

THE BEGINNINGS OF SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY - 2 CORINTHIANS 12, 2-5. A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Aim. In this inquiry, the author examines the 12th chapter of the 2nd letter of Paul to the Corinthians in a hermeneutical way, highlighting its relevance for a Christian's spiritual autobiography and emphasizing the influence it has had on the later development of the genre.

Methods. Using patristic exegesis (like that of Saint Chrysostom) and also that of more recent authors dedicated to this theme, the author tries not only to present and explain the event, but also to offer new interpretive keys for reading it.

Results and conclusion. The approach focuses on keywords and phrases like "the rapture," "glimpse" or "thorn in the flesh" and it tries to present Paul's understanding of the link between the spiritual experience of encountering God and the suffering that follows it as a useful means of humbling a person. The research also highlights some important examples that show how the Apostle influenced the style and the way of thinking of later authors like Saint Augustine or Saint Silouan from Mount Athos.

Cognitive value. The relevance of showing why Saint Paul's second letter to Corinthians (12, 2-) represents the beginning of the spiritual autobiography in the Christian space is key due to the fact it can help the reader have a deeper understanding of the latter spiritual autobiographies such as the ones of Saint Siluan, father John of Kronstadt, Teresa of Calcutta or Maria Faustina Kowalska.

Key words: humility, Saint Paul, spiritual autobiography, revelation, third heaven.

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about Saint Paul, his Epistles and his theology, and yet there are still many things to say. Some of the authors who focused on his work spoke of his theology (Clasper, 1969; Robinson, 1952), his ecclesiology, his Christology or his pneumatology. Unfortunately, accounts of his mystical experience are not as well developed. Many of those who analysed this aspect of his life focused only on the exegetical dimension and have neglected the deeper, theological and mystical elements of it (Bultmann, 1985; Omanson, 2011). Therefore, in this research, I will try to offer a hermeneutical interpretation of the most important passage of spiritual autobiography to be found in Paul's epistles: 2 Corinthians 12, 2-5.

The demarche will not only bring new information, accents and perspectives upon the aforementioned passage, but will also try to present it from the perspective of the spiritual autobiography by observing the main aspects of the genre to be found there. As a researcher interested in spiritual autobiography, I have often encountered in both dictionaries and other books the claim that the beginnings of spiritual autobiography (see, for example: Kalaitzidis, 2010; Baslez, Hoffmann, Pernot, 1993; Dinzelbacher, 1993) are to be found in Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (Augustine, 1861). However, although Augustine's spiritual autobiography is a masterpiece of the genre and despite the fact that others too have embarked on such a quest (for example, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus; cf. Coman, 1937; Corneanu, 1984), we must recognize that the beginnings of the spiritual autobiography from the Christian perspective can be found in the aforementioned passage of Scripture (Morariu, 2015). Almost all exegetes see in this Scripture passage about Paul's personal experience an example of spiritual autobiography. Starting from this assumption, we will not only try to present and explain the passage, but also to show why we talk about such a genre, to present its defining characteristics and to show how this passage influenced the evolution of spiritual autobiography in Christian contexts such as that of Orthodox Christianity. The keywords and phrases of the investigation are: the kidnapping, the return to body, the glimpse, or the third heaven. We will try to understand their meaning, the link between them, the continuity (where it exists), the theological significance, the Jewish influence (seen as the cultural background to the passage) and also its contemporary application. Though we cannot neglect important philological aspects, we will focus mainly on the hermeneutical dimension of the passage and not on the exegetical one. We will also address ambiguous spiritual-philological aspects like the fact that the Apostle speaks about himself in the third person. We will use primarily the text of the Holy Scriptures, trying to find connections between the life and theology of the author by means of a more profound understanding of his words. We will also appeal to the insights of some of the Church Fathers from the earliest centuries of Christianity as well as some more contemporary exegetes. We therefore invite and challenge the reader to go deeper into the Holy text's meaning to find new and complementary understandings of the Apostle's experience.

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CONTEXTUAL REMARKS

As is always the case, we will start by focusing on the content of the paragraph, its meaning and its context (Omanson, 2011; Martin, 1986; Kreitzer, 1996; Minor, 2009; Vegge, 2008). Therefore, from the outset we must say that the passage under consideration is part of a more general defence of the author's apostolic authority (10.1-13). It is also linked to a smaller section where he compares himself to his opponents (11.6-12.) (Coogan, 2007). It is an interesting part of the writer's strategy. A certain theologian described this strategy as follows: "Hence the complex strategy adopted here: to suggest a 'vision' experience second to none but to attribute it to 'a person in Christ' and to say as little about it as possible" (Barclay, 2003, p. 1370).

