

LIARS AND LAWYERS

Part Deux

“Let me,” Paul insists. “I’ve always wanted to introduce an article in the Alaska Bar Rag.”

“Be my guest,” I cede the floor.

“Alert readers – ” ‘how’m I doin’?’ he winks at me.

“Don’t drop your ‘G’s’,” I suggest. “Unless you’re running for – ”

Paul cuts me off.

“Alert readers will recall that I committed the World’s Worst Logical Blunder in Scripture.”

“That’s true,” I urge him on.

“So here I am, hanging out with the gang in Santa Barbara – ”

“Enjoying the world’s most beautiful weather,” I interject.

“And they’re going to redeem me.”

“It’s not an easy job,” I add.

“Your apostle,” he concludes, “is surrounded by celebrities and lawyers.”

And we’re off.

“I’ve always wanted to relive that moment,” Augustine muses. “The moment I first believed.”

“Not me,” Paul remarks.

“I think it’s that way for a lot of us. Especially if it came over you gradually. You’d really like to go back and do it all over again.”

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“Victor Mature did,” I point out. “In *Demetrius and the Gladiators*.”

“Backsliding has its virtues,” Paul points out. “Which does bring us back to Crete, and rather neatly,” he adds.

“If I may?” I stay Paul. “Could I ask you something?”

I turn to Augustine.

“How come the Triunian religion changed so much from your century to your century?” I gesture from Paul to Augustine.

“By the time I started to write,” Augustine replies, “and I wrote *Against the Academicians* in 387 AD, the Triune faith had become a state religion and the only one permissible. There’s not much cachet in saying, ‘I profess the only faith that the government allows me to profess.’ Hence the necessity of undressing myself in public. Belief, or submitting to belief, was the only dangerous work around. Even if – ‘or,’ Paul adds, and cheekily so, ‘especially if,’ “if public acts of faith were legally compelled.”

“Voilà, *The Confessions*,” Paul speaks up. “And here I am, stuck with the Epistle to Titus around my neck.”

“Which you didn’t write,” Augustine ripostes. “According to learned authors,” and he adds the popular ‘air quotes,’ “and their much-beloved consensus.”

“Disavow my authorship?” Paul asks. “ ‘That’s not me’,” he tries it on.

“For heaven’s sake, Paul,” Augustine gets serious, “don’t look to the logicians for help,” he says. “We’ve had our hands full with the logicians.”

“And still you’ve taken worse licks from the lawyers, although – ” I note that the sommelier has joined us. ‘Diocletian à votre service,’ his badge proclaims. “ – the Romans conceded ‘others pleaded causes better’.”

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“The burden of persuasion – as far as we’re concerned – is not their highest art,” Tertullian joins the crowd, shakes hands and orders up. “Falerian blush,” he signals Diocletian, “any year before 200 AD.”

“I’ll bring you,” Diocletian sniffs, “the best I have.”

“Where did they say that?” Paul says, and asides to Titus, ‘I sure hope Nero’s not in town.’

‘I hear ya, sister,’ Titus winks back and to me adds his ‘demotic, don’t you know.’

“I’ve always wondered about that,” Augustine remarks. “If I may reflect on this point.”

“Me too,” Tertullian butts in, without, mind you, anyone asking for his opinion.

“‘Parcere subiectis’ is the phrase Vergil serves up. The Romans spare their subjects,” Augustine riffs, “making those who are cast down the objects of a mercy – ”

“Most political,” Paul hotly rejoins.

“However,” I counter, “your right of appeal to the Emperor was honored.”

“You could have renounced your Roman citizenship,” Titus joins me. “Liz Taylor turned in her passport. To avoid paying her taxes.”

“*We* never gave up being Roman citizens,” Tertullian and Cyprian chorus.

“And in a few years,” Titus points out, “it all became a moot point. As soon as Constantine made the Triune the state religion.”

“I knew that was coming,” Paul rebukes his bishop.

