

The first Christian. ... the story of one of the most ambitious and obtrusive of souls, of a head as superstitious as it was crafty, the story of the apostle Paul - who knows this, except a few scholars? ... so much do these pages of the Jewish Pascal expose the origin of Christianity, just as the pages of the French Pascal expose its destiny and that of which it will perish.

That the ship of Christianity threw overboard a good deal of its Jewish ballast, that it went, and was able to go, among the pagans - that was due to this one man, a very tortured, very pitiful, very unpleasant man, unpleasant even to himself. He suffered from a fixed idea - or more precisely, from a fixed, ever-present, never resting question: what about the Jewish law? and particularly the fulfillment of this law? In his youth he had himself wanted to satisfy it, with a ravenous hunger for this highest distinction which the Jews could conceive - this people who were propelled higher than any other people by the imagination of the ethically sublime, and who alone succeeded in creating a holy god together with the idea of sin as a transgression against this holiness. Paul became the fanatical defender of this god and his law and guardian of his honor; at the same time, in the struggle against the transgressors and doubters, lying in wait for them, he became increasingly harsh and evilly disposed to them, and inclined toward the most extreme punishments. And now he found that - hot-headed, sensual, melancholy, malignant in his hatred as he was - he was himself unable to fulfill the law; indeed, and this seemed strangest to him, his extravagant lust to domineer provoked him continually to transgress the law, and he had to yield to this thorn.

Is it really his "carnal nature" that makes him transgress again and again? And not rather, as he himself suspected later, behind it the law itself, which must constantly prove itself unfulfillable and which lures him to transgression with irresistible charm? ... and just as Luther one day began to hate the spiritual ideal and the Pope and the saints and the whole clerisy with a true, deadly hatred - all the more the less he could own it to himself - so it was with Paul. The law was the cross to which he felt himself nailed: how he hated it! how he searched for some means to annihilate it - not to fulfill it any more himself!

And finally the saving thought struck him, together with a vision - it could scarcely have happened otherwise to this epileptic ... Paul heard the words: "Why dost thou persecute me?" The essential occurrence, however, was this: his head had suddenly seen a light: "It is unreasonable," he had said to himself, "to persecute this Jesus! Here after all is the way out; here is the perfect revenge; here and nowhere else I have and hold the annihilator of the law!" ... Until then the ignominious death had seemed to him the chief argument against the Messianic claim of which the adherents of the new doctrine spoke: but what if it were necessary to get rid of the law?

The tremendous consequences of this idea, of this solution of the riddle, spin before his eyes; at one stroke he becomes the happiest man; the destiny of the Jews - no, of all men - seems to him to be tied to this idea, to this second of its sudden illumination; he has the thought of thoughts, the key of keys, the light of lights; it is around him that all history must revolve henceforth. For he is from now on the teacher of the annihilation of the law ...

This is the first Christian, the inventor of Christianity. Until then there were only a few Jewish sectarians.

Friedrich Nietzsche (translation, Walter Kaufmann)

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