

SUMMARIA DISSERTATIONUM INAUGURALIUM

Eos XCVII 2010
ISSN 0012-7825

THE PORTRAIT OF A HERETIC. PELAGIUS AND HIS IDEAS IN THE WORKS OF AUGUSTINE WRITTEN IN THE YEARS 415–418*

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This doctoral thesis presents the effects of a thorough analysis of three polemical treatises, 11 letters and 20 sermons of Augustine written in the years 415–418 against Pelagius. The main outcome of these studies is to provide an answer to the question: why Pelagius, regarded by contemporaries as a saint, was judged and sentenced as a heretic. The thesis of this study is that it resulted from the literary activity of Augustine. As scholars almost universally agree that it was the theological argumentation of the bishop of Hippo that doomed Pelagius, it is suggested here that it was particularly a means of presenting Pelagius as a heretic and a morally corrupt, technically inferior rhetorician i.e. exegete, writer, teacher.

The first chapter should be considered as an attempt to establish the dispute in a firm historical context. Little do we know about Pelagius' life, his friends, patrons, enemies up to 410, but plenty of researchers write about it. He was a newcomer to Rome of the late 4th century, originating from Britain. The testimony of Marius Mercator from the late 420's first mentions Pelagius in Rome in the episcopate of Anasthasius (399–401), where he is presented as a young man who follows the instructions of some Rufinus of Syria, identified nowadays as Rufinus of Aquileia. It should be mentioned that we do not recognize him as the opponent of Jerome in the 380's, and presume that the date of his earliest works, that are without any doubt dated ca. 405, should be the clearest indication of his maturity.

* I present here a summary of my doctoral dissertation *Obraz Heretyka. Pelagiusz i jego poglądy w pismach Augustyna z lat 415–418*, written under supervision of Dr habil. Przemysław NEHRING at the Classical Philology Department of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń 2010. It was reviewed by Prof. Ewa WIPSYCYCKA and Prof. Marian SZARMACH.

He soon became an ascetical leader and a teacher of faith among the wealthy and potent families of old Roman families – now converting to Christianity – *gens Valeria* and *gens Anicia* among them. With them he fled from Rome before the Goths, and visited Sicily, North Africa on the way to Palestine.

The most surprising but crucial fact in the life of the British monk was that, being considered almost a saint in 411 – not only by his friends, but Augustine as well – as early as 415 he became harassed, presented as a heretic, and ultimately sentenced as one. He died as a heretic and encyclopedias present him as the head and inventor of the Pelagian heresy. This chapter was written to historically prove that the main source of this twist of fate was the literary effort on the part of Augustine. He received a helpful hand in the actions and writings of old monk and severe polemist, Jerome, and in a young, and not so shrewd, though enthusiastic presbyter, Orosius. We know that Pelagius was subjected to three judicial proceedings. In three cases he was found innocent of heresy, in 415 in Jerusalem and Diospolis by the eastern bishops, and in 417 in Rome, by Pope Zosimos (where he was not present). However, he was found guilty of heresy by two councils of African bishops in 416, by Pope Innocent in the same year, and in 418 once again by African bishops, by emperor Honorius and by Pope Zosimos. The last one was clearly forced by the course of events to change his earlier decision. All those judgments against Pelagius repeated the arguments brought to life by Augustine in his polemical treatises, of which *De natura et gratia* from 415 is the earliest. It may be proved beyond a shadow of a doubt by the careful reading of extant sources.

The status of Pelagius' works that were saved by the history and the interpretation of his theology, present in those books only that were familiar to Augustine, can be found in the second chapter. The authorship of many works ascribed to Pelagius is still the subject of discussion among scholars. One has to find some Archimedean point. The goal of this study was to establish the changing attitude of Augustine to Pelagius and the means by which the bishop of Hippo communicated it. If this chapter was to be of any value, our interpretation of Pelagius' theology had to be based only on those writings which Augustine also read and recognized as genuine works of his opponent. Only then could one have evaluated the presentation of this theology in the polemics of Augustine.

The main work of Pelagius, still extant, is *Expositiones in epistolas Paulinas*. The thorough research on the manuscript tradition shows that there are some incoherencies between the two manuscript families. One may presume, though it is only a hypothesis, that the original text went through a redaction during the life of Pelagius, though obviously we cannot trace his own hand in it. If it existed, this redaction was less 'Pelagian' and more 'Augustinian'. Only two other texts of Pelagius are extant, that is *Epistula ad Demetriadem* and *Libellus fidei*. The former is a paradigmatic exhortatory letter, written to a young lady of noble birth in order to persuade her that the life of a sacred virgin is the

best choice for the future. The latter provides us with valuable testimony that in 416/417 Pelagius tried to subject his wording to the demands of Augustine and the African bishops, though clearly he did not recognize himself as a heretic. In the works of Augustine one can also find fragments of other works of Pelagius, which are of lower value to us. The reason for it is that they are interwoven into the texture of polemics, and in such cases selection is already an interpretation.

