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978-0-521-11206-2 - The Divine Apostle: The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistles in the Early Church

Maurice F. Wiles

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

In my earlier book *The Spiritual Gospel* I set out to study the way in which St John's Gospel was interpreted by the early Greek commentators. In *The Divine Apostle* I have attempted a similar study with respect to the letters of St Paul. This task has proved for a number of reasons a more difficult one to handle. In the first place St John's Gospel is a single work whereas St Paul wrote many letters. I have excluded Hebrews and the Pastoral epistles from my survey even though they were generally regarded by the Fathers as Pauline, but we are still left with ten letters of very varied character. Secondly, the volume of patristic commentary is both greater in quantity and also more variegated and more fragmentary in character. In particular we have a far wider range of Latin commentaries than in the case of St John's Gospel and it has seemed right to bring these also within the scope of the inquiry. Thirdly, although St John's Gospel was more central to the main development of Christological doctrine than St Paul's writings, yet the range of doctrinal issues raised in any attempt to expound St Paul was probably even wider than in the case of St John. A comprehensive treatment of all the issues which arise in the course of reading the patristic exegesis of St Paul's writings would require a complete history of early doctrinal development. The scope of this work is a much more limited one. In the first place I have drawn for the most part only upon the actual commentaries; my aim in so doing has been to try to show how certain important aspects of Pauline thought were understood and interpreted by early scholars engaged directly upon the work of commentary and exegesis. At times, however, in order to present as clearly as possible the developing pattern of ideas, it has been necessary to go outside the actual commentaries themselves; where I have done so, I have always attempted to concentrate attention upon the extent to which and the manner in which those developing ideas were consciously based upon Pauline teaching. In such cases I have indicated in the notes not only the relevant patristic texts but also the particular scriptural texts on which the patristic argument was explicitly based. Secondly, my purpose is essentially historical in character. In

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other words my fundamental aim has been simply to trace out the main ways in which St Paul's writings were expounded in the early centuries. I have ventured from time to time, especially in the final assessment, to suggest reasons which may help to explain this course of development and to give some indication of its worth. But my main purpose is descriptive rather than evaluative. I have not attempted to adjudge in detail just how far the early commentators were or were not correct in their understanding of St Paul. Such judgements could only be made on the basis of an agreed understanding of St Paul which, within the range of such a book as this, would have to be assumed rather than argued. In recent studies of the patristic exegesis of St Paul, which have attempted to present their material throughout in terms of such evaluative judgements, it is my not infrequent experience to find that any points of disagreement with them arise more often from differences in the understanding of St Paul's thought (which in the particular work has been largely assumed) than from differences in the understanding of the Fathers (which is the more direct and detailed subject of the study).<sup>1</sup> I have therefore made it my goal here simply to set out as carefully as I can how the Fathers in fact interpreted St Paul. Whoever is confident that he knows the true exegesis of St Paul's thought will then be in a position to answer for himself the question how far the interpretation given by the Fathers is correct.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. F. Buri, *Clemens Alexandrinus und der Paulinische Freiheitsbegriff*; U. Wickert, *Studien zu den Pauluskommentaren Theodors von Mopsuestia*.

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## CHAPTER I

# THE COMMENTATORS

The incorporation of a group of letters within the fold of Holy Scripture is one of the more striking features of the Christian canon. The story of how this came about is still a subject of debate, and unfortunately our evidence is so slender that at present it must remain largely a matter for conjecture. At least the process seems to have been virtually complete before the end of the second century, so that for all Christian writers from that time on there existed a corpus of Pauline letters which were regarded as having the status and authority of Scripture. Whatever it was that prompted the early Church to promote Paul's writings to this exalted status, it was not the simplicity or clarity of their message. II Peter iii. 16 bears testimony to the co-existence of a deep respect for the profundity and wisdom of Paul's letters with a recognition of their difficulty and of the possibility of their serious misinterpretation. It has been the frequent contention of Protestant scholars that this misinterpretation of Paul's thought within the early Church was by no means restricted to those heretical circles which the author of II Peter had in mind. Rather it is to be seen present, albeit unconsciously present, in the most orthodox and fervent admirers of Paul. Harnack's dictum that the second-century Fathers completely failed to understand Paul apart from Marcion, who misunderstood him, has become proverbial. E. Hoffman-Aleith concludes a study of Chrysostom's interpretation of Paul by declaring that he is a striking example of how the theologians of the early Church combined an admiration for Paul with an unconscious failure to understand him.<sup>1</sup> Many similar examples could be quoted. But this is not the only kind of judgement that has been passed. Roman Catholic scholars in particular have been inclined to give a very different verdict. Lagrange, for example, speaks of Chrysostom's homilies on Romans as 'un commentaire perpétuel, le plus beau que nous ait

<sup>1</sup> 'Das Paulusverständnis des Johannes Chrysostomus', *Z.N.W.* xxxviii (1939), 188.

