

The value of Patristic Interpretation of the New Testament

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[p. 114] When I said to a colleague that I intended to give a paper on the value of patristic interpretation of the New Testament, his humorous reaction was: “well, that will be a short paper!” He could not imagine that this theme would produce an elaborate lecture. Yet it is remarkable that currently three series on patristic interpretation of the NT are being produced: First, there is the American series *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, edited by Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, which consists of extracts from patristic interpretations; many volumes on both the Old and the New Testaments have been published already. Secondly, another American initiative is the series *The Church’s Bible*, edited by Robert Wilken; its volumes will contain translations of far longer passages of patristic interpretations of Old and New Testament books. The first NT volume, on 1 Corinthians, has been prepared by Judith Kovacs. Thirdly, there is the international project *Novum Testamentum Patristicum*, which is led by Andreas Merkt and Tobias Nicklas from Regensburg (Germany) and Joseph Verheyden from Leuven (Belgium). The first volume on Galatians (by Martin Meiser) has been published in 2007, the one on 1 Peter (by Andreas Merkt) is nearing completion. Whereas the two American series can be positioned in the ancient *catenae* tradition of the 6th-8th centuries, since they consist of selected texts (a long chain or *catena*) of patristic exegesis, *Novum Testamentum Patristicum* will rather present descriptions and analyses of patristic commentaries and other isolated interpretations.

These initiatives imply that both scholars and publishing houses that are involved in these series are convinced that patristic interpretation of the NT is worth being investigated and promulgated. Moreover, many of the volumes of the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* also pay attention to patristic exegesis and to the general *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of effects) of the NT. As a matter of fact, I do not forget that other, especially older Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican (British) commentaries also give references to patristic exegesis. It is noteworthy that Rudolf Bultmann wrote his *Habilitationsschrift* on Theodore of Mopsuestia’s commentary on the Pauline epistles [*correction*, 25th May, 2012: *afterwards I saw that in fact this book deals with Die Exegese des Theodor von Mopsuestia in general and not only with the Pauline epistles*].

An important question is, however, whether patristic interpretation is only a matter of *Wirkungsgeschichte* that shows how Biblical texts have been received and interpreted in the first centuries, whereas no serious scholar would ever pretend that it might be valuable for current historical-critical exegesis, *or* whether patristic interpretation can also offer a valuable contribution to the present-day exegetical research. I would like to maintain [p. 115] that often enough the patristic interpretation of New Testament texts is relevant to be consulted and taken seriously in order to correct present-day interpretations that are ingrained but unhistorical. My thesis is that at least sometimes the Church Fathers gave an interpretation

that is more or less correct from a historical point of view, or at least points into the right direction, because to some extent they knew and understood better the context in which the Biblical authors lived.

In three examples I want to show what may be the value of patristic interpretation of the NT. Since each of these examples might be discussed more extensively in separate presentations, the risk of this paper is that it will not do justice to each of the examples individually. However, I prefer to base my argument on more than one example.

In the first place I want to point at the “New Perspective” on Paul. In 1977 E.P. Sanders demonstrated on the basis of his study of contemporaneous Palestinian Judaism that Paul’s theme of justification (or righteousness) by faith as opposed to the allegedly false attitude of boasting of “works of the law”, should not be considered an early precedent for Martin Luther’s struggle with late mediaeval Roman Catholicism; according to Sanders Paul wanted to demonstrate first of all that Jews and Gentiles stand on an equal footing, so that both Jews and Gentiles should only believe in Christ in order to be saved (or: “justified”).¹ Jews were not helped by their Jewish identity, and Gentiles could not boast of their pagan morality; both groups could only be saved by faith in Christ. In this view justification by faith-alone happens in the process of conversion and baptism and is not meant to be claimed by believers every day of their lives – as it proposed by Lutheran theology. After the initial justification by faith and by grace a Christian is expected to live according to God’s and Christ’s commandments – with the help and grace of God’s Spirit. I might also mention the older investigations by Ferdinand Christian Baur, William Wrede, Albert Schweitzer, and Krister Stendahl, and much more might be said about recent scholarly debates on Sanders’s views. I think that in general we may consider Sanders’s book a major contribution to the historical understanding of Paul – a contribution that is not fully opposed to the traditional Lutheran interpretation, but encompasses it since it shows the historical context of Paul’s teaching of “justification by faith”.

[p. 116] I will not elaborate on the modern discussions of Sanders’s views, but I want to point at Origen’s Commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, written in or around 243 CE, where Origen repeatedly says that in this epistle Paul is like an arbiter between Jews and Gentiles. He explains the Epistle to the Romans as a treatise for both Jewish and Gentile Christians. For in spite of the changes, due to the lapse of time since Paul wrote to the Romans, in Origen’s time the relationship between these two groups within the Church was still delicate and, moreover, the relationship between the Christians and the non-Christian Jews was delicate as well. Therefore Origen is very sensitive to the fact that Paul carefully balanced his attention to the Jews and to the Gentiles.² The purport of his Commentary on Romans is that in this epistle Paul shows that God is not the God of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles also (Rom. 3:29). The teaching of justification by faith, and even by faith alone, is interpreted with regard to the remission of sins to one who starts to believe in Christ; or, to put it in Sanders’s words, it is “a *transfer term*”.³ This coincides remarkably with Sanders’ views; yet Sanders reached his conclusions after carefully studying early Judaism and without any reference to Origen.

