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JEWES AND GENTILES IN ORIGENS COMMENTARY ON ROMANS III 19-22

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In the first chapters of his epistle to the Romans Paul charges that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin (Rm 3,9). This is proved by a string of texts from the psalms and the prophets about man's depravity. Then Paul continues: "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no flesh will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rm 3,19-20). We understand that by means of the quotations from the Scripture (which is called *ho nomos* in Rm 3,19) Paul wants to convince the Jews that all men, also the Jews, are indeed under sin. He states that the law of Moses (meant in Rm 3,20) does not lead to salvation, but just gives rise to knowledge of sin.

In his *ComRm1* Origen does not take into account that *ho nomos* in Rm 3,19 might mean the Scripture. He knows the explanation that the apostle means the law of Moses, but he rejects this possibility. According to Origen Rm 3,19 deals with the natural law. He reasons that the law of Moses speaks to only one people, viz. of the circumcised. How could this law stop every mouth and hold the whole world accountable to God? What does this law have in common with all the Gentile peoples and with the whole world? Moreover, also before Moses many people have acknowledged their sin. So in Rm 3,19 the universal law of nature is meant. Only the children who cannot yet discern between good and evil are not under that law (Sch 142-144, Ruf 937C-938C).

Origen employs the Stoic definition of law: the law commands what is to be done and it prohibits what one should not do (Ruf 939A, 941A, Sch 148)2. So for him the phrase, that through the law comes knowledge of sin, is just a sober observation.

Paul continues that "now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rm 3,21-22). Origen does not recognize Paul's subtle use of the term "law". In his view these verses contain a contradiction unless one distinguishes between two different laws. His solution is, that the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the natural law, being witnessed by the law of Moses and the prophets according to the spirit. For him the sequence of Paul's thought is: the apostle wrote that through the natural law comes knowledge of sin, but at once he wanted to exclude the possible conclusion that through this law also comes knowledge of the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God surpasses the human mind, which disposes only of the natural senses (Sch 148-152, Ruf 942BC, 943A-944A). As far as the natural law gives insight into righteousness, human and not divine righteousness is concerned. The rule that you should not do to your neighbour what you yourself dislike, is an example of human righteousness.

Of divine righteousness it is said that one should not do it before men and that one's left hand should not know what the right hand is doing (Mt 6,1,3; Ruf 942D-943A).

After that Origen says that the righteousness of God which has been manifested apart from the natural law, is Christ himself, "whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Co 1,30; Ruf 944B). Instead of Paul's sharp criticism of the law of Moses, Origen observes that the natural law is not so powerful that one can come to know Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through it (Sch 152, Ruf 944C).

Those who have noticed this exegesis of Rm 3,19-22 have judged that Origen misunderstands and abolishes the Pauline criticism of the Mosaic law.³ Yet, for Origen this interpretation is not an occasional solution of an apparent contradiction, but it is completely in line with his general view on Romans. I intend to show the motive which has led Origen to his exegesis.

We saw his objection to the interpretation that in Rm 3,19 Paul deals with the law of Moses, namely that this law speaks only to the people of the circumcised. What does this law have in common with all the Gentile peoples? (Sch 144, Ruf 938A). But if it is explained as dealing with the natural law, then the apostle is right in saying that through it every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God. Origen argues that nobody, neither of the Jews nor of the Gentiles, is devoid of this law (Ruf 938BC).

Here comes to light a central theme of the ComRm: Origen relates the epistle as much as possible equally to the Jews and the Gentiles. In this respect he follows Paul, who says that the gospel is for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Rm 1,16) and that God's righteous judgment will be revealed to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rm 2,5-10); likewise Paul charges that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin (Rm 3,9) and he states that God is not the God of Jews only, but also of Gentiles (Rm 3,29). But Origen emphasizes this principle more strongly than Paul may have meant. I will give some examples from the Commentary on Rm 2-3.

Commenting Rm 2,12a, "all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law", he suggests that "law" can be interpreted as the law of Moses and as the law of Christ and also as the written laws of the peoples, as well as the natural law (Ruf 890A-C). Only those who have withdrawn from all these laws, even from the natural law, will perish without law (Ruf 890C, 891AB).

