

REVIEWS

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ALI BONNER, *The Myth of Pelagianism*

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THE BOOK OPENS with a standard introduction (pp. x–xviii) presenting the contents. Here the author discusses *The Canon of Pelagius' Surviving Writings* in a rather surprising way. We learn that Pelagius wrote two letters: the *Letter to Demetrias*, and the *Letter to Celantia*, two short treatises: *On Virginity* and *On Divine Law*, and a very short *Statement of Faith*. This was demanded by the pope, and duly sent to Rome. The work Pelagius was most famous for, his *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, is strikingly excluded from the analysis on the grounds of containing too many interpolations. In Bonner's view the existing edition of this text 'cannot be taken as accurately representing Pelagius' original text' (p. xvii). While it is generally true that there are interpolations in this text, the scholars writing on Pelagianism (A. Dupont, S. Thier, and others) have hitherto fruitfully tried to critically use it as a testimony to Pelagius' thinking. Bonner's pragmatic decision to omit the discussion of the longest surviving text authored by Pelagius is, therefore, controversial. It should be added that fragments of other works of Pelagius, preserved in Augustine's writings such as *De natura, Pro/De libero arbitrio*, and *Epistula ad Innocentium*, are not taken into consideration either. These passages, although preserved in a polemical context, should by no means be *a priori* excluded from the study, especially without any critical discussion or giving grounds for such a choice. I am uneasy with the fact

that these controversial decisions concerning the material used for the analysis, that in many ways affect its results, are made without consulting the works of W. Löhr, Y.-M. Duval, O. Wermelinger and others.

The title of Chapter One (pp. 1–28), *The Caricature of Pelagius' Teaching and its Disjunction from Reality of Texts Written by Pelagius*, is a fitting description of its content. Bonner proceeds in an interesting manner: she extracts a list of fourteen tenets attributed to Pelagius and his followers from *De gestis Pelagii* 35.65 because 'its compendious character makes it the most relevant for this survey' (p. 2) and then compares them one by one with the writings of Pelagius. All these detailed comparisons are later summed up in short sentences as for instance: 'the idea that newborn infants were in the same state as Adam before his sin is not asserted in Pelagius' surviving writings' (p. 6). In passing, Bonner gives random hints as to the history of the Pelagian controversy, without presenting any systematic outline – Caelestius is discussed on p. 7, Melania, Pinianus and Albina on pp. 12–13.

Bonner concludes on p. 25 that out of these fourteen ideas attributed to Pelagius by Augustine, only half of one may be found in his writings, namely the claim that God's grace is given in accord with our merits (discussed on pp. 16–18). In the light of the limited dossier of texts attributed to Pelagius as chosen by the author, both this analysis and the conclusion presented here are precise. In her next move, Bonner asks the question 'why he [Pelagius] was not charged with advocating just the two propositions at issue: the goodness of human nature and effective free will' (p. 25). Her answer is 'that the other tenets were there as distraction and smear, and that the tenets were necessary to obscure the real process being effected, which was the installation of a different anthropology and soteriology into Christian doctrine' (p. 26). This statement is repeated throughout the book and argued for especially in Chapter Six, and is seen as the book's main argument by the author.¹

The longest argument of the book, namely that Pelagius' work was not a novelty and that all the teachings found in his writings had already been

¹ It would be rewarding to discuss such a strong thesis in relation to the numerous publications on Augustine's engagement with Pelagius, especially those authored by Mathijs Lamberigts, Anthony Dupont, and Nello Cipriani.

widely disseminated in ascetic *paranaesis* is to be found in Chapter Two (pp. 29–110) and Three (pp. 111–196). The argument is divided into three parts.

In Part I, Bonner juxtaposes passages from Athanasius' *Life of Antony* and its two Latin translations with the writings of Pelagius. It is very interesting to observe how the Latin versions, especially the one prepared by Evagrius of Antioch, differ from the original Greek text. This part may be of interest even for translators without special interest in Late Antiquity. Bonner masterfully notes for instance how 'Athanasius' Antony did not express the individual's direct control over his own salvation as explicitly as Evagrius' Antony' (p. 47) or how Evagrius 'imported the word "merits" (*merita*) into Athanasius' ascetic programme where no equivalent was present in the Greek original' (p. 58). On pp. 85–97, we find a solid philological *excursus* on the use of the word 'grace' in the Greek and Latin versions of the *Vita Antonii*.

