

Law of Nature

Published in John Anthony McGuckin (ed.), *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, Louisville / London, 2004, p. 140-141. (In the following text, however, a few of the editorial changes and additions have not been retained.)

© Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville / London. Published on www.riemerroukema.nl with permission. Printing or downloading the material is prohibited by the publishing house.

Riemer Roukema

The origin of the concept of the law of nature (or natural law) can be found mainly in Stoic philosophy. In two of Origen's works, the *Commentary on Romans* and the *Contra Celsum*, it plays an important role.

First, in his *Commentary on Romans* Origen often refers to the law of nature in its moral sense, in order to explain the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and to solve some exegetical problems. He quotes with approval the Stoic definition that the law is that which says what one ought to do and forbids what one ought not to do (*ComRm* III.6.4; III.6.9; VI.8.3; VI.9.9; ed. Scherer V.3 p. 148; *Philoc* 9.1). Rarely Origen refers to the law of nature in its physical sense, according to which, for example, a human being is bound to die (*ComRm* IV.10.1).

In his interpretation of Romans 2:14-15 Origen explains that the natural law teaches the Gentiles not to commit murder or adultery, not to steal, not to bear false witness, to honor father and mother, and perhaps even that God is one and the Creator of all things. In Origen's view these commandments agree with the laws of the Gospel, according to which one should not do to others what one does not want done to oneself (thus some manuscripts of Acts 15:20); moreover, the natural law may agree with the spiritual sense of the law of Moses, but not with its literal sense (*ComRm* II.9.1). Origen identifies the law of nature with the "law of the mind" of Romans 7:23 (*ComRm* V.6.3). As for the assertion of its synonymy with the essence of the Mosaic law, Origen is preceded by Philo and Clement of Alexandria.

By means of his emphasis on the law of nature, Origen affirms that God revealed his law not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles, so that, thanks to the law of nature, the latter have an inborn righteousness. Just as a Jew will be rewarded for his virtuous life on the ground on the Mosaic law, the same is true for a Gentile who was inspired by the natural law (*cf.* Rom. 2:10; *ComRm* II.7.5-6; VII.19.6). However, the law of nature neither testifies to God's righteousness that is revealed in Christ (Rom. 3:21-22), nor does it incline humanity to believe that Jesus is the Christ of God (*ComRm* III.7.8-10; ed. Scherer V.4 p. 150-152). In other words, Origen would not equate the law of nature with the "law of faith" that Paul spoke of in Romans 3:27, which leads to salvation (*ComRm* III.9.8; IV.3). He rather upholds Paul's charge that both Jews and Greeks are under sin (Rom. 3:9) because of God's revelation of both the Mosaic and the natural law (*ComRm* III.2.7-9; ed. Scherer V.2 p. 134-138).

Furthermore, the concept of the law of nature enables Origen to interpret several Pauline texts that seem critical of the Mosaic law and could therefore be exploited by the Marcionites and gnostics to prove the defectiveness of the Old Testament. Paul's verdict that the whole world can be held accountable to God because of the law, "for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:19-20) applies, for Origen, to the natural law, since the law of Moses does not apply to the whole world (*ComRm* III.6; ed. Scherer V.3, p. 144-148). Similarly, Paul's affirmation that "the law brings wrath" (Rom. 4:15) should be applied not just to the law of Moses, but rather to the "law in the members" which provokes sin (Rom.

7:23) and possibly also to the law of nature (*ComRm* IV.4; ed. Scherer VI.4 p. 200-204). Likewise, Origen deems it impossible to interpret Romans 5:2, (“the law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied”), with relation to the Mosaic law, since sin clearly existed (even abounded) long before Moses. In Origen’s view Paul is here dealing once more with the “law in the members,” which enters each human being “under the cover of the natural law” (*ComRm* V.6.1-4). A key text in Origen’s *Commentary on Romans* is Romans 7:9, where Paul says that he was once alive without the law, whereas the commandment provoked sin and death. Origen explains that Paul speaks about childhood, in which sins are not yet imputed to a human being, but that as soon as a child comes to know the commandments of the natural law, sins are imputed, so that spiritually one is said “to die” (*ComRm* III.2.7-8; V.1.23-26; VI.8.3-4). The advantage of this interpretation is twofold: it avoids the heretical disparagement of the law of Moses, and it is true for all people, not only for the Jews.

The second place in his corpus where the idea of natural law rises as significant is in his apology *Against Celsus*, where he deals with Celsus’s criticism that the Christians withdraw from society by forming secret associations and do not respect the traditional laws. Celsus’s attack betrays the rising anxiety that the growth of Christianity in the second century would destabilize the unity of the Roman Empire and deliver it to lawless barbarians (*CCels* I.1; VIII.68). In his reply Origen makes use of the Stoic distinction between the written codes of the cities and the law of nature. According to Stoic philosophy the written laws have been laid down by humans, but do not necessarily agree with the natural law, which is divine. Origen admits that Christians cannot always respect the written codes, as far as these laws prescribe things opposed to the divine law (for example, to sacrifice to demons and to worship pagan gods or to swear by the fortune of the Roman emperor). He argues, however, that Christians do live according to the law of nature that God has written in the hearts of people (Rom. 2:15) and which corresponds with the Stoic concept of “universal ideas” about morality (*CCels* I.1; I.4-5; V.37; V.40; VIII.26; VIII.52; VIII.65; cf. *ComRm* ed. Scherer V.2 p. 136; V.6 p. 168). In contradistinction to Celsus’s nationalism, Origen hopes and expects that humanity will be united under this one and divine law, and will be united to the supreme God through his Son (*CCels* VIII.72-75). This implies that Origen considers the law of nature as a tool for the Christianization and salvation of the whole world.

Literature

W.A. Banner, “Origen and the Tradition of Natural Law Concepts”, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Cambridge (Mass.) / Washington 8 (1954), p. 49-82

R. Roukema, *The Diversity of Laws in Origen’s Commentary on Romans*, Amsterdam 1988