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978-1-107-45076-9 - Nestorius: And his Place in the History of Christian Doctrine

Friedrich Loofs

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THE subject of my lectures—"Nestorius and his position in the history of Christian Doctrine"—seems at the first glance to have little interest for us modern men. Almost 1500 years have passed since Nestorius played his rôle in history. And this rôle was in the orthodox church a very transitory one.

For the Persian-Nestorian or Syrian-Nestorian church (as the language of this church was Syriac) Nestorius, it is true, became a celebrated saint; and still to-day small remains of this once far-reaching church are to be found in the vicinity of the Urmia Lake in the north-west of Persia and south of it in the mountains of Turkish Kurdistan. But in the orthodox church Nestorius was even in his own time an ephemeral appearance. In the year 428 A.D. he became bishop of Constantinople and as early as 431 he was deposed. Four years later he was banished to Oasis in Egypt, and up to a few years ago the common opinion was that he died soon after in his exile.

For the orthodox church he remained merely one of the most condemned heretics. He was reproached not

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only for having forbidden the title *θεοτόκος*, mother of God, as applied to Mary the virgin, but it was told of him that he, separating the divine and the human nature of Christ, saw in our Saviour nothing but an inspired man¹. What was right in his statements, viz. his opposition to all monophysitic thinking, was held to be maintained by the famous letter of Leo the Great to Flavian of Constantinople of the year 449, acknowledged by the council of Chalcedon, and by the creed of that council itself. The rest of what he taught was regarded as erroneous and not worth the notice of posterity.

That this is not a tenable theory I hope to prove in my lectures.

To-day it is my aim merely to show that just at the present time different circumstances have led to the awakening of a fresh interest in Nestorius.

The church of the ancient Roman Empire did not punish its heretics merely by deposition, condemnation, banishment and various deprivations of rights, but, with the purpose of shielding its believers against poisonous influence, it destroyed all heretical writings. No work of Arius, Marcellus, Aetius and Eunomius *e.g.*, not to speak of the earlier heretics, has been preserved in more than fragments consisting of quotations by their opponents. A like fate was purposed for the writings

¹ Comp. Socrates, h. e. 7, 32, 6 ed. Gaisford II, 806; Evagrius, h. e. 1, 7 ed. Bidez and Parmentier, p. 14, 6.

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of Nestorius: an edict of the Emperor Theodosius II, dating from the 30th of July 435 ordered them to be burnt¹. Even the Persian church, about the same time won over to Nestorianism, had to suffer under this edict: only a few works of Nestorius came into its possession for translation into Syriac.

This we learn through Ebed-Jesu, metropolitan of Nisibis (†1318), the most famous theologian of the Nestorians in the middle ages and who has given us the most complete account of the writings of Nestorius. He introduces in his catalogue of Syrian authors² the notice about Nestorius with the following words: *Nestorius the patriarch wrote many excellent books which the blasphemers (viz. the Antinestorians) have destroyed.* As those which evaded destruction he mentions, besides the liturgy of Nestorius, *i.e.* one of the liturgies used by the Nestorians, which without doubt is wrongly ascribed to Nestorius, five works of the patriarch. The first of these is the book called *Tragedy*, the second the *Book of Heraclides*, the third the *Letter addressed to Cosmas*, the fourth a *Book of letters* and the fifth a *Book of homilies and sermons*.

For us the edict of Theodosius against the writings of Nestorius has had a still more important result. Until 1897 nothing was known about the second book

¹ Cod. Theodos. 16, 5, 66; Mansi, v, 413 f.

² J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca orientalis*, III, 1, p. 35 f.

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mentioned by Ebed-Jesu, *i.e.* about the *Book of Heraclides*. Also the *Letter addressed to Cosmas* mentioned third by Ebed-Jesu had to be counted and is still to be counted as lost¹. Of the three other works ascribed by Ebed-Jesu to Nestorius we had and still have only fragments—occasional quotations in the works of his enemies and his friends.