In Part II (pp. 111–183), Bonner convincingly documents that also Jerome's letters and exegetical works written before his encounter with Pelagius consisted of passages with some of the fourteen tenets later ascribed to the heresiarch. The argument is generally sound and complete, but not unproblematic. The first remark concerns Bonner's presentation of Jerome's view on original sin. Bonner presents it as coherent and consequently similar to that of Pelagius (pp. 152–153). This interpretation is based on the reading of the *Commentary on Ezekiel* written c.AD 387 and the *Commentary on Isaiah* of AD 410. Bonner's interpretation of the difficult beginnings of correspondence between Jerome and Augustine is also controversial. Her claim that Jerome was 'afraid of being hurt by Augustine' (p. 169), and the lack of decoding the rhetoric at play in Jerome's *Ep.* 112, goes against the current scholarship (e.g. J. EBBELER, *Disciplining Christians. Correction and Community in Augustine's Letters*, Oxford 2012, pp. 135–139). It is not to say that there are no controversies over these issues, but that one is obliged to acknowledge them. Thirdly, there is a serious and somewhat puzzling mistake in Bonner's translation of one passage from Jerome's *Ep.* 112 *et novis Africae frugibus Romana tecta locupleta* – 'enrich the Roman storehouses with the fruits of the new Africa'. In the comments to this passage we also read that 'the subtext of novelty versus innovation [sic!] was underlined in the phrase "new Africa" (*novis Africa*)'. These are clear mistakes. *Novis* is not nominative singular joined with Africa but abla-

tive plural (of *novus*) describing the noun *frugibus*. Hence, the phrase in Jerome says about the ‘new fruits/harvests from Africa’ with which Augustine is encouraged to enrich Roman houses.

Chapter Two ends with Part III of the argument concerning the conservative character of Pelagius’ teaching, where we find twelve lines on Ambrose, seven pages on Ambrosiaster, and almost three pages on Apponius (pp. 184–194). This is followed by the concluding remarks to Chapters Two and Three (pp. 194–196). The treatment of Ambrose is puzzling. Pelagius himself quoted from the *Expositio Euangelii Lucae* authored by the bishop of Milan to prove that his ideas on sinlessness were sound. Augustine dedicated a large portion of his *De gratia Christi et peccato originali* to refute this so-called ‘patristic argument’ and the nature of this polemic has been much debated in modern scholarship (G. Maschio, E. Rebillard, A. Chronister). Bonner for some reasons omits these facts and discussions.

Bonner also tries to prove that ‘there are many points of contact between Pelagius’ (p. 193) and Apponius’ *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. The English translation, however, omits the word *gratia* present in the Latin text: ‘the characteristic gift of the Word of God’, *proprium donum gratiae uerbi Dei*. This omission makes the translated text of Apponius misleadingly closer to the thought of Pelagius.

We should note that already Jerome tried to prove that Pelagius’ teaching was not original at all, but that the ‘heretic’ simply repeated the stoic doctrines. Many scholars pointed at affinities between some tenets found in the writings of Pelagius and other ancient advocates of Christian asceticism. It is, however, a real achievement of Bonner to present a comparative analysis of the most influential ascetic writings composed and published before Pelagius arrived at the stage. This analysis proves beyond any doubt that ‘the ideas found in Pelagius’ writings were by the first decade of the fifth century long-standing *topoi* of ascetic literature’ (p. 195). It would have also been useful to observe after Nello Cipriani (N. CIPRIANI, ‘La morale pelagiana e la retorica’, *Augustinianum* 31 (1991), pp. 309–327), that the ascetic teaching of Pelagius was very similar to the popular moral doctrine taught in schools.

The main thesis of Chapter Four (‘No Organized Movement Existed, and No Individual Held the Collection of Views Attributed to “Pelagianism”’, pp. 197–217) is that there was no group of Pelagians: ‘the only grouping that

really existed was the ascetic movement' (p. 215). Bonner's method is to focus on different views presented in some texts traditionally labelled as Pelagian, like those from the Caspari Corpus or the *Book of Faith* of the so-called Rufinus the Syrian, to prove that (1) Pelagius did not share these views, (2) there is no certain historical connection between Pelagius and the proponents of these ideas (including Caelestius), (3) the educated Christians of the fourth and fifth century felt the need to publish their ideas and Augustine 'objected to [...] their intellectual freedom' (p. 205).

Bonner's short analysis of the so called Rufinus the Syrian (pp. 207–212) has a glaring problem, namely that it does not take into account several thorough studies of Walter Dunphy published in the last thirty-five years, who has very convincingly attacked the *opinio communis* Bonner refers to in her presentation. In his paper (W. DUNPHY, 'Rufinus the Syrian: Myth and reality', *Augustiniana* 59 (2009), pp. 79–157), he argued that Marius Mercator and Caelestius referred in fact to Rufinus of Aquileia. Then, in a series of three papers published in the *Augustinian Studies* between 2013 and 2015, he proved that the *Liber de fide* (which Bonner presents as treated by scholars as Pelagian) is in fact 'a conflation of two originally independent writings into which the Pelagian editor has inserted his defense of the ability inherent in human nature to avoid sin and of the innocence of infants' (W. DUNPHY, 'Glosses on glosses: On the Budapest Anonymous and Pseudo-Rufinus. A study on anonymous writings in Pelagian circles (Part 3)', *Augustinian Studies* 46 (2015), pp. 69–70). This Pelagian editor must have worked after the condemnation of Pelagius in 418, so the 'story of Rufinus the Syrian "infecting" Pelagius and Caelestius with Pelagianism' (p. 211) that Bonner tries to undermine in her argument is not really a story told by contemporary scholarship.