The theology of Pelagius is clearly anti-Manichean, anti-Arian, and anti-Iovinian. That stands for the polemical part of his writings. But their main interest lies in the power of God as the Creator and Savior, who enabled the human nature to be blameless and to achieve the greatest of our goals, the Kingdom of Heaven. Pelagius did not see the validity of the doctrine of the original sin, because he did not recognize human nature as *natura vitiosa*. He was a teacher of ascetic life and wanted his listeners and readers to share the enthusiasm of being the children of God. And so – we read – the teacher of religious life should not even be sad, because sadness is a sin. He was a maximalist because – by showing the enormous potential of our nature and the eternal prize – he was known to have been able to persuade some people to live a godly life. But this radicalism is optimistic, and in the extant writings of Pelagius the author does not occur as a revolutionist or a severe and austere censor, as some have thought.

Our interpretation stresses many incoherencies of his theology to show that in the fields of thought of crucial importance for the so-called Pelagian controversy, Pelagius was ambivalent or even self-contradictory. Hermeneutically thinking this proves that he did not realize that anthropology had suddenly become the subject of orthodoxy. He felt free to discuss the power of human nature in the exhortatory context. The incoherencies of his teaching did not bother him, probably not more than they could have bothered Saint Paul. As a successful ascetic leader he saw that his theology was good enough for his addressees, and as a conscious attacker of previous heresies he must have been quite amazed to find out after 415 that he was seen as one.

Augustine's interpretation of Pelagius' theology was inadequate – as it is proved in the third chapter. Primarily, because the bishop of Hippo presented it as a system, which, in fact, it was not. The many incoherencies of his opponent's thought were only used to discredit Pelagius as a liar and bad writer. He presented a few theses of Pelagius that were not that author's genuine ideas emerging in his works, but merely implications drawn by Augustine himself. The two most important ones are the claims that Pelagius was against the grace of God and against the baptism of infants. To be true, the only part of the doctrine, later established as universal, that Pelagius was missing, was the theory of *tradux peccati*. But he was not the only one outside Africa to think so. And this kind of argument can be reversed, as he held the doctrine of *locus medius* – conceptually close to the later purgatory, a concept which Augustine did not only lack but contradicted in the famous *Sermo* 294.

The final chapter is the most important and innovative one, presenting rhetorical structure of Augustine's works against Pelagius. Copious though these "rhetorical" elements in the investigated texts are, they have not been respectively taken under consideration by scholars. We may find many (and diverging) interpretations of Pelagius' theology, but almost no one tells us that Augustine considered Pelagius not only a theologian, but primarily an opponent, and that their judges were not alumnae of theological seminars but rhetorically educated addressees. For all these reasons the bishop of Hippo portrayed the heretic in his flesh and bones, focusing on his many moral and intellectual flaws, that were just as powerful arguments in this strife as those purely theological, if not better.

In the examined writings of Augustine one may find a coherent and conventional picture of a heretic. Pelagius is presented as an ethically biased man, vane and problematic personality, that wants to establish his theology in place of the Christian one. His goals – according to Augustine – are merely negative, as he plans to diminish the Church, because he is a snake, a servant of the Evil. That is why the heretic found so many followers who worshipped him more than God, whom Augustine called *inimici gratiae*, which soon became their label, previous to 'Pelagianistas'. They are also presented as theological innovators, and not as some established *heretici redivivi*. The portrait is elaborate and its analysis can prove how good Augustine's rhetorical skills were. But there is more to it.

In the writings of Augustine Pelagius was also presented as a bad rhetorician, *vir malus dicendi imperitus*. As he was an exegete and a teacher of faith it was only natural that Augustine would present him as a false interpreter of God's plans. It is quite striking, however, how vast a part of his polemics is based on this technical discussion of the use of certain rhetorical assets like *argumentatio a similitudinibus*, *inductio*, *definitio*, etc. Of special importance are these parts in which Augustine proves that Pelagius does not understand the Bible because he is both unskillful (*dicendi imperitus*) and immoral (*malus*).

This study may be useful to many branches of humanities as it presents a cultural structure of polemics, the history of the Pelagian controversy and the literary means of presenting an opponent in a theological debate.