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“While the Aeneid, that hymn to civic duty and glory,” Titus continues, “praises those who take down ‘superbos’ a notch, as in ‘debellare superbos’.”

“So that’s,” Cyprian ticks off the score, “*parcere subiectis* set off against *debellare superbos*.”

“It puts the well-lettered,” Tertulian pours another glass for himself and one for Paul, “in mind of Jerome’s wordplay where – ”

“Luke 1:51-52,” Cyprian nods to one and all.

“ ‘Superbos’ is set off against ‘humiles’.”

“Yes, yes,” The Bede forcefully signals with Charlemagne’s mirror. “ ‘Dispersit superbos,’ as Jerome has it, against ‘exaltavit humiles.’ ‘He has thrown aside the arrogant in the depths of their hearts,’ if I may,” The Bede supplies us a lively English translation, “ ‘and raised the lowly in spirit’.”

“The Magnificat,” Cyprian titles the poem from which these lines are taken.

“But what you’re saying,” Paul scowls his conclusion, “is that a religion that offers better gods must compete with an empire that strives to make better laws.”

“It must be conceded,” Titus ‘gives it up,’ “that protection for the unfortunate victims of mundane events merits attention both divine and imperial.”

“The motto might read,” Tertullian mugs, “ ‘better laws through better lawyering’.”

“As a ship’s physician,” Augustine looks around for that apostle, “Luke was well travelled and well read.”

“The Free Clinic,” Antoninus Pius informs him and waves Augustine onwards. “Too bad you arrived on a Tuesday,” he adds.

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“Luke sets off – and better than Vergil’s *super-* and *sub-* as contrasting prefixes – his Greek equivalents of same. ‘Looking-down-on-everyone-for-the-sake-of-appearances’ that is ‘hyperephanous,’ on the one hand, with ‘hypsosen,’ that is, ‘the upraising of the lowly’.”

“Those would be,” Diocletian offers a trolley stocked with Falerian wines, “great names for Dalmatians. *Hyper* and *Hypo*, I mean.”

“Or, on the other side of Split,” Antoninus Pius, our maitre d’ elbows Diocletian, “*Super* and *Sub*.”

“So what’s wrong with what I did?” Paul asks the assembly when the guffaws subside. “If I can bring the conversation back to my crimes, against literature or logic, as the case may be.”

“Or both,” Cyperian adds.

“Is there a rule,” Titus joins us and takes the floor, asking me and Paul, “*sole* that lies outside any body of writ and *that* extra rule dictates obedience to the body. Taken as command, of course. This is Paul’s quandary,” he concludes.

“The ‘tyranny of the gaps’ or ‘anarchy of the gaps’,” Paul nods, “is what has always remained, riddled, as it were, for explication. Divine or human. Whoever-gets-there-first.”

“Go on, Augustine,” I urge him on. “You started it. Finish it.”

“Or is it this: what is not expressly forbidden,” Augustine taunts us, “is implicitly permitted?”

“So it’s all permission,” Titus winks, “’cept when it ain’t.”

“Why would you – or anyone – suppose there’s there’s something illogical about theology?” Paul muses.

“ ‘Yo! Titus!’ ” Augustine adopts a salty seaside accent. “ ‘Paul speaking. Lissen up!’ ”

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Charlemagne signals for the floor.

Titus ignores him.

“When you find fat people,” Titus goes on, “I mean, like really obese types, urge them to lay off the extra helpings. You’ll be doing them a favor because healthy eating habits are an important first step on the road to disciplining your mind.

“You might say that there are folk who deny the ‘portly’ label.

“You may prefer ‘pleasingly plump.’

“For example, there’s a Cretan who is revered as a prophet in Crete and he says his people are tubs. So don’t let them deny their failings. They should-be converted. Just find one of them who will ’fess up and go from there.”

“Yrs. Paul,” Augustine concludes for Titus.