Among the hostile writings in which we find such fragments are to be named especially the works of his chief opponent Cyril of Alexandria; then the proceedings of the council of Ephesus; then some works of Marius Mercator, a Latin writer who in the time of Nestorius lived in Constantinople and translated a series of quotations from Nestorius given by Cyril, three letters of Nestorius and also, but with considerable omissions, nine of his sermons; finally the church history of Evagrius (living about 590). The latter gives us² an account of two works of Nestorius dating from the time of his exile, one of which must be the *Tragedy*, while the other could not be identified up to the last ten years, and he inserts in his narration extracts from two interesting letters of the banished heretic. Among the friends who preserved for us fragments of Nestorius the Nestorians of later date played a very unimportant part. Important is a Latin work which has connection with the earliest friends of Nestorius, the so-called

¹ Comp. Hauck's *Real-Encyklopädie*, xxiv, 242, 56 ff.

² h. e. 1, 7 ed. Bidez and Parmentier, pp. 12 ff.

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Synodicon, known since 1682¹ or, in complete form, since 1873², and which is a later adaptation of a work of Bishop Irenaeus of Tyrus, a partisan of Nestorius, which was entitled “Tragedy” like the lost “Tragedy” of Nestorius, upon which perhaps it was based.

The quotations of these enemies and friends represent, as I said, fragments of three books of Nestorius mentioned by Ebed-Jesu, viz. the *Book of letters*, the *Book of sermons* and the *Tragedy*. The first two of these three works of Nestorius need no further explanation. The third, the *Tragedy*, about which Evagrius and the *Synodicon* teach us, must have been a polemical work, in which Nestorius, as Evagrius says, defended himself against those *who blamed him for having introduced unlawful innovations and for having acted wrongly in demanding the council of Ephesus*³. The title which the book bears must have been chosen because Nestorius told here the tragedy of his life up to his banishment to Oasis in Egypt.

Fragments of other books of Nestorius not mentioned by Ebed-Jesu were not known to us ten years ago⁴.

¹ Ch. Lupus, *Ad Ephesinum concilium variorum patrum epistolae*, 1682 = Mansi, v, 731–1022.

² *Bibliotheca Casinensis*, i, 49–84. ³ h. e. 1, 7, pp. 12, 24 f.

⁴ We had, it is true, the Anathematisms of Nestorius against Cyril’s Anathematisms, and a fragment of his *λογίδια*; but the Anathematisms probably were attached to a letter, and the *λογίδια* (short discourses) perhaps belonged to the *Book of homilies and sermons*.

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All the fragments previously known and in addition to them more than 100 new fragments preserved especially by the Syrian-monophysitic literature I collected and edited in 1905 in a volume entitled *Nestoriana*¹. It is with pleasure that here in England I mention the collaboration of the learned English scholar Stanley A. Cook, an expert in Syrian language and literature, without whose help I never could have used the Syriac texts in the British Museum. I will not speak long of the book which this help and that of a German scholar then at Halle, Dr G. Kampffmeyer, enabled me to compose. Three remarks only shall be made. Firstly: The Syriac fragments gave us knowledge of a book of Nestorius not mentioned by Ebed-Jesu, which was written in the form of a dialogue and which was certainly a comprehensive work, although the number of the fragments handed down to us is very small. The title of this work is *The Theopaschites*, that is, the man who thinks God had suffered, a title certainly chosen because Nestorius in this dialogue opposed the Cyrillian party, which he accused of holding a doctrine which imagined the God in Christ suffering.

Secondly: The introductory headings in the Syriac fragments of the sermons of Nestorius in combination with a reconstruction of the order of the leaves in the

¹ *Nestoriana*. Die Fragmente des Nestorius, gesammelt, untersucht und herausgegeben von F. Loofs. Mit Beiträgen von Stanley A. Cook und G. Kampffmeyer, Halle, 1905.

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manuscripts used by Marius Mercator and by the council of Ephesus, offered the possibility of arranging the fragments of the sermons of Nestorius in such a manner that more than 30 sermons could be clearly discerned and that not a few of them were recognisable in their essential contents and their characteristics.

Thirdly: By the help of the quotations I succeeded in finding—as did also at almost the same time a Catholic scholar¹ independently of me—the original Greek of one sermon of Nestorius in a sermon preserved in a manuscript at Dresden and printed in 1839 as a work of Chrysostomus. It is a sermon on the high priesthood of Christ in many respects especially characteristic of the teaching of Nestorius.

Thus my *Nestoriana* gave for the first time an opportunity to survey the remains of the works of Nestorius then accessible. They were the first factor in arousing fresh interest in Nestorius. They inspired, as the author himself says, the writing of a monograph on the christology of Nestorius by a Roman Catholic chaplain, Dr Leonhard Fendt².

