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The Myth of Pelagianism

by Ali Bonner

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Mark Edwards weighs up a more favourable estimate of Pelagius

IT HAS long been suspected that Pelagianism is largely the construct of St Augustine. According to Ali Bonner's opening chapter, this is true par excellence of the 14 tenets that constitute the heresy as Augustine defined it, not one of which was endorsed by the historical Pelagius.

In chapter 2, she maintains that where Pelagius differs from Augustine (above all in denying predestination, Original Sin, and the irresistibility of prevenient grace), he is speaking not only for himself, but for an entire tradition, which is catholic enough to have the support of the Athanasian Life of Antony, together with those authors who widened its currency by redaction in Greek or translation into Latin.

In the third chapter, Jerome's castigation of Pelagius is found to be strangely at odds with his previous writings, in which he sometimes falls into the very excesses (above all, the assertion that the rich cannot be saved) which were wrongly imputed to his victim; when he feels bound to avert the charge of being a Pelagian, he reproduces Augustinian calumnies (above all, that Pelagius sought perfection within God's help), but embraced no positions distinctive to Augustine.

Far from being distinctive, the teaching of Pelagius himself is shown in chapter 4 to have been the unchallenged foundation of the ascetic movement that in his time was the dominant force in ecclesiastical policy and theological reasoning; hence (as chapter 5 contends) we fall into the snare set by Augustine if we impose the term "Pelagian" on anonymous specimens of ascetic teaching.

In chapter 6, Bonner surmises that, because he was unable to find clear precedents for his own doctrines of predestination, prevenient grace, and Original Sin, Augustine drew up a caricature of his foremost critic from real or fancied extremes of ascetic teaching.

The final chapter argues, from the wide circulation of Pelagius' writings in medieval France and Britain, that the typical scribe could see no difference

between the opinions of the putative heretic and those of St Jerome (to whom the manuscripts commonly ascribed them), so that where they are condemned, the genuine works of Jerome fall under the same reproof.

As Bonner perceives, her general thesis has been anticipated by other students of Augustine and Pelagius; it is also of a piece with much that is written on the construction of Arianism, Gnosticism, and the Antiochene tradition. Its merit lies, therefore, in its assiduity, but one can only regret that this so often takes the form of a mere accumulation of texts with only brief and perfunctory analysis. Consequently, the charges of Augustine are not in every case satisfactorily rebutted.

Pelagius may assert that Adam died in fact on account of his sin, but logically this is consistent with the claim that he believed Adam to have been mortal in any case; he may teach that the entire human race is corrupt, but if he holds that the cause of corruption is our imitation of Adam, Augustine may not have erred in attributing to him the belief that Adam's sin injured only himself. The iteration of passages from Jerome affirming that only willed actions are good and that our merits are rewarded will not distinguish him from Augustine unless the same texts assert that merit precedes election, or that the will that informs our actions is untainted by the Fall.

The young Augustine, who taught that we are elected on the basis of foreseen faith in his Exposition of Romans, is more Pelagian than the late Augustine; we should not forget, however, how much common ground remained even after he had refashioned the British theologian as his antitype.

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