepidant enim, cum fecerunt, haerent; conscientia aliud agere non patitur ac subinde respondere ad se cogit.*

⁸ For the text see Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.19.91-96 (ed. GCS 15. Clemens Alexandrinus, Werke, Bd. 2, 2. Aufl., Berlin 1939). All citations below are taken from this edition.

also in this passage: The Athenians' dedication of an altar to the unknown God is matched by the Johannine motif of Christ knowing the Father and everyone knowing the Father through Christ. Paul's sermon opened the eyes of the Areopagites, though only of some, for as already Socrates said [the reference is to an apocryphal saying], referring to the mystery cults, 'many are thyrsos bearers, but only a few are bacchanals' (ναρθηκοφόροι μὲν πολλοί, βάκχοι δέ τε παῦροι), which reminds Clement of Mt 20:17: 'Many are called, but only a few are chosen' (πολλοὺς μὲν τοὺς κλητούς, ὀλίγους δὲ τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς).

Clement's source applies the saying about the bacchanals to those who philosophized in the right way, or practiced the right kind of philosophy, οἱ πεφιλοσοφηκότες ὁρθῶς. And by philosophizing in the right way Clement's source seems to mean, among other things, to believe in life after death, which was the final point of the Areopagus speech. Another characteristic of the true philosophy is the contemplation of the one true being and the good; and here Clement introduces one of his famous citations from Heraclitus: 'the knowledge of many things does not satisfy the soul...' Implying that it is only the contemplation of the One that matters (perhaps also alluding to Lk 10:41).⁹

Now the question which Clement asks is, did the Greeks hit on these truths by chance, or did they have some inner, orderly, access to the truth, be it natural or divinely decreed? Clement develops his argument slowly: Even if we assume that there was an element of chance, he argues, chance itself is divinely administered. Good fortune is not unforeseen (οὐκ ἀπρονόητος ἡ συντυχία). One could argue that the Greeks had a natural conception (φυσικὴν ἔννοιαν) of these things, therefore also a notion of the creator (τὸν τῆς φύσεως δημιουργὸν ἔνα), and a common intellect (κοινὸν νοῦν). Just as in the biblical sphere the prophets anticipated the ultimate revelation of God, thus in classical culture it would have been the philosophers. In fact, Clement even seems to believe that those Greeks who have philosophized accurately, 'see' God: καὶ κατ' ἔμφασιν δὲ καὶ διάφασιν οἱ ἀκριβῶς παρ' Ἑλλησι φιλοσοφήσαντες διορῶσι τὸν θεόν.

But not everything would have been clear from the outset, which is where Paul comes in once more: 'Now we see only as if through a mirror,' Clement cites 1 Cor 13:12. It is only gradually, after overcoming the limitations of our fleshly existence, that we, i. e. all men,

⁹ For an extensive discussion of the Heraclitus fragment in the context of Clement's argumentation see H. Wiese, *Heraklit bei Klemens von Alexandrien* (Diss. Kiel, 1963) 105-115.

Greek philosophers included, shall proceed to a fuller, deeper, comprehension, and indeed vision, of God. And this is now also the context in which Clement cites Rom 2:14. It is introduced by a verse from Proverbs, Prov 27:23: 'Thou shalt have a deep knowledge of thy flock', γνωστῶς δὲ ἐπιγνώσῃ ψυχὰς ποιμνίου σου. The accumulated use of words invoking γνώσις seems deliberate here. Gnosis, a full vision of God, is the ultimate goal. Overcoming the flesh by fulfilling God's commandments is an important precondition to achieving this goal. And all human beings, Gentiles included, have the ability to follow that path. This is the point for which Clement uses a literal citation of Rom 2:14; and for some reason he attaches to it a paraphrase of Rom 2:26a. I quote: 'The Gentiles who do not have the law do by nature what the law requires. Therefore, not having the law they are a law for themselves. Thus "un-circumcision" is preserving the precepts of the law, according to the apostle.'¹⁰