The main purpose of the author of the Scripture passage is not to describe his personal mystical experience, but to defend his apostleship which was hotly contested by some of his detractors. He also wants to emphasize the fact that he was "not inferior to any other apostle in status and authority" (Ziesler, 1992, p. 3). Speaking about himself in the third person, which confuses some of the theologians who are trying to analyse his work (Hodge, n.d.), making them even doubt about the autobiographical character of the passage (Goulder, 2003), Paul recounts a personal experience that took place fourteen years before at the beginning of his missionary activity. He tells in a few words (and in an ambiguous way) how he was snatched up to the third heaven (in a physical or, maybe in a spiritual way) and the glimpse he experiences there. Then he speaks about the thorn in the flesh with its precise role - to humble him, helping him not to fall into the sin of pride because of this experience (Schweitzer, 1956). As some theologians who have investigated his ideas say, "Paul does not share this interpretation of the vision. He claims he could share facts about the vision (12:6) and links it to other content-laden revelations (12:7)," and "there are of course difficulties in interpreting such an opaque event and the unspecified thorn," (Garland, 1999, p. 516; Talbert, 1987, p. 358). We will try therefore, not only to present but also to understand this episode and its aim.

We consider it useful to do this by using a few keywords and phrases for our interpretation. Due to their different understanding from the exegetes and because of their importance to the hermeneutical approach, we will therefore speak about: the rapture, the third heaven, the glimpse and the thorn in the flesh trying to show how their understanding has influenced spiritual autobiography over the time (Hindmarsh, 2005).

KEYWORDS ON HERMENEUTICAL INTERPRETATION

“The rapture”

At the beginning of the episode that we are investigating, Paul speaks about his spiritual experiences cautiously (Roukema, 2005). Prior to this he had pointed out the fact that he was not happy to do so because it is inappropriate for someone to talk about his own mystical experiences. Then he highlights the fact that the experience is not the result of his own merits but the gift of God. Therefore, “he would give over boasting, and refer not to what he had done, but what God had done; not to scenes in which he was the agent, but to those in which he was merely the subject – to revelations and visions” (Hodge, n.d., p. 279).

Then he presents his experience of interaction with the grace as a “rapture.” It is part of his strategy. Firstly, he is “glorying in infirmities” and afterwards, he presents his unexpected visit into the heavens using the word “rapture.” This helps him to show the unexpected character of the experience; to emphasize the fact that it is totally the work of God (Chrysostom, 1978) and to avoid telling whether it happened in or outside of the body. Some of the interpreters of the episode even try to find cultural reasons for explaining his choice:

We can surely say that Paul refers to the two possible forms of rapture for some reason. Jewett suggests that he is indirectly opposing ideas held by two different groups in Corinth: gnostic members of the church, for whom ecstatic states would be non-bodily, a means of release from the somatic prison; and the visiting missionaries, whom Jewett identifies as “divine men” and who believed, it is said, in physical transfiguration through study of Torah and would therefore emphasize bodily rapture. Paul does not wish to side with either group. (Jewett, 1971, p. 287; Thrall, 2000 p. 786-787).

If there is a cultural or social motivation for Paul’s choice, we do not know and it is not the purpose of this essay to emphasize it. The important point is to understand that the term “rapture” is used firstly to show the importance of the event and of God’s work in its realisation, its unexpected character. Its use reveals the author who is so shy talking about.

The third heaven

If there is a meeting with God, a discussion with Him, or even a simple sharing from His light, this must take place in heaven or in a place that looks like it. It was also the situation of Saint Paul. Even if he cannot describe in a clear and detailed manner what happened there (Hood, 2011), it is certain that he was abducted to the “third heaven.” The use of this word, which comes as a result of Jewish education and influence on its perception, has no other purpose than to suggest that it was in paradise, the two notions being synonymous here. This is confirmed by the exegetes who write: “Because it is plain that the ‘third heaven’ and ‘paradise’ are synonymous terms; and paradise, as is admitted, at least by those who suppose that Paul here speaks as a Jew, means heaven” (Hodge, n.d., p. 283). The description thus structured is part of Paul’s

“boasting” which he uses to counteract his opponents (Thrall, 2000). Why the third one? While some of the exegetes are tempted to see two raptures, others see there an allusion to the Blessed Trinity (Hughes, 1962). The most credible explanation seems to be that he is influenced in what he says by the rabbinic understanding of the term (Bultmann, 1985).