Another ancient Commentary on Romans that points at the historical context of the tense relationship between Jews and Gentiles among the early Roman Christians was written by an unknown person who is now called Ambrosiaster (pseudo-Ambrose), between 374 and 379 CE. He explains that the Jewish Christians in Rome had convinced the Romans to believe in Christ and to keep the Mosaic law, as if there were no full salvation in Christ. Other Chris-

¹ E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, 481-497, 518-519.

² R. Roukema, *The Diversity of Laws in Origen’s Commentary on Romans*, Amsterdam, 1988, 13-15.

³ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 544 (italics Sanders); see R. Roukema, “Salvation *Sola Fide* and *Sola Gratia* in Early Christianity”, 37-41.

tians who visited Rome had raised questions concerning abstention from meat and whether hope in Christ was sufficient or should be complemented by the observation of the law.⁴ Ambrosiaster declares several times that one is justified by faith alone, *sola fide*, which means to him that one is not justified by fulfilling the prescriptions of the Mosaic law, such as circumcision or new moon festivals or reverence for the Sabbath.⁵ This means that Ambrosiaster does not criticize boasting of good works in general (as Protestants traditionally understood Paul's words), but only Jewish boasting of their obedience to the Mosaic law.

[p. 117] We may observe that such comments are remarkably close to the New Perspective on Paul's epistle to the Romans. However, in exegetical discussions these patristic commentaries hardly play a role yet.⁶

My second example of a patristic interpretation that deserves to be taken seriously concerns the question of eating food sacrificed to idols. Many commentaries on 1 Corinthians 8 say that for Paul eating food sacrificed to idols was basically allowed, but that "the strong" should refrain from it because of "the weak" (Johannes Weiss, C.K. Barrett, J. Murphy-O'Connor etc.). It is true that in 1 Cor. 8:7-13 Paul seemingly agrees with the "strong" Christians, that those who have knowledge may eat food offered to an idol since it does not do any harm to them, but that they should refrain from it only because of the conscience of the "weak" Christians, who might be encouraged to do the same and thus risk being alienated from Christ. However, this interpretation has been countered by other exegetes who maintain that Paul's real view comes to light in the end of his exposé on the matter, in 1 Cor. 10, where he forbids the Corinthian Christians to participate in activities in which food is sacrificed to idols or where it is consumed (Gordon Fee, Peter Gooch, Joop Smit). In this view, his remarks in 1 Cor. 8 are only an initial, tactical, strategic concession, whereas his conclusion in 1 Cor. 10 represents his actual conviction.

For understanding Paul's intention it may seem hardly useful to refer to other early Christian texts that strictly forbid participation in idol offerings, yet without appealing to Paul (one might refer to the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15:20, the Didache, Aristides' Apology, and Justin's Dialogue with Trypho). I admit that it is possible indeed that Paul's apparently "liberal" standpoint was fairly unique in early Christianity, and that only the second-century Gnostics who saw no objection to eating food offered to idols have correctly understood the apostle. Yet also Clement of Alexandria, whose views are sometimes closely related to the Gnostic Valentinians, clearly judges that Christians should refrain from idol offerings. For this view he quotes several texts from 1 Cor. 8 and 10, from which it appears that Clement did not see any contradiction between the two chapters. Even more remarkable is his interpretation of Paul's final concession in 1 Cor. 10:25 where Paul says that without raising any question a Christian is allowed to eat meat that is sold in the market, and that he is allowed to eat meat when he is invited by an unbeliever. Clement says that one is [p. 118] free to buy all things in the market without raising any question, but that idol offerings are meant to be accepted. His argument is that one should refrain from this meat for the sake of the conscience of the less advanced Christians who might want to follow the wrong example in ignorance and might become a despiser, i.e., a despiser of the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15:20. This means that, as an interpreter of Paul, Clement prohibited any participation in idol offerings.

Origen of Alexandria shares Clement's judgment on idol offerings by referring to 1 Cor. 8 and 10. In his extant works he does not comment on Paul's final concession that one may

⁴ Ad Romanos, Argumentum.

⁵ Ad Romanos 3:28.

⁶ E.g., P. Gorday, *Principles of Patristic Exegesis. Romans 9-11 in Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine*, New York / Toronto, 1983, 285, n. 30. Now see M. Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle. A History of Interpretation*, Louisville, 2005.

buy meat in the market without raising a question on its provenance. This means that for Origen, as an interpreter of Paul, there is no exception concerning food offered to idols: Christians should always abstain from it.