The way Clement constructs this passage deserves some further attention. He closes it as a whole with the phrase κατὰ τὸν ἀπόστολον, 'according to the apostle'. This suggests that he intends it to be treated as a unit. Otherwise he could have separated the two verses with a phrase like 'again', καὶ πάλιν, as he does a little earlier in the case of two Proverb verses.¹¹ But what he is doing here instead is to convert the conditional clause that is Rom 2:26a (ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ἀκροβυστία τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου φυλάσῃ) into an absolute genitive (τῆς ἀκροβυστίας τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου φυλασσοῦσης and attaches it to the literal citation of Rom 2:14, as if pretending that he is dealing with one citation from Paul. This may be due to what is also observed elsewhere in his work: that he is citing Biblical verses from memory; or he wants to put a particular spin on Rom 2:14, emphasizing the Gentile role in preserving the law, by which he obviously means the more basic, ascetic, rules of the law rather than any particular cultic, or purificatory, elements, an aspect which we shall see Origen discuss in his commentary. After all, it was the role of the Gentiles, i. e. the Greek philosophers, in achieving the highest degree of human proximity to God, which was the topic of this chapter in the first place.

¹⁰ For the text see Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.19.95.3: 'ὅταν γὰρ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν, οὗτοι νόμον μὴ ἔχοντες ἑαυτοῖς εἰσι νόμος (Rom 2:14) [τῆς ἀκροβυστίας τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου φυλασσοῦσης]' (Rom 2:26a) κατὰ τὸν ἀπόστολον.

¹¹ Compare *Stromateis* 1.19.95.1-2: 'εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ τὰ ἴδια σπεύροντες οἱ πλείονα ποιῶσιν' (Prov 11:24), καὶ πάλιν 'ἐπιμελοῦ τῶν ἐν τῷ πεδίῳ χλωρῶν καὶ κερεῖς πόαν, καὶ συνάγαγε χόρτον ὄριμον, ἵνα [95.2] ἔχῃς πρόβατα εἰς ἱματισμόν' (Prov 27:25-26).

Thus Clement only *uses* Rom 2:14. And he does so in this particular combination with Rom 2:26a, and for this purpose only. He does not explain the verse in context. It merely serves to illustrate and underline the point he had made since setting out from the passage in Acts, namely how important a role Greek philosophy plays in the attempt to attain true gnosis. This is further underlined by what follows at the end of the chapter. It illustrates just how much Clement values Greek philosophy for this purpose. He considers it to be more or less the Gentile version of the Mosaic law. He writes that Solomon in Proverbs had contrasted philosophers with heretics, when he said, Prov 27:10: 'Better a friend (i. e. Greek philosophy) who is near than a brother (i. e. Christian heresy) who lives far away' (οἷον εἰ δὲ σύγκρισιν ποιούμενος ὁ λόγος τῶν ἀπὸ φιλοσοφίας πρὸς τοὺς αἵρετικούς καλουμένους, ἐμφανῶς πάνυ 'κρείσσων' φησὶ 'φίλος ἐγγὺς ἢ ἀδελφὸς μακρὰν οἰκῶν'. Strom. 1.19.95.4, quoting Prov 27:10).

Clement here seems to argue against the notion (famously put forward by Tertullian) that the heresies are derived from Greek philosophy. For Clement the Greek philosophers are trustworthy and even connected with God (because nature and revelation are linked through creation), just as the biblical prophets; for according to Rom 2:14, underlined by the paraphrase of Rom 2:26a, the law of nature is strictly equivalent to the law of Moses; whereas the heretics have lost that link. They harvest chaff (συνάγων χερσὶν ἀκαρπίαν). They are separated from the primitive church (τὴν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἀπολείπουσαι ἐκκλησίαν). They are like people crossing the desert without water (διέρχεται δι' ἐρημίας ἀνύδρου). They are like lost at sea (κατασύροντα εἰς θάλασσαν). They have abandoned the basis provided by the law, including by the law of nature for which the Greek philosophers stand, who are representing a valid tradition of contemplating the One rather than the tumultuous pagan cult of the many (τὰ ἔθνη καὶ ἄτακτα τοῦ βίου κύματα).¹²

Tertullian

I come to Tertullian. He uses and alludes to, or cites, Rom 2:14-16 in a few places. Not entirely unexpectedly he differs from Clement in many respects, but there are also some counter-intuitive similarities.

¹² Compare E. Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 223.