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laissé l'antiquité' and says of his commentary on Galatians that it is Chrysostom 'qui reflète le mieux la pensée chrétienne et l'âme de Paul'.<sup>1</sup> The majority of scholars no doubt would steer a course somewhat between these two extremes,<sup>2</sup> but an immense range of differing judgement remains. Any sifting of the elements of truth and untruth in such conflicting claims can only be made in the light of a careful analysis of the work of the early commentators. It is the aim of this study to provide such an analysis. But first of all we must review briefly who those early commentators were, what works of theirs have come down to us and in what circumstances they were written.<sup>3</sup>

Paul's writings are quoted as authoritative Christian writings from a very early stage. The first half of the second century is a period from which very little Christian literature has come down to us. Polycarp of Smyrna is as representative a figure of the main stream of Christian life and thought during that period as it would be possible to name. In his epistle to the Philippians (probably about A.D. 135) he quotes Eph. iv. 26 alongside a quotation from the Old Testament as 'Scriptura'.<sup>4</sup> The Gnostic Basilides was a man of very different ideas but of very similar date; he is reported as having quoted I Cor. ii. 13 as ἡ γραφή.<sup>5</sup> Later in the century we find Irenaeus citing the words of Gal. v. 21 with a similar introductory phrase.<sup>6</sup> The word γραφή at that stage had admittedly a rather wider connotation than would be implied by the

<sup>1</sup> M. J. Lagrange, *Épître aux Romains* viii; *Épître aux Galates* viii (quoted by A. Merzagora, 'Giovanni Crisostomo, Commentatore di S. Paolo', *Didaskaleion*, n.s. x (1931), 5). Merzagora (*art. cit.* p. 1) also quotes the famous saying of Isidore (*Epp.* 5, 32), with special reference to the commentary on Romans, that if Paul had known Attic Greek he would have interpreted himself in precisely the way in which Chrysostom in fact did. Cf. also B. Altaner, *Patrologie*, p. 291 (E.T. pp. 378–9).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (1954), p. 485; K. H. Schelkle, *Paulus Lehrer der Väter* (1936), p. 440.

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed information on the commentaries themselves, see in the case of the Greek commentaries C. H. Turner, 'Greek Patristic Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles', in the extra volume of Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, and in the case of the Latin commentaries, A. Souter, *The Earliest Latin Commentaries on the Epistles of St Paul* (1927).

<sup>4</sup> Epistle of Polycarp, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Hippolytus, *Elenchos*, 7, 26, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1, 6, 3 (Harvey, 1, 55).

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English word 'Scripture'.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, we may safely assert that by the close of the second century the letters of Paul had established themselves in the eyes of the Church as authoritative Scripture alongside the Old Testament and the Gospels. Such groups as the Ebionites might indeed refuse to accept them, but that was only evidence of their heretical or even fundamentally unchristian character.<sup>2</sup> No doubt the division between those who accepted and those who rejected Paul's writings was not always clear-cut. Some, like Tatian, rejected 'some epistles of Paul' although in practice drawing upon his writings in the exposition of their own teaching.<sup>3</sup> But all such exceptions were of comparatively limited extent and of only temporary significance. Throughout the second century the great majority of Christians and would-be Christians were concerned to find in Paul's writings support for their particular understanding of Christian truth. And from the beginning of the third century onwards the canonization in practice of those writings was more or less complete and any statement of the Christian case had to be based upon them as surely as it had to be based upon the Old Testament and the Gospels. Thus the beginning of the third century represents approximately the stage at which Paul's letters had reached a sufficiently fixed and exalted status in the eyes of the Church for the work of systematic commentary to begin.

Nevertheless, the nature of the appeal to Paul in the second century is not without significance, for it provides the background of thought which in part called out the earliest works of commentary and in no small measure determined their character. Marcion's special dependence on the Pauline writings is well known, and more will be said of it when we come to deal with the interpretation of Paul's teaching about the law.<sup>4</sup> But the other great second-century Gnostics, such as Valentinus and Basilides, also drew upon his letters. In particular they found there valuable evidence for their ideas about

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Werner, *Der Paulinismus des Irenaeus* (1889), pp. 35–46; J. Lawson, *Biblical Theology of St Irenaeus* (1948), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1, 26, 2 (Harvey, 1, 212–13); Origen, *Con. Cel.* 5, 65; *Hom. in Jer.* 19, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome, *Comm. in Tit.* Prolog. (556A). See R. M. Grant, 'Tatian and the Bible', *Studia Patristica*, 1, 300–3.

<sup>4</sup> See chapter IV below.