About Rm 2,12b, "all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law", Origen states that, whether one is under the law of Christ or under the law of Moses, one will be judged by this respective law (Ruf 890C). In another context he explains that in the final judgment one will be charged by the law according to which one has lived. Who has not committed anything against the established laws will be praised by God on account of these laws on the day of judgment (Rm 13,3; Ruf 1228C). In this way Origen applies Rm 2,12 to all people, Christians and Jews and Gentiles alike.

In Rm 2,14-15 Paul introduces Gentiles who do by nature what the law requires even though they do not have the law. He does not want to say anything in favour of natural morality among the Gentiles. He refers to the Stoic concept of the natural law, but within the framework of his charge that all men, Jews and Gentiles, are under sin (Rm 1,18-3,20).

Here Origen finds a clear confirmation of the universal revelation of the law of God. The natural law has been written in the hearts of the Gentiles, "not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" (2 Co 3,3). He says that the contents of the natural law corresponds with the second table of the Ten Commandments and perhaps it also teaches that there is one God, the Creator of all things⁴. It also corresponds with the laws of the gospel which refer to natural justice and with the law of Moses according to the spirit. In Origen's view the apostle means that the Gentiles can accomplish this law by nature (Ruf 892A-893A, cf. 1080A). These verses, which have just a subordinate function in Paul's demonstration, are of central importance in Origen's ComRm. Here he finds an unambiguous indication that the law of God has not been revealed to the Jews only, but also to the Greeks or Gentiles.

A third example of the attention to the revelation to both Jews and Gentiles can be found in the explanation of Paul's question in Rm 3,1, "what advantage the Jew has, or what is the value of circumcision". Origen demonstrates that in Rm 2,8-29 Paul was as an arbiter between Jews and Greeks who addressed himself alternately to both peoples (Ruf 914A-915B). Paul's answer in Rm 3,2 is according to Origen's text: "Much in every way. For they were the first who were entrusted with the oracles of God."⁵ He comments that, although now the oracles of God are also entrusted to the Gentiles, they still have been first entrusted to the Jews. The oracles of God are not so much the letters and the books, but their sense and the mysteries that are within them. The Jews who were entrusted with these oracles are Moses and the prophets and the apostles. Those who read them without understanding, i.e. without believing in Christ, are only entrusted with the letter, that kills (2 Co 3,6; Ruf 915B-916B, Rm 218).

The question which Origen asks next is typical for his ComRm. Do those who came to Christ from the Gentiles also have an advantage? Indeed, Origen states that they have the advantage of faith. Jesus said about the Roman centurion that not even in Israel he had found such faith (Mt 8,10; Ruf 916BC). This is the way Origen explains the epistle. As much as possible he relates it to the Jews and the Gentiles. Further down in the Commentary we also note the tendency, that Paul's treatise should not relate only to the circumcised, but also to all other people (Ruf 1075A).

This principle has induced Origen to his exegesis of Rm 3,19-22. For this reason he emphasizes that nobody, neither of the Jews nor of the Gentiles, is devoid of the natural law (Ruf 938C). The expression of "Jews and Gentiles/Greeks" is repeated four times. Not by the law of Moses as such (i.e. according to the letter), but by the law and the prophets according to the spirit the right-

eousness of God is manifested to all who believe, whether they come from the Jews or from the Gentiles (Ruf 941C, 944D, 945B). For there is no distinction between Jews and Greeks (Ruf 945A).

The emphasis on the universal purport of the epistle is not to be explained from Paul's text only. We can recognize in it a reaction to a topic of the Marcionites and the Gnostics. In Origen's view it held that man has either a good or a bad nature, according to which one will be judged. Origen always accentuates that man has a free will and that God will judge him according to his way of life and not according to his nature (Philoc xxv, Ruf 833A, 843-846, 878C, 894BC, 1002A, etc.). Origen's tendency to explain Romans in relation to all people is, in fact, an anti-Gnostic polemic.