Generally¹³ Tertullian is known for refuting Greek philosophy: It abuses and perverts the truth, and causes heresies: The Gnostics derive from Plato, Marcion from the Stoics. (Someone calling the kettle black here.) On the other hand Tertullian develops a very similar argument as Clement: Occasionally the philosophers stumble on the truth by accident (*De anima* 2.1);¹⁴ but accident implies providence. God rationally ordered nature (*De paenitentia* 1.2) and provided man with reason to understand it (*De corona* 4.1). This is why philosophy sometimes gets it right (*De anima* 2.1);¹⁵ and what philosophy does get right is identical with the truth revealed in the Gospel (*De paenitentia* 1; *De testimonio animae* 5.7).¹⁶

There is, of course, a difference in emphasis between Tertullian and Clement. Clement seems to concede to philosophy a quasi independent status, almost as a second source of revelation besides the biblical tradition. Tertullian's embrace of philosophy is much more blatantly driven by his interest as a Christian propagandist. His interest is not so much in philosophy getting it right, as Clement's might have been, but in the fact that in getting it right philosophy concurs with the Christian message. To apply his famous phrase of the human soul being naturally Christian, *naturaliter Christiana*: Clement's emphasis might have been on the word *naturaliter*, Tertullian's would have been firmly on *Christiana*.

Before delving into the evidence for Tertullian's use of Rom 2:14, a few notes on the alleged Stoic outlook of his thought might be in place, especially his 'ethics'. Tertullian strongly links the Stoic triad of nature, law and conscience. But one may wonder whether he did so more strongly than Paul. He certainly did it much less strongly, in philosophical terms, than Philo or Seneca. One might also ask to what extent Tertullian was influenced by Paul or not. Thus he does not cite Rom 2:15 when he had ample opportunity to do so, for example in two passages in *Adversus Marcionem*: 1. Conscience is a primordial gift of God for the soul.¹⁷ 2. Marcion, so Tertullian argues,

¹³ For what follows see E. Osborn, *Tertullian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 34.

¹⁴ Tertullian, *De anima* 2.1 (CCL 2:783): *plane non negabimus aliquando philosophos iuxta nostra sensisse... natura pleraque suggeruntur quasi de publico sensu, quo animam deus dotare dignatus est.*

¹⁵ For the text compare the previous note.

¹⁶ Tertullian, *De testimonio animae* 5.7 (CCL 1:182): *...non multum refert an deo formata sit animae conscientia an litteris dei.*

¹⁷ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 1.10.3 (CCL 1:451): *animae enim a primordio conscientia dei dos est.*

does not want to think of God as judge. Therefore he wants to eliminate from the Gospel Jesus' word that God is letting it rain on the just and the unjust alike (Mt 5:45). Against this position Tertullian argues, as much as Marcion might try to sanitise the biblical concept of the creator God who is also judge, he will not succeed, because the world itself is inscribed with it and the inscription can be read by every human being in their conscience.¹⁸

Although Rom 2:15 seems to be written all over these passages, the verse is not cited, or even hinted at. Nor do we, as far as I know, find anywhere in Tertullian the idea of an inner court, or conscience as a judge or an accuser at that inner court. Tertullian's concept of conscience is broader, and contextualised differently. As God's primordial gift to man it enables human beings to learn from the law of nature, which is inscribed in creation.¹⁹ The context is usually pedagogical rather than judicial. The emphasis is on learning the law rather than being judged by it in a court room, or by Christ at the last judgment.

It is in this context that Tertullian refers to Rom 2:14 more openly. In *De corona* 6.1 he argues that before enquiring about God's law concerning certain Christian practices one should consider the common law which is engraved on the tables of nature (*legem... communem istam... in naturalibus tabulis*). To this, he continues, also the apostle refers when he says about the veiling of women, 'does not nature herself teach you that' (1 Cor 11:14)? Similarly, when the apostle says in Romans that the Gentiles do by nature what the law requires (Rom 2:14), he suggests that there is a natural law and a legal nature (*lex naturalis... natura legalis*), i. e. a nature that is structured according to that law, so that the requirements of that law can be learned through a careful study of nature. Tertullian then goes on to discuss the end of Rom 1 (he calls it *prior epistulae pars*, an interesting reference to the partition of the letter in antiquity) as an example for how to distinguish between natural and unnatural behaviour.²⁰

¹⁸ Compare Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 2.17.1 (CCL 1:494): ...*ipse mundus inscriptus est et omni a conscientia legitur*.