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the nature of man and esoteric knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This tradition of interpretation was well known to the great Alexandrian scholars, Clement and Origen, who are the first Pauline commentators known to us. The refutation of Gnostic claims was never far from their minds as they came to give their own exegesis of Paul's meaning.

Of Clement little can be said. We know that he commented very briefly on all the epistles in his lost work, the *Hypotyposes*,<sup>2</sup> but only a very few excerpts have survived through quotation in later writings. His comments appear to have amounted to little more than very short notes, and it is rather with Origen that the real work of exegetical commentary begins. Origen's productivity was enormous. Best known to us for his commentaries and homilies on the Old Testament and the Gospels, he seems also to have written commentaries on all the Pauline epistles. These were not planned as a single continuous commentary, and indeed varied considerably in their length and thoroughness of treatment. All seem to have belonged to his Caesarean rather than his Alexandrian period. But of this vast output only a fraction remains. Interesting fragments survive from the commentaries on I Corinthians and on Ephesians, but the only one to survive in any substantial form is that on Romans. This exists in an abridged Latin translation by Rufinus. Among the papyri discovered at Tura in 1941 was a much longer section of the original Greek text than had previously been available, and this has enabled some check to be made on the reliability of Rufinus' translation. The resulting judgement has proved on the whole to be a vindication of Rufinus,<sup>3</sup> and it seems permissible therefore to use Rufinus' version with a fair measure of confidence except when the translator's hand is clearly evident.

The survival of the commentary on Romans and the decision that the translation of Rufinus is in general a reliable guide to Origen's exegesis are matters of no small importance for our study. For Origen stands out in splendid isolation at the fountain-head of the tradition of Greek exegesis. We do not even know of the existence of any other

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1, 8, 3 (Harvey, 1, 72) (I Cor. ii. 14–15; xv. 48); Hippolytus, *Elenchos*, 7, 26, 3 (I Cor. ii. 13). See chapter III below.

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *H.E.* 6, 14, 1; Photius, *Bibl. Cod.* 109 (*P.G.* 103, 381 D–384 A).

<sup>3</sup> See H. Chadwick, 'Rufinus and the Tura Papyrus of Origen's Commentary on Romans', *J.T.S.* n.s. x.

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commentaries from the third century. The next surviving Greek commentaries are a full century and a half after his time. They belong to the years surrounding the start of the fifth century and are the work of the two great Antiochenes, John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia.

From the pen of Chrysostom we have writings on every one of Paul's letters. In the case of the Epistle to the Galatians the work is in the form of a commentary; all the rest are treated in homilies. The majority of these were delivered at Antioch, and therefore before A.D. 397, though a few, notably the homilies on Colossians, belong to his Constantinopolitan period. Despite the essentially homiletic purpose of the writings, Chrysostom does enter with comparative thoroughness into detailed questions of the correct exegesis of the text. It may be indeed that the homiletic method has some advantages in the treatment of letters, whose original purpose was certainly nearer to that of homiletic than to that of theological definition.

Theodore of Mopsuestia was Chrysostom's fellow-student in the school of Diodore at Antioch. Theodore's work took the form not of sermons but of commentaries on all the Pauline epistles. The Church of the sixth century regarded him as a precursor of Nestorius, and both he and his writings were condemned at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553. As a consequence hardly any of his original writings have survived and, as with Origen, we are dependent either on fragments or on translations. Of his commentaries on Romans and the two Corinthian epistles only fragments remain, but we are fortunate to possess a full and substantially reliable Latin translation of his commentaries on all Paul's other epistles. The commentaries are to be dated in the later period of Theodore's life and belong to the early years of the fifth century. They are works of outstanding interest and remarkable exegetical insight, which help to show why Theodore should have earned in his own day the nickname of 'the Interpreter'.

The century and a half which separates Chrysostom and Theodore from Origen was a period of vigorous theological debate. The Eastern Church was divided during much of the period not only by ecclesiastical rivalries but by genuine differences in the

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understanding of the faith. The controversies associated with the names of Arius and Apollinarius may have been bedevilled by many extraneous non-theological factors, but they did involve a serious grappling with the theological meaning of the Scriptures. The absence of any surviving commentaries on the Pauline epistles from the period does not mean that no commentaries were written. It was in fact a period of great activity in the writing of commentaries. The work of biblical exegesis could contribute both to the building up of the faithful (for even though the period may impinge upon us primarily as a period of councils, creeds and controversies, the essential day-to-day life of the Church was being carried on all the time with vigour and devotion) and also at the same time to the exposition and defence of theological conviction. For importance in this latter respect the Pauline epistles were second only to St John's Gospel.