“The glimpse” and “the thorn in the flesh”

If somebody tried to explain the passage we are dealing with by separating the two keywords and phrases, namely “the glimpse” and “the thorn in the flesh” and analysed them separately, they would surely be wrong. In fact, they are both parts of an interesting strategy in which Paul is trying to present the link between the revelation and the bodily suffering. It is somehow part of his lamentation because “Paul’s suffering figures prominently in the letter and lament is intricately connected to suffering” (Hassler, 2016, p. 167).

By placing the passage on the “bodily thorn” in the broader context of the entire scene, a contemporary writer points out that:

In verse 7, Paul begins his discussion of his “thorn in the flesh” by stating its purpose: that he might not be elevated with pride because of the revelations he had previously mentioned. The word for “thorn” in this verse is “σκόλοψ”, which originally referred to “anything pointed,” such as a stake but then it came to be used of something causing “serious annoyance,” such as a thorn, a splinter, or other “injurious foreign body” (Hassler, 2016, p. 173).

About the meaning of this keyword there were many opinions. Some of the Holy Fathers see this expression as a metaphor referring to carnal temptation. Others, as a form of speaking about a disease, perhaps epilepsy, while others allude to Paul’s mental suffering (Furnish, 1985) and even depression (O’Connor, 1991; Hughes, 1962). We will neither try to analyse the different assumptions here nor to rally one of the opinions. This is because what counts is that:

while Paul learned that his thorn would remain and had a deeper purpose, this was still something he learned through the experience of (implicit) lament, petition, and silence from God. This is the heart of biblical lament. (Hassler, 2016, p. 175).

2 CORINTHIANS 12, 2-5 AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR THE GENRE OF THE SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

As I have tried to emphasize above, the content of the Scripture passage is deeply linked with the keywords and phrases outlined above. Using these expressions as parts of an ingenious strategy which combines self-defence with irony, Paul defends his apostleship, presents some of his mystical experiences and offers practical information for his readers. This part of the second letter to Corinthians is clearly a passage of spiritual autobiography. It is so because even if it is speaking about someone else, the author is presenting his own

experience and not a common one; the deepest and spiritual form of all of experiences (see: Athonite, 1994; Athonite, 1976).

If we read this text by comparing it with other spiritual autobiographies, we will see that there are many similarities between them. Paul has involuntarily influenced the later authors on this topic. Due to the limits of this inquiry, we cannot make an exhaustive analysis of the entire literature of the spiritual autobiography from the Christian perspective. Therefore, we will try here to do a short case study. Our comparison will be with the spiritual autobiography of Saint Silouan the Athonite; a Russian monk from Athos Mount in the 19th and 20th centuries (Saharov, 1973) who produced the most important work of the genre for the Orthodox tradition.

If somebody studied his work, they would see a man ashamed to speak about himself. He was a monk who experienced grace and then, like Paul, experienced a “thorn” in his “flesh” manifested in the sadness of losing the gifts of the Holy Spirit in his life (Morariu, 2016). Therefore, even if he does not speak about the rapture into the third heaven, he follows the structure of Saint Paul in describing his experience by presenting some general aspects about the mystical ecstasy and then, by focusing on the suffering caused by the return into the body. Another similarity may be found in the interpretation of the answer that they received from God. If for Paul the answer stipulates that the grace is enough, for Silouane it is the leitmotiv of his notes to “keep your mind in heal and do not despair” (Athonite, 1976, p. 7). Both understood the intrinsic dimension of the message and focused on the deepening of God’s knowledge.

Such similarities and influences can also be found in Saint Teresa of Avila’s spiritual autobiography, in the Protestant Dag Hammarskjöld and in many other works of the genre.

This undoubtedly demonstrates that by describing his mystical experience, Paul exercised a powerful influence on spiritual autobiography in all Christian spheres and created real milestones, which the later authors took into consideration when composing their works.

CONCLUSION

As we have already tried to show in our presentation, the passage from second Corinthians is of great importance for both biblical theology and the understanding of spiritual autobiography as a genre of theological literature. By placing the beginnings of the genre mentioned here, we can understand its subsequent evolution, structure and even the rarity of works belonging to him in certain confessional communities such as the Orthodox one. It becomes clear why authors are sometimes ashamed to write about their own experiences and why the emphasis does not fall on the ecstatic state, often occult, but on the suffering that follows them, which is intended to keep them from falling into the sin of pride and to fortify them in faith. The “rapture,” “glimpse,” “third sky” and “thorn in the flesh” become therefore the main topics of analysis of the spi-

ritual autobiographies from all the Christian confessions and can be founded, in one form or other, in each writing of the genre.

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