¹⁹ See Tertullian, *De ieiunio* 6.1 (CCL 2:1261): ...*conscientiam communem consulamus. Ipsa natura enuntiabit...*

²⁰ Compare Tertullian, *De corona* 6.1 (CCL 2:1046): *quaeres igitur dei legem? habes communem istam in publico mundi, in naturalibus tabulis ad quas et apostolus solet prouocare, ut cum in uelamine feminae: 'nec natura,' inquit, 'uos docet'? (1 Cor 11:14), ut cum ad Romanos, natura facere dicens nationes ea quae sunt legis (Rom 2:14), et legem naturalem suggerit et naturam legalem. sed et in priore epistula parte (Rom 1) naturalem usum conditionis in non naturalem masculos et feminas inter se demutasse affirmans ex retributione erroris in uicem poenae, utique naturalibus patrocinator.*

However, coming back to *Adversus Marcionem*, nothing as such is gained according to Tertullian by the natural ability to distinguish good from evil, and Tertullian seems to follow Paul here quite closely. The law of nature only serves to justify God's judgment not only over the Jews but also over the Gentiles, who do not have the law of Moses, but who do have the law of nature. Tertullian emphasizes this in *Adversus Marcionem* 5.13.4 with an explicit reference to and citation of Rom 2:14.²¹ And already earlier, in *Adversus Marcionem* 4.16.15,²² he points out that the law of nature alone is not enough to enable men to live a godly life. Such a life under God's discipline (*dei disciplina*) can only be led under the fear of God, when good will and right action from faith ultimately coincide. The contrast between, or the opposition of, the two concepts of law (both, law of Moses and law of nature) on one side, and discipline of God on the other, is vital, so Tertullian, to form a basis for a Christian life. Marcion's God, revealed as he may be, or precisely because he is thought of as revealed without any reference to a previous legal system (be it of nature or of Moses), cannot provide such a basis, because he simply has no reference point in history.

To conclude Tertullian: It seems that Tertullian follows Paul closely, though he does not frequently cite him. Then there is a difference between Tertullian's and Clement's concepts of natural law. Clement sees it quasi as a second source of revelation. He puts the Greek philosophers alongside the biblical prophets. Tertullian, more like Paul, uses the concept negatively, to have a common basis for the judgment of Jews and Gentiles alike. His position is coloured by his anti-Marcionite stance. Marcion had postulated a second revelation that was to erase the first. Tertullian knew only one revelation which did not erase history, i. e. the law (both Mosaic and natural), but relied on it. To prove this he used Rom 2:14 a few times, not very often, but in some sense more congenially than Clement.

²¹ Compare Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 5.13.4 (CCL 1:702-703): *si enim iudicabit deus occulta hominum, tam eorum qui in lege deliquerunt quam eorum qui sine lege, quia et hi legem ignorant et natura faciunt quae sunt legis* (Rom 2:14), *utique is deus iudicabit cuius sunt et lex et ipsa natura, quae legis est instar ignorantibus legem.*

²² Compare Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.16.15 (CCL 1:584): *nam etsi natura bonum et malum notum est, non tamen dei disciplina; qua cognita tunc demum convenientia voluntatis et facti ex fide, ut sub metu dei, agitur. itaque deus Marcionis cum maxime reuelatus, si tamen reuelatus, non potuit huius praecepti de quo agitur tam strictum et obscurum et caecum adhuc et facilius pro meo potius arbitrio interpretandum compendium emittere, cuius nullam praestruxerat distinctionem.*

Origen

I come to Origen. There are a number of instances when he discussed Rom 2:14-16. The most significant passages are perhaps his commentary on Rom 2:14-16 translated by Rufinus, and *Contra Celsum* 1.4. I shall discuss the latter first.