But the second factor now to be treated is still more important and surely more interesting. Let me give some introductory remarks before treating the subject itself.

¹ S. Haidacher, *Rede des Nestorius über Hebr. 3. 1, überliefert unter dem Nachlass des hl. Chrysostomus (Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie, xxx, 1905, pp. 192–195).*

² *Die Christologie des Nestorius*, Kempten, 1910.

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Some few heretics of the ancient church were fortunately enabled long after their death to triumph over the condemnation or even destruction which the orthodox church pronounced against their writings.

Of Apollinaris of Laodicea, the heretic whose doctrine was to Nestorius a special cause of offence, we have still not a few writings because the Apollinarists secretly introduced the works of their master into the church literature, inscribing them with the names of orthodox authors of good renown, *e.g.* Athanasius, Julius of Rome, Gregorius Thaumaturgos. Since these *fraudes Apollinaristarum*¹, of which as early as the 6th century some church writers had an idea or at least a suspicion², were carefully examined, a small collection of works of Apollinaris could be made. Prof. Lietzmann of Jena gave such a collection in his *Apollinaris von Laodicea* in the year 1904.

Severus of Antioch, the most conspicuous of the Monophysites of the 6th century, continued to be admired in the Syrian monophysite church, although the orthodox church had anathematized him. Hence not an unimportant part of the works of Severus translated into Syriac has been preserved, especially among the Syriac manuscripts of the British Museum.

¹ Comp. Leontius, *adversus fraudes Apollinaristarum*; Migne, ser. graec. 86, 1947-1976.

² Comp. the preceding note and Nestorius' *ad Constantinopolitanos* (F. Nau, *Nestorius, Le Livre d'Héraclide*, p. 374).

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And, besides others¹, your famous countryman E. W. Brooks has, to the great advantage of historical science, begun the publication of this material².

Pelagius, the well-known western contemporary of Nestorius, whose doctrine Augustine opposed, wrote beside other smaller dogmatical works a large commentary on the Epistles of Saint Paul, the original text of which was held to be lost. An orthodox adaptation only of this work, as was the opinion of ancient and modern scholars, existed in a commentary regarded since olden times as belonging to the works of Hieronymus and it has been printed among them. But nobody took much notice of these commentaries; for because they were regarded as having been revised they could teach nothing new about Pelagius, and one could only make use of those thoughts which otherwise were known to be his. Lately we have come by curious bypaths to valuable knowledge about the Pelagius-commentary which we hope will soon put us in possession of the original text of Pelagius. The well-known Celtic scholar, Heinrich Zimmer, formerly professor at the University of Berlin († 1910), was led, as we see in his book *Pelagius in Irland* (1901), to traces of the original Pelagius-commentary by quotations in Irish manuscripts. He

¹ e.g. R. Duval in *Patrologia orientalis*, iv, 1, 1906.

² *The sixth book of the select letters of Severus, Patriarch of Antiochia in the Syriac version etc.*, 2 vols., London, 1902–1904; Hymns in *Patrologia orientalis*, vi, 1, 1910.

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even believed he had recovered the original commentary itself; for a manuscript which he found in the monastery of S. Gallen (Switzerland) in his opinion nearly resembled the original text, in spite of some additions, and showed that the *Pseudo-Hieronymus*, i.e. the form printed among the works of Hieronymus, was more authentic than was previously supposed. This judgment on the manuscript of S. Gallen and the *Pseudo-Hieronymus* proved, it is true, to be too optimistic. But the investigation, begun by Professor Zimmer, has been furthered by German and English scholars by means of extensive study of manuscripts. Professor A. Souter of Aberdeen, who played a prominent rôle in this research and who really succeeded in finding at Karlsruhe a manuscript of the original Pelagius-commentary, is right in hoping that he will be able to give to theological science the original text of Pelagius within a few years¹.

In a still more curious manner Priscillian, the first heretic, who in consequence of his being accused was finally put to death (385), has been enabled to speak to us in his own words. None of his writings were preserved; we only had the accounts of his opponents. Then there was suddenly found, 27 years ago, in the University library at Würzburg (Bavaria) a manuscript of the 5th or 6th century containing 11 treatises of the old heretic perfectly intact—the genuineness of which

¹ Comp. Hauck's *Real-Encyclopädie*, xxiv, 311.