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EDITORS AND COMMENTATORS :
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE CRAFT
OF SECOND CENTURY THEOLOGIANs

When Christian theology emerged in the 2nd century, its intellectual practice was from the start intensely exegetical and hermeneutical. This should come as no surprise: the models for Christian theology were provided both by Jewish scriptural exegesis and the interpretation of authoritative texts as taught and practised in the schools of Greek philosophy. The following remarks concern the beginnings of Christian exegetical practice in the 2nd century, its modalities and its context. I am particularly interested in the close conjunction of philological / editorial practice and the rise of the Christian biblical commentary.

I

One of the few sources that illuminate the practicalities of early Christian exegesis in the second century is to be found in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V, 28¹. Here Eusebius quotes from an anonymous writing that was directed against the heresy of a certain Artemon, who apparently taught that the Saviour was a mere man². Artemon argued that this

1. All translations of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (here and in the following) are taken from the Loeb translation of Kirsopp Lake.

2. E. SCHWARTZ, *Zwei Predigten Hippolyts*, München, 1936, pp. 46-51. This writing is usually called « The Little Labyrinth » and has been attributed with some reason to Hippolytus of Rome. After Eusebius it was apparently read by Theodoret of Cyrus, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium* II ,5, PG 83,392 A-B.

« psilanthropism » had been the prevailing doctrine in the Roman church until the time of bishop Victor, the 13th successor of the Apostle Peter. It was only under bishop Zephyrinus, he argued, that the truth had been debated (V, 28,1-3). In his treatise the anonymous author refutes Artemon's position. He cites Justin, Miltiades, Tatian and Clement (and again Melito and Irenaeus) who considered the Christ to be God. Moreover, he claims, Christian hymns and psalms also proclaimed the Christ to be the Logos of God. And, thirdly, bishop Victor excommunicated the founder of the heresy, Theodotus the cobbler (V, 28,4-6). Under the successor of Victor, our author continues, bishop Zephyrinus, Natalius, a confessor, was seduced by the disciples of Theodotus the cobbler, a certain Asclepiodotus and a second Theodotus whose epithet was « the banker ». However, this Natalius was subsequently warned by visions of the Lord. When he did not heed these warnings, holy angels whipped him all night long. The next morning, duly chastened, he went to Zephyrinus and the assembled clergy and laity, asking to be readmitted into the Roman church – a request that was finally granted, but only just (V, 28,7-12)³.

The anonymous author adds some further (polemical) information about the way the disciples of Theodotus practised theology – and this is the passage which has to concern us here :

« They have corrupted the divine Scriptures without fear, they have rejected the rule of ancient faith. Christ they have not known and they do not seek to find out what the divine scriptures say, but they take pains to consider what syllogistic figure may be found for the support of their atheism. If anyone adduced to them a text of divine Scripture they inquire whether it can be put in the form of a conjunctive or a disjunctive syllogism. They abandon the holy Scripture of God and study geometry (...) Some of them practise the geometry of Euclid and admire Aristotle and Theophrastus. Galen is almost worshipped by some of them. » (V, 28,13-14)

And after a few lines the anonymous author continues in this way :

« For this cause they did not fear to lay hands on the divine scriptures, saying that they had corrected them (*legontes autas diorthōkenai*). (...) For if any be willing to collect and compare with each other the copies of each one of them, he would find them in great discord. For the copies of

3. See W. LÖHR, « Theodotus der Lederarbeiter und Theodotus der Bankier – ein Beitrag zur römischen Theologiegeschichte des zweiten und dritten Jahrhunderts », *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 87, 1996, pp. 101-125.