Celsus had criticised the Christians saying that their ethical teachings were common, or 'vulgar',²³ and, compared to those of the other philosophers, contained nothing new or outstanding (or 'worthy', σεμνόν): κοινὸν εἶναι καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἄλλους φιλοσόφους ὡς οὐ σεμνόν τι καὶ καινὸν μάθημα. To this Origen replied that for people who held that God's judgment was just (κρίσιν δικαίαν θεοῦ) it would not be possible to accept the kind of punishment (δίκη) sinners could expect, if they were not assured that all human beings had a sound preconception (πρόληψις ὑγιής) of ethical teaching (περὶ τοῦ ἠθικοῦ τόπου), in accordance with the ideas common to all men (κοινὰ ἔννοιαι), which were implanted by nature in the soul of every human being.²⁴

There are traces of later Stoic teaching in this passage.²⁵ It was Chrysippus who taught that every human being would develop preconceptions (προλήψεις) of the universal ideas (κοινὰ ἔννοιαι) before the rational faculties were developed, i. e. in the first seven years of his or her life. Therefore, 'pre-conceptions'. These preconceptions would be formed by nature, naturally, and then grow, develop,

²³ See for this now H. Lona, *Die 'wahre Lehre' des Kelsos* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005) 76.

²⁴ Compare Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.4 (ed. GCS 2. Origenes, Werke 1, Berlin 1899): Ἰδωμεν καὶ ὡς τὸν ἠθικὸν τόπον οἶεται διαβαλεῖν τῷ κοινὸν εἶναι καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἄλλους φιλοσόφους ὡς οὐ σεμνόν τι καὶ καινὸν μάθημα. Πρὸς τοῦτο δὲ λεκτέον ὅτι τοῖς εἰσάγουσι κρίσιν δικαίαν θεοῦ ἀπεκέκλειστο ἂν ἡ ἐπὶ τοῖς ἁμαρτανομένοις δίκη, μὴ πάντων ἐχόντων κατὰ τὰς κοινὰς ἐννοίας πρόληψιν ὑγιή περὶ τοῦ ἠθικοῦ τόπου. Διόπερ οὐδὲν θαυμαστὸν τὸν αὐτὸν θεὸν ἅπερ ἐδίδαξε διὰ τῶν προφητῶν καὶ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἐγκατεσπαρκέναι ταῖς ἀπάντων ἀνθρώπων ψυχαῖς· ἵν' ἀναπολόγητος ἐν τῇ θείᾳ κρίσει πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ᾗ, ἔχων τὸ βούλημα «τοῦ νόμου γραπτῶν» ἐν τῇ ἑαυτοῦ καρδίᾳ [Rom 2:15]· ὅπερ ἠνίξαστο ἐν ᾧ νομίζουσιν Ἕλληνες μῦθος ὁ λόγος ποιήσας τὸν θεὸν γεγραφέναι τῷ ἰδίῳ «δακτύλῳ» τὰς ἐντολὰς καὶ Μωϋσεῖ δεδωκέναι, ἃς «συνέτριψεν» ἡ κακία τῶν μοσχοποιησάντων, ὥς εἰ ἔλεγεν, ἐπέκλυσεν ἡ χυσις τῆς ἁμαρτίας. Δεύτερον δὲ γράψας πάλιν ἔδωκε λατομήσαντος λίθους Μωϋσέως ὁ θεός, οἷονεὶ τοῦ προφητικοῦ λόγου εὐτρεπίζοντος ψυχὴν μετὰ τὴν πρώτην ἁμαρτίαν δευτέροις γράμμασι τοῦ θεοῦ.

²⁵ For what follows compare J. Lössl, 'Der Glaubensbegriff des Klemens von Alexandrien im Kontext der hellenistischen Philosophie,' in: *Theologie und Philosophie* 37 (2002) 321-337.