In Chapter Five ('Systemic Problems of Definition and Classification', pp. 218–259) we find a critique of various attempts to define Pelagianism and to attribute to some ancient texts the label 'Pelagian'. The latter issue is directly determined by the former – if we do not know in which ways the Pelagian texts differed from other ascetic writings, we cannot in fact classify any text as Pelagian. After a critical survey of scholarly attempts to come up with a definition of Pelagianism or a method of discerning texts as written by Pelagius or Pelagians, Bonner concludes convincingly that 'it is not pos-

sible to separate Pelagius from other ascetic propagandists, who may well have been writing works so similar to Pelagius' as to now be indistinguishable from them' (p. 250).

The main thesis of the book is thoroughly discussed in Chapter Six ('The Invention of "Pelagianism": Motive and Means', pp. 260–287). Bonner argues here 'that "Pelagianism" was invented in order to bring into disrepute the two principles of the goodness of human nature and effective free will; and that this was achieved by making the name Pelagius toxic and tarring his teaching by association with self-evidently unacceptable propositions, thereby facilitating the installation of alternative theses as orthodox dogma' (p. 260). These alternative theses are called the 'triune' that consist of 'three interlinked doctrines of original sin, prevenient grace, and predestination interpreted as preordainment' (p. 258). The three doctrines were much less popular and widespread than the ideas of the goodness of human nature, free will and effective grace, disseminated especially through the ascetic teachings.

On a more general level, Bonner makes use of the interactionist sociology of deviance, already employed by Eric Rebillard in his work on Pelagian controversy, to prove that Augustine's *modus operandi* against Pelagius is 'universal to all heresy accusations' (p. 286). The complex historical reasons why Augustine's polemic was successful in the fifth century are also presented and critically discussed. This methodological instrument served Rebillard to prove that in the Pelagian controversy, like in any other Christian controversy, we should be able to see the process of elaboration of a new exegesis of the Scriptures in time when the tradition fails to be precise enough because of the new questions posed. The fact that *a posteriori* the winners claimed to be the defenders of the orthodoxy and tradition while being in fact innovators is also crucial to Rebillard's analysis and to the sociology of deviance in general. The merit of Rebillard's analysis is that it does not suggest that the orthodox writers were conscious manipulators fully aware of the process of making a heretic according to the concepts of the sociology of deviance. Bonner, however, moves in this dangerous direction to suggest that Augustine and the other opponents of Pelagius first decided to expel the ideas of 'the goodness of human nature and effective free will from official Christian orthodoxy and install other ideas in their place'

(p. 285). Next, they found a scapegoat or a straw man called Pelagius, made up some easily digestible false accusations against him to conceal their real agenda. Finally, they created an atmosphere of conflict, came up with a label to better sell Pelagius as a villain, ‘un-Christian and immoral’ (p. 286) and lobbied people in power ‘for support of their positions’ (p. 274), thanks to which they achieved a final success. I think that this goes a step too far in presenting Augustine as a Machiavellian genius of Church politics. No sociological theory has the power to prove that such unsympathetic interpretation of Augustine’s motives and methods is true.

Bonner insists in this chapter that Pelagius’ opponents presented him as a new heretic and highlighted his novelty, because this is what sociology of deviance teaches us. The problem is that apart from Augustine, the trio of Jerome (*Epistula* 133.1–2 and 9, *PL* 22, 1148–1158, *In Hieremiam prophetam* IV 1.2), Paulus Orosius (*Liber apologeticus contra Pelagianos* 15–6, *CSEL* 5, 604) and Marius Mercator, (*Commonitorium* I 1–2, *PL* 48, 109A–111A) took up a totally opposite tactics and portrayed Pelagius as a continuator of the teachings of the Stoics, and the famous heretics – Origen, Priscillian, and Jovinian. Therefore, in the light of the sources, it is simply not true that ‘Pelagius’ opponents had to present “Pelagianism” as novel doctrine in order to win the fight for possession of the label of tradition’ (p. 271).

In the last chapter (‘The Manuscript Evidence and its Implications’, pp. 288–301), Bonner reflects upon the phenomenon of a large number of surviving manuscripts with Pelagius’ writings. The fact that they have passed as the works of Jerome and Augustine is a clear sign that in the medieval period the copyists and their supervisors could see no doctrinal difference between them. A proof is to be found in the marginal comments added to Pelagius’ *Letter to Demetrias* (pp. 294–298). Once again, it is a pity that some contemporary findings, for example, those of Peter van Egmond who, having studied *Libellus fidei*, arrived at similar conclusions, are completely left out by Bonner.

There follow conclusions, appendix with the γ -text of Ambrosiaster’s *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles* on Rom. 9:11–16, bibliography, and a useful index.

Bonner’s style is very clear. Each chapter is divided into smaller parts, announced by very informative descriptive headings; these divisions are log-

ical and help the reader to orientate him- or herself throughout the book. There are introductory and concluding remarks at the beginning and end of each chapter. We can find them also in the most important subchapters. Such a method allows us to familiarise ourselves with the main tenets of the book, but it is also responsible for inevitable repetitions. Although this books has many merits, their appreciation is hindered by the fact that the author does not acknowledge the existence of/engage into a discussion with a large portion of contemporary scholarship.

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