Also in other traits of his exegesis of Rm 3,19-22 the controversy with heretical views is apparent. From Clement of Alexandria we know that, to prove that the law is not good, "some sects" appealed to Paul's verdict that through the law comes knowledge of sin⁶. Origen emphasizes that knowledge of sin comes through (*dia*) and not from (*ek*) the law. He takes the law, and implicitly also the law of Moses⁷, under his protection against those who contend that the law is a bad tree that bears bad fruit⁸. The law through which comes knowledge of sin is good, just like medicine, by means of which an unobserved illness is discovered, is not bad but good (Sch 148, Ruf 941AB)⁹. By interpreting "law" as the natural law he avoids even more the interpretation that the law of Moses is bad. For who, apart from any Gnostics, would assert that the natural law is bad¹⁰?

When changing from the natural law to the law of Moses according to the spirit in Rm 3,21b Origen again criticizes the heretics. He reproaches them with disrupting the one doctrine of faith and with exploring only those testimonies from the Scripture which suit their own doctrine. He claims to show the consistency of Paul's train of thought in opposition to them (Ruf 942AB).

I conclude with one more observation in reaction to the heretics, viz. to the separation of the Old and the New Testament. Origen states that neither faith only manifests the righteousness of God, without the law and the prophets, nor the law and the prophets without faith. The one is dependent upon the other, *ut sit ex utroque perfectio* (Ruf 945A).

NOTES

- 1 Rufinus' abbreviated translation in PG 14 is referred to as 'Ruf'. For an evaluation of its reliability see H. Chadwick, Rufinus and the Tura Papyrus of Origen's Commentary on Romans, in: JThS 10 (1959) 10-42. Greek fragments which concern this paper have been edited by J. Scherer, Le Commentaire d'Origène sur Rom. III 5-V 7, Cairo 1957 (Sch) and by A. Ramsbotham, The Commentary of Origen on the Epistle to the Romans, in: JThS 13 (1912) 209-224 ('Ram'); cf. also J.A. Robinson, The Philocalia of Origen, Cambridge 1893, cc. ix, xxv.
- 2 Cf. I. ab Armin, Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta III, Leipzig 1903, 77-80.

3 C. Verfaillie, La doctrine de la justification dans Origène, d'après son Commentaire de l'Épître aux Romains, Strasbourg 1926, 42-46; W. Völker, Paulus bei Origenes, in: ThStKr 102 (1930) 272; E. Aleith, Paulusverständnis in der alten Kirche, Berlin 1937, 104; K.H. Schelkle, Paulus Lehrer der Väter, Düsseldorf 1956, 114.232; M. Harl, Origène et la sémantique du langage biblique, in: VigChr 26 (1972) 169-170. More positively, from a different viewpoint: V.E. Hasler, Gesetz und Evangelium, Zürich 1953, 81.

4 Cf. Philo, De vita Mosis. I 31; De praemiis et poenis 41-42; Clement of Alexandria, Strom I 166,5-167,1.

5 Origen reads: *πρότι γὰρ ἐπιστεύθησαν τὰ λογία τοῦ θεοῦ*. See O. Bauernfeind, Der Römerbrieftext des Origenes nach dem Codex von der Goltz (TU 44,3), Leipzig 1923, 95-96; also Scherer 162,21. Rufinus first quotes the text according to the translation he apparently was familiar with: *primum quia credita sunt illis eloquia Dei* (913D); cf. G. Bardy, Le texte de l'épître aux Romains dans le Commentaire d'Origène-Rufin, in: RB 29 [1920] 229-241). But elsewhere Origen's text comes through in the translation (Ruf 915C, 917CD, 952B, 1182B), Strom II 34,4; IV 9,6.

6 Cf. Ruf 941A, *ut haereticus Deum legis accusant*. Scherer 149 thinks it is an addition of Rufinus.

7 From Paroch II 5,4 we learn that this appeal to Lc 6,43-44 was in use with the Marcionites. According to the Valentinian Gospel of Philip 122,5-12 the law was the tree of knowledge of good and evil which created death for those who ate of it.

8 Cf. Clement of Alexandria, Strom I 171.

9 Cf. De Resurrectione (Epistula ad Rheginum) 44,20-21, where the law of nature is called "death".

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