into individual minds. They were therefore also called προλήψεις ἔμφυτοι, 'ingrown preconceptions', not to confuse with 'innate'.²⁶ The teaching of προλήψεις ἔμφυτοι was therefore Chrysippus's way of explaining the origin and nature of the κοινὰ ἔννοιαι, the universal concepts, also simply known as universals. The concept of κοινὰ ἔννοιαι as such is not Stoic, but Platonist. As we know, Plato and Aristotle had different ways of explaining the universals, or ideas, but they both believed that they were real. In contrast, the early Stoics, in particular Zeno, rejected the idea that they were real and held that we only get the impression that they are real from the way in which nature organises itself in and through us, i. e. through this process of imprinting or implanting themselves in the soul. Although there are differences in the way in which earlier and later Stoics were using the concept, all Stoics agreed on the existence of the κοινὰ ἔννοιαι and on the tendentially physical (in the case of material) understanding of the concept. We get a hint of that way of explaining the universals from Origen's account, his use of the word πρόληψις and his use of the concept of the κοινὰ ἔννοιαι being implanted in the soul, though Origen uses a slightly different term for this, ἐγκατασπείρω, literally 'sowing out in...'. There is also a hint here of Platonist teaching, and indeed Christian Platonism; for Origen argues that the preconceptions are present in the soul 'according to' (κατά) the universal concepts, i. e. Origen seems to imply that the universal concepts are real and pre-existent, which is in line generally with his Platonism. Moreover, in what follows Origen also thinks of God as a personal agent in this process, rather than the whole process being purely natural, in a Stoic sense: 'There is nothing amazing about it, if the same God should have implanted (ἐγκατεσπαρκεῖν) that which he taught (ἐδίδασκε) through the prophets and the saviour into the souls of all human beings (ταῖς ἀπάντων ἀνθρώπων ψυχαῖς). He did this so that every human being would be without excuse (ἀναπολόγητος) at the divine judgment (ἐν τῇ θεῖᾳ κρίσει), having the requirement of the law (τὸ βούλημα τοῦ νόμου) written in his or her heart (γραφτὸν ἐν τῇ ἐαυτοῦ καρδίᾳ).'

So here we have a paraphrase of Rom 2:15a: The plural 'hearts' has become a singular ('everybody's heart') and 'the work' (τὸ ἔργον) of the law is understood as 'requirement' (βούλημα, literally 'will'). This is also how many modern exegetes understand the verse. According to what I said earlier Origen is also in line with Paul when he

²⁶ See SVF 2, frg. 83. 87. 105. 473; P. Steinmetz, *Die Stoa*, in: Ueberweg / Antike 4/2, 1994, 594-595.

emphasizes that God's purpose in writing the law in the hearts of all men is to make sure that nobody has an excuse at the divine judgment. What about the verb ἐγκατεσπαρκέναι? It means 'to spread out in' in the sense of sprinkling or sowing, e. g. water, or seeds. Origen uses the word again in *c. Cels.* 1.5,²⁷ when he speaks of ideas having been spread out in all human beings (ἐγκατεσπάρησαν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἔννοιαι) using the passive voice and leaving it open who does the spreading out. According to Stoic teaching, as I indicated, it is nature herself, in a purely rational, scientific, process. But here in *Contra Celsum* 1.4 Origen indicates that God himself is the agent.

What is interesting is that Origen, not entirely dissimilar to Tertullian, combines the motifs of learning and sowing out: God has sown out these seminal ideas in all human beings and taught them also through the prophets and the saviour.

Finally, a brief summary of Origen's exegesis of Rom 2:14 and 15 in his commentary on Romans translated by Rufinus. The lemma also includes v. 16, which announces that the court situation described in v. 15 will take place on the day (*in die*) that God, through Jesus Christ, will judge all that is hidden in men (*occulta hominum*).

Origen begins his commentary of the passage saying that v. 14 does not refer to cultic precepts of the law, but to more fundamental requirements, like the ten commandments; or perhaps also to some basic principles from which everything else can be deduced, e. g. that the one God is the creator of the universe, *quod deus unus creator sit omnium*.²⁸ This may hint again at Origen's metaphysical understanding of the λόγοι ἔμφυτοι, or κοινὰ ἔννοιαι. But then he continues saying that what is most probable is that the requirements of the law that are inscribed in people's hearts are those of the law of the Gospel, like the Golden Rule. Then he continues: Obviously, the natural law cannot agree with the law of Moses in a literal, but only in a spiritual sense (*legi uero Moysi concordare lex naturalis secundum spiritum, non secundum litteram potest*); for there cannot be any natural reason why one should circumcise boys on the eighth day or avoid weaving flax into wool etc.

²⁷ See Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.5: οὐκοῦν καὶ περὶ τούτου λεκτέον ὅτι ὁμοίως τῷ ἄλλῳ ἡθικῷ τόπῳ ἐγκατεσπάρησαν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἔννοιαι...

