

The Law and Sin: A Reading of Paul with Lacan and Levinas

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1

It has been customary to exclude God in explaining and understanding natural, social, and human phenomena. Psychoanalysis is exemplary. It reduces God to a mere psychological product. This article criticizes psychoanalysis with Levinas's philosophy and Paul's theology. It concentrates on Paul's thought around law and sin. After exposing the psychoanalytic theory of God as the exalted father, it highlights a theoretical pitfall of psychoanalysis concerning the origin of God and civilization. Then, the article proceeds to Levinas's philosophy which absolutely requires God or the idea of Infinity. Finally, it summarizes Paul's theology which was constitutive of the God-centered Western civilization. Paul's thought is still a fundamental Christian response both to psychoanalysis and to Levinas's philosophy.

2

The Freudian myth is concerned with the primordial father who has played the decisive role in the history of humanity as civilized.¹ The crucial event of the human race was the murder of the primal father. After the united sons killed him, they were haunted by the nagging sense of guilt. The first commandment had emerged – 'Do not kill your father.' Then, it was transformed as 'Love your father!' The father in psychoanalysis is not a child's real father. Every child is born with the enigmatic image of the murdered father as a "memory trace." God is the necessary product of the privileged memory trace from the event in the primal horde. The unconscious or conscious guilt pushed the sons and their offspring to found totemism as the first mode of civilization. Freud argues that this event was bequeathed as a phylogenetic memory trace to every human child. Later the murder of the Egyptian Moses, which was juxtaposed to the primal parricide, produced a people whose religion was monotheism.² Now Freud's psychoanalysis becomes a theory of Western civilization in which monotheism has been hegemonic.

Lacan's comments on Paul's letter to the Romans are based on Freud's speculation that the fundamental law of civilization was originated from the primordial parricide.³ A human infant – at least a male infant – is haunted by the insatiable sense of guilt as soon as he fantasizes his killing of the father who obstructs his incestuous desire. The sense of guilt illegalizes his incestuous desire and parricidal impulse. Legality is the crucial point of Lacan's psychoanalysis. The "Name of the Father" legalizes and illegalizes fantasies ($\$ \diamond a$) at the same time.

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1950), 194-200.

² Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 61-5.

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992).

Lacan emphasizes Paul's argument concerning the relation between the law and sin. His discourse represents a characteristic reduction of psychoanalysis. He argues that Paul's letter to the Romans is the best psychoanalytic exposition concerning the Law. Lacan states:

Is the Law the Thing? Certainly not. Yet I can only know of the Thing by means of the Law. In effect, I would not have had the idea to covet it if the Law hadn't said: 'Thou shalt not covet it.' But the Thing finds a way by producing in me all kinds of covetousness thanks to the commandment, for without the Law the Thing is dead. But even without the Law, I was once alive. But when the commandment appeared, the Thing flared up, returned once again, I met my death. And for me, the commandment that was supposed to lead to life turned out to lead to death, for the Thing found a way and thanks to the commandment seduced me; through it I came to desire death.⁴

Lacan summarizes, "The dialectical relationship between desire and the Law causes our desire to flare up only in relation to the Law, through which it becomes the desire for death."⁵ Concerning Paul's letter, Lacan states, "[T]hanks to [...] the substitution of the term the Thing for what the text calls sin, I was able to achieve a very precise formulation [...] on the subject of the knot of the Law and desire."⁶ He concludes, "Freud is telling us the same thing as Saint Paul [...]."⁷

Freud's myth, interpreted by Lacan, is articulated by two conflicting drives – Eros and death drive.⁸ Roughly speaking, death drive is the tendency to kill. As Freud's texts show, this tendency is not visible. On the other hand, Eros as the unifying life force urges people to make a greater society. From this perspective, the primal horde itself is the work of Eros which was restricted by many necessities. The association of sons happened when historical changes had required a novel mode of society. Eros was probably prior to the primal parricide and the formation of civilization.

3

Levinas's major interlocutors were not psychoanalysts but phenomenologists. He did not write even a short article concerning psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, it is possible to construct his philosophy as a radical critique of psychoanalysis. Almost all major concepts in *Totality and Infinity*⁹ refract those of Lacan.

Lacan's interpretation of psychoanalysis is founded on the differentiation between need and desire. Levinas argues that Freud's desire belongs to need and introduces Desire with capital D. It is called the "metaphysical Desire." Against Lacan's eccentric use of the term *jouissance*, Levinas is content with ordinary meaning – enjoyment which governs economy. Also, Lacan's term of the Other is criticized. Levinas argues that the Other is another human being while Lacan's Other is situated in the subject as the object. While the lack is central for Lacan, the surplus is for Levinas.

⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁵ Ibid., 83-4.

⁶ Ibid., 170.

⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1960), 37-47.

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). This article is based on this book.