I repeat: of course it is possible that an initial, “liberal” standpoint taken by Paul was fully isolated in early Christianity and has been suppressed in the early Church, whereas the Christian Gnostics preserved this element of Paul’s heritage.⁷ The other possibility is that Church Fathers like Clement and Origen correctly interpreted Paul’s admonitions and correctly understood that his remark that one who is “strong” might basically have part in an idol offering but should refrain from it only for the sake of the weak, was not a licence to the “strong” but only a tactical, concessive start of his argument.⁸ This confirms the view of those exegetes who conclude that according to Paul Christians should always refrain from idol offerings.

My third example concerns the early Christian view of Jesus as the Lord. In early patristic theology the fact that Jesus is the Lord, often means that Jesus is considered the incarnation of the Old Testament LORD, Adonai. In the mid-second century Justin Martyr explains (I Apology 63) that Jesus Christ, who first existed as the Logos, appeared to Moses in the burning bush and revealed his name “*ego eimi ho ôn*” (“I am the being one / the one who is”) to him. According to Melito of Sardes (Pascha 104-105) Jesus Christ is the Lord, the one who created heaven and earth and formed man. In 180 CE Theophilus of Antioch (Ad Autolyicum II, 22) says that the Logos, the Son of God, was present in paradise in the role of God and conversed with Adam. In ca 243 CE Origen explains that Isaiah saw the glory of the Son of God, as John testifies in 12:41 (“But Isaiah [p. 119] said these things when he saw his glory”).⁹ This means that, in Origen’s view, in the temple Isaiah saw the pre-existent Jesus sitting on the throne. This implies that in the perspective of both the Fourth Gospel and several Church Fathers Jesus, being the incarnation of the Logos, takes the place of Adonai. This does not imply, however, that in this ancient view the incarnate Lord is fully identical with God the Father; according to this theology God the Father remains remote, “in heaven”, and has his Son created the world and sends him to the earth to reveal himself to Israel and ultimately to live and die as a human being in view of the salvation of mankind.

This early patristic view that Jesus is the OT Lord is not a weird, dogmatic aberration from earlier traditions on Jesus, but it occurs already in the NT. This has been demonstrated by, e.g., David Capes in his dissertation *Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul’s Christology* (1992), David Mark Ball in his dissertation *‘I Am’ in John’s Gospel* (1996), and by C.H. Williams, *I am He. The Interpretation of ’Anî Hû in Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (2000). As I expounded in my course in the Gospel of John of the previous days, especially in this Gospel it is clear that Jesus is presented there as the incarnation of the Logos and that the Logos represents the OT Lord, Adonai. The numerous *I Am*-words, and several OT texts and images concerning the Lord that are applied to Jesus confirm that in the Fourth Gospel Jesus is the bodily manifestation, or incarnation, of the Lord, so that one may conclude that he represents and even *is* the Lord (Adonai) who came to visit his people. Yet in the Gospel of John Jesus often speaks about his heavenly Father, which means that God the Father exists apart from the incarnate Lord. This is already the beginning of Trinitarian theology; some experts call this “binitarianism”, which means that the early Christians believed in God the

⁷ Thus Brunt, “Rejected”.

⁸ J.F.M. Smit, “1 Cor 8,1-6: A Rhetorical *Partitio*”, 589-590

⁹ Origen, Comm. Rom. VI,7, l. 87ss (p. 23 Scheck). (Elsewhere Or. gives other interpretations of the Lord sitting on the throne!)

Father and in the divine Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰ For this one may also refer to Philipians 2, where God is said to bestow on Jesus the name which is above every name (according to many modern commentaries this is the name of the LORD, the tetragrammaton), which is confirmed by the final doxology that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11).

I understand (and it is my experience) that this short presentation of my third example may not be sufficient to convince those who are not [p. 120] acquainted with the full argument, and even the full argument will perhaps not be convincing to all of you; but at least one may say that in this respect as well there are serious NT exegetes whose conclusions coincide with early patristic views on Jesus, which implies that these patristic views deserve to be taken seriously.

Of course, the important methodological question is: when should historical-critical exegetes agree with patristic exegesis, and when should the ways part? In any case, I do not want to maintain that as a rule the Church Fathers give the correct interpretation, considered from a historical point of view. Often – or should I say: most often – their interpretations are based on assumptions that may be considered useless for the approach of sound historical exegesis. I admit that the impression that patristic texts and commentaries are *at the most* interesting for the sake of their *Wirkungsgeschichte* is understandable. Moreover, very often the Church Fathers give different interpretations that deviate considerably from each other, so that it is unwarranted to say that patristic interpretation is always valuable for present-day exegetes.

However, the point I want to make is that patristic interpretation in general still deserves a keen interest and needs to be investigated in a way similar to the commentaries of the last century or the last two centuries and of the Protestant Reformers, that are quoted in the exegetical discussions. It may be interesting to know that in this field of patristic interpretation of the NT very much is still to be done, since compared with the huge number of “traditional” and historical-critical NT exegetes the number of patristic scholars who concentrate their research on biblical exegesis is relatively small.

The methodological question when an exegete should take a patristic view seriously and when he or she can ignore it, cannot be answered by means of a sweeping statement. This implies that the ancient interpreters of the NT are always worth consulting and studying, not only for the sake of a museum interest, but also in order to consider the possibility that these first interpreters still knew and understood something that we have lost in the course of time.

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