²⁸ For a similar thought see Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.19.94.2-3: εἴτ' αὖ φυσικὴν ἔννοιαν ἐσχηκέναι τοὺς Ἑλλήνας λέγοι, τὸν τῆς φύσεως δημιουργὸν ἕνα γινώσκωμεν, καθὼ καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην φυσικὴν εἰρήκαμεν, εἴτε μὴν κοινὸν ἐσχηκέναι νοῦν, τίς δ' αὖ τοῦτου πατὴρ καὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν τοῦ νοῦ διανομῆς δικαιοσύνης σκοπήσωμεν. ἂν γὰρ προαναφώνησιν τις εἴπη καὶ συνεκφώνησιν αἰτιάσεται, προφητείας εἶδη λέγει. ναὶ μὴν κατ' ἔμφασιν ἀληθείας ἄλλοι θέλουσιν εἰρῆσθαι τίνα τοῖς φιλοσόφοις.

Origen points out that on a few occasions he challenged Jews with this question,²⁹ but they merely answered that that was how the legislator had decided and there was nothing else to add (*quia ita uisum sit legislatori*). We, however, Origen continues, paraphrasing Paul, know that it is not those who hear the law who are justified, but those who fulfil it. Fulfilling, however, does not mean the literal fulfilment of the law, which is impossible, but fulfilment according to the spirit; and this is, of course, possible for Gentiles, if they do what is required in the law, i. e. the law that is written in their hearts (Rom 2:15), 'not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God' (2 Cor 3:3).

We can see that Origen here moves away from Paul's meaning in Rom 2:15 with the help of another Pauline writing, 2 Corinthians, and argues that the law written in people's hearts is not the law of Moses, but the spiritual law underlying, but not literally agreeing with, the literal law of Moses.

Origen then continues saying that 'hearts', too, are not meant to be the physical hearts, but the soul's rational power (*rationalis animae uirtus*). Thus Origen does here not go as far as to simply identify hearts and souls, but he does draw a very close link between the two. He then proceeds to an analysis of what is meant by conscience. He defines it as the spirit who according to Paul is the soul's companion (...*spiritus qui ab apostolo esse cum anima dicitur*), comparable to a tutor or guide (*paedagogos... et rector*) who praises the person when she is doing the right thing and punishes or chastises her when she is acting wrongly.

Now this is different from both Paul and the philosophical tradition mentioned earlier. Both had kept more closely to the judicial context, whereas Origen interpreted the motif in a pedagogical context. Paul had only spoken of conscience as a co-witness, Philo and Seneca as an accuser and / or judge. But the role of judge for the Christian exegetes is reserved for Jesus Christ; and on the other hand already Tertullian, as we saw, linked the judicial motif with the pedagogical motif and spoke of learning in the context of the law.

In a last section Origen does briefly discuss the conscience's role of witness, but in an eschatological context. Nobody knows a person, only the spirit inside that person (1 Cor 2:11). The spirit himself is witness to our spirit (Rom 8:16). If the spirit distances himself from the person to whom he is attached, i. e. witnesses against her, that person will be left out in the cold. Origen here uses Mt 24:40f.:

²⁹ For examples see N. R. M. De Lange, *Origen and the Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 89-102.

Of two persons on a field one will be taken away, the other one left behind etc.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion let me summarise a few points: Paul's understanding of the law of nature in Rom 2:14 seems to have been that of a natural equivalent to the Mosaic law. The purpose of the construction seems to have been to explain why Gentiles should have no excuse for being judged on judgment day. Although v. 15 has reminiscences of the philosophical model of the inner court with conscience as judge, Paul firmly puts God in the judgment seat, in an eschatological context (v. 16). Although there is a tendency in early Christian literature to express this complex in more philosophical terms, I found it striking how close writers like Tertullian and Origen follow Paul in these crucial points. Clement seems slightly different. He seems to use Rom 2:14 as a proof text that certain types of Greek philosophers could attain true gnosis, i. e. salvation in the full sense. But we have to consider that this is an historical, abstract, construction, as is demonstrated by the references to the heretics. In his own time Clement would consider anyone following Greek philosophy in defiance of Christian teaching a heretic. So even for Clement, Rom 2:14 is less about relativising the Christian claim in the present than about explaining its validity in the pre-Christian past.

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