Lacan's concept of father is also put in question. While Lacan always emphasizes the dead father and thus the phantasmal God, Levinas's God is the absolute, which makes a certain man father. The primal horde was already a human society in which the father – however cruel and despotic – governed it. The cruel man was already conceived as the father by the sons who murdered him. Without the event that a man had been constituted as the father, there would have been no escape from perpetual wars among equal men. This requires a radical modification of psychoanalytic premises. Freud evades the question of origin. According to Levinas, the encounter with God or Infinity is the most primordial. It means that the Freudian father would be a historical and cultural articulation of such an encounter.

For Levinas, the first cause of the Law is not the killing. The Law prohibits killing. Where did the Law come? Levinas replies that it comes from the Other who is Infinity. It is a definition of God which is not deduced from theological assumptions but is made sense of from concrete experiences. For Freud and Lacan, God exists but it is the primordial image of the dead father. An ordinary man becomes father owing to Infinity. God is metaphorically conceived as mother, father, king, and so forth. Perhaps the killed father did not become God but God becomes the father. Levinas's idea of Infinity is concerned with not gods but God who condemns all modes of mythology.¹⁰

4

Levinas's philosophical reflection of Infinity stimulates Christian theologians but also troubles them. Levinas is not Christian.¹¹ He does not fully accept Paul's theology. For Paul, two doctrines are fundamental. One is that God exists; the other is that Jesus has been resurrected. It is often agreed that the Pauline theology is the limit of Christianity.¹² Keeping in Lacan and Levinas, Paul's Christian theology is briefly summarized here.

According to psychoanalysis, Paul's theory of sin may be summed up as incest and parricide. The urge to kill is concerned with his father and brothers. In the story of the first murder in the Bible, Adam is secondary and God is primary. Cain's killing Abel is not parricide. The bother-killing is already regulated by the father's law. For Paul, this tendency came to humanity by Adam's crime. As Freud suggests, his crime might be parricide. Then, his killing of the God-Father created *Imago Dei* inside him and it has been transmitted hereditarily. *Imago Dei* is already deeply related with the crime. Everyone has an insatiable sense of guilt. In the deep level, guilt is concerned with parricide. This human situation is not changed whether God is alive or not as far as God is also governed by the Adamic event. Adam's sin cannot be annulled. Both God and his chosen people cannot overcome the aftermath of the event. The finality of death is not doubted. Human beings, with several ambiguous exceptions, are mortal. Every human being is Adamic at least in the Jewish Bible. For them, the promise of immortality through Jesus is absurd and scandalous.

Paul's theology of sin was not produced because he had an excessive sense of guilt. Rather, it was articulated by his realization that a spiritual revolution had happened with the resurrection of Jesus. With the event, God's real face as Abba was revealed and the legal status

¹⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77-9.

¹¹ See Emmanuel Levinas, "A Man-God?" in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹² For an introduction of Paul's theology, see Stephen Westerholm ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Paul*. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

of humanity was radically changed as sons instead of slaves. Whether in Egypt or in Canaan, all human beings were slaves of sin. Its mark was death. Whether ethical or not, all human beings were destined to die. It is why, for Paul, Jesus' resurrection is fundamental. It proves that God has acquitted humanity. God willed to annul the Adamic principle through Jesus. The resurrection does not nullify the present world. The cosmic event called the end of the world should be actualized. Humanity as a whole still lives in the reign of the Law, sin and death. Christian subjects are torn inside. However, now a radical hope is possible. With Adam, death becomes inevitable; with Christ, death is overcome. The event that Jesus has been resurrected is the ultimate evidence of God's love. A new possibility and a new hope are open by Jesus' resurrection.

5

It is often argued that religion is founded on faith while sciences are on reason. Paul's doctrine of "justification by faith" is considered typical. However, faith is constitutive of any human knowledge.¹³ Faith is the fidelity to a truth enigmatically revealed. Every reasonable discourse is founded on faith. It is not proved by experiences, but rather it organizes and makes sense of them.

As every discursive system has unique purposes and domains, science and theology do not have to be reduced to each other. Rather, the frank and even ruthless conflicts and negotiations of interpretations¹⁴ are required for a deeper understanding of human beings and their discourses which cannot be exhausted by sciences. The massive successes of sciences have obscured their metaphysical elements. Sciences are overrated. Also, humanity is faced with the possibility of extinction by technological sciences. A critique of science is ethically demanded. The aspects of human experience dogmatically ignored and refused by science should be reappraised.

Paul's theology is itself a complex system of ideas. He is a philosopher in the sense that Freud and Levinas are. Paul's fundamental thought is articulated and organized as consistently as theirs. As I outlined above, we can read psychoanalysis and Levinas's philosophy from the perspective of Paul's theology. As far as Levinas and Christianity are concerned, the faith that God really exists is the ultimate premise of knowledge. Judaic-Christian theologies become trivial when God is reduced to the physical, the biological, the psychical, or the cultural. Theology is expected to show that science is not sufficient for understanding religious experiences. As P. Ricœur argues, theology should restore the genuine faith convincingly after psychoanalysis and other sciences demolish idolatrous religions.¹⁵

Paul's statement still challenges scientists, philosophers, and theologians. "But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23).

¹³ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 114-23.

¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

¹⁵ Ricœur, *Conflict of Interpretation*, 467.

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