“I gave instructions to Titus,” Paul begins. “On the subject of being a bishop. Of course, it’s a bishop’s job, directing his priests and deacons to join with unbelievers, and at close quarters.”

“Hard to avoid,” I point out. “Back then it wasn’t illegal to unbelieve. Before 383 AD and all that.”

“I was giving him advice,” Paul ignores me. “ ‘How to talk to an unbeliever.’ You have to start where they are. What they say, what concerns them, what interests them – ”

“Very sound advice. Very,” I wave my hand over the spectacular seascape that washes the shore below us, “Mediterranean.”

“The world,” Paul concludes, “according to our – ahem, my – Triunian theology, is a messed up, confused and mixed-up kind of place.”

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“The world’s full of contradictory remarks and statements. Each one considered as an event, a speech event,” Augustine picks his way towards a notation, “like *e* this or *e* that.”

“What you say is true. ‘This testimony is true’,” Paul sips his iced tea. “That’s all I said. How could I get into so much trouble?”

“I don’t know,” I murmur, “that the Triunians have given you all you deserved.”

“Augustine’s the worst. And the first of my many critics,” Paul sighs. “The western Roman Empire was tottering and he *was* – ”

“Showing off?” I ask, “and I’m just taking a stab here. You’ve brought us around to ‘Insolubia’.”

“ ‘That very flimsy trick of theirs’,” Paul quotes Augustine. “ ‘If a thing is true, it is false; if it is false, it is true’.”

“*Against the Academicians*,” I am about to repeat myself but Cyprian is much too fast.

“Book 3.XIII.29.”

He waggles his ‘no no’ at me.

“It’s my job.”

“I don’t know,” I return to Paul, “that your co-religionists dished the real dirt.”

“You’re saying,” he takes what I offer, “that there’s worse to come.”

“Oh yes,” I reply.

“If I may?” Augustine begins. “ ‘He who is actually greater than the world can crave nothing, can desire nothing from the world’.”

“Cyprian,” Xantippe nudges her husband.

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“ ‘How heavenly’,” Augustine concludes his quotation, “ ‘to be loosed from the snares of this entangling world, and to be purged from earthly dregs’.”

“Letter to Donatus I.14,” Cyprian intones, “if I may sail us to the safe harbor of the cybernauts.”

Augustine glances at me.

I turn back to Paul.

“The floor is yours,” I wave the Apostle on.

“And here’s my counter-quote,” Paul replies to Augustine. “ ‘How can I persuade you if you enjoy the pleasures of the world?’ Book One I.2, if I may provide the citation to your work, Augustine.”

“But is it,” Augustine ripostes, “a pleasure of the world – *in the world, from the world* – to teach how the world may be overthrown?”

“Does it not depend,” Paul nods at me, “who is doing the heavy work of persuasion?”

“I put out,” Xantippe declares, “a really mean ‘New York style’ cheesecake.”

“I’d be delighted,” I reply, “if that’s an invitation.”

“I also do the punchlines,” she adds.

“You appear quite,” I turn to her husband, “what’s the word I’m looking for? Spruced up.”

“What did you expect?” Socrates asks me. “Flies buzzing around my head? That’s Plato for you. Sooner or later someone will quote from *The Gorgias*. One of,” he studies his nails, “my stellar performances.”

“Speaking of your nephew,” I ask, “where is he?”

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“He’s down on the beach,” Augustine answers my question.

“The Academy. The Peripatetics. Arm-in-arm along the strand,” I muse. “Imagine the dialogue they must be having.”

“Actually,” Paul brings me up short. “There’s a go-cart track down there.”

“Plato and Aristotle bet,” Xantippe informs me, “on the races.”

“They cheat,” Socrates adds. “The one as bad as the other.”

Apparatus

Author:	Peter J. Aschenbrenner
First Published:	The Alaska Bar Rag
Revisions:	Minor.
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Our Server Version:	21 - Liars and Lawyers Part II