Our knowledge of the work done during the period derives from the fragments preserved in the catenae or chain-commentaries of later centuries. In the later patristic age the main emphasis in scholarship was not on new creation but on the preservation of the old. Men were content to produce commentaries on the books of Scripture in the form of a chain of extracts from the work of earlier exegetes without expressing any judgement or conclusions of their own. It is to this traditionalist spirit that we owe such limited knowledge as we have of Greek exegetical writing on the Pauline epistles between the times of Origen and Chrysostom. Moreover, these later catenists seem to have been unusually free from dogmatic bias; they were prepared to record comments which seemed to them to be of exegetical worth even though they came from the pen of authors generally regarded as heretical. Our knowledge of the exegetical tradition of the period, therefore, though very limited, is representative of a wider range of theological opinion than might have been expected. It has, however, always been necessary to exercise great care in making use of these catenae, because the extracts are not always assigned clearly or accurately to their proper authors. But the catena fragments on the Pauline epistles have been excellently edited by K. Staab in his *Pauluskommentare aus der griechischen Kirche*. They contain no extracts from the third century nor even



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from the earliest years of the fourth. But from the middle years of the fourth century we have fragments of Eusebius of Emesa on Galatians and Acacius of Caesarea on Romans. Doctrinally both belonged to the group usually described as semi-Arian, and may serve as important reminders that the anti-Arians had no monopoly of sound scholarship at that time. Indeed it is probable that the best and fullest work of commentary on the Pauline epistles after the time of Origen was the work of another mid-fourth-century writer of the same general theological persuasion, Theodore of Heraclea; but in his case not even fragments have survived. Further fragments from commentaries on Romans survive from the hands of Diodore and Apollinarius. Both were vigorous opponents of Arianism, though themselves in direct conflict with one another on the question of Christological belief. Both stood in the Antiochene tradition in matters of exegesis, and their real importance cannot be measured by the paucity of the surviving fragments. Diodore was undoubtedly a paramount influence on the thought both of Chrysostom and of Theodore: Apollinarius, in spite of his heresy, was still regarded by Jerome as being (together with Didymus the Blind) second only in importance to Origen as a source to be consulted in the work of Pauline exegesis. From within the Alexandrian tradition we have slightly more extended fragments on Romans and the two Corinthian epistles from Didymus and Cyril of Alexandria, but in their cases also the total volume is only small. The one writer of the period who is extensively represented in the catenae with comments on all the epistles is Severian of Gabala. He was a jealous rival and bitter opponent of Chrysostom in the unhappy days of his Constantinopolitan archiepiscopate. But the rivalry and the opposition were motivated more by personal ambition than by theological difference. As an exegete he belongs essentially to the same Antiochene tradition as his greater rival.

Many of these fourth-century commentators were very closely involved in the Arian and Christological controversies of their day. Their work of commentary was not detached from their work of doctrinal definition; their particular Christological concerns did much to mould the detail of their exegesis. Nevertheless, there is much in the Pauline epistles which is only indirectly related to the

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subjects of the great fourth-century controversies. On such issues as law and grace or faith and works, doctrinal opponents were often exegetically at one. So it was also with the great rival schools of Alexandria and Antioch. Some of the differences in interpretation do correspond to the traditional division between those two great schools of exegesis. But this is by no means always the case. The basic divergence between an allegorical and a more literal approach to Scripture is far less relevant to the interpretation of Paul's writings than it is to that of the Old Testament or of the Gospels. So although the varieties of exegesis are many and interesting, we may come nearer with the Pauline epistles than with any other major portion of the Scriptures to speaking legitimately of a Greek tradition of exegesis.

But the Greeks were not the only early commentators. If they were first in the field, none the less we have five sets of Latin commentaries from between the years A.D. 360 and A.D. 410, all of which are of considerable interest and worth. We must turn our attention now therefore to the situation of those Western writers.

We know nothing of any Latin commentaries from the ante-Nicene period, from the years when Clement and Origen were starting the Greeks upon the road of Pauline commentary in Alexandria. Nevertheless, that early period was of almost as much importance for the history of Pauline exegesis in the Western as in the Eastern half of the Christian world. The work of Irenaeus and of Tertullian, though not taking the form of the writing of commentaries, was most intimately bound up with many of the fundamental problems arising in the interpretation of Paul's writings. More firmly and more uncompromisingly than their Eastern counterparts, they ensured that the words of Paul would be read and understood in a manner radically opposed to Gnostic or Marcionite ways of thought. When in due course the writing of commentaries in the West began, that issue was already firmly settled and no doubts upon it ever troubled the minds of the commentators.

The five men from whose pens we have Latin commentaries were all people of unusual attainments and interests. The earliest was Marius Victorinus, and we possess his commentaries on Galatians, Philippians and Ephesians, probably composed soon after the