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The Church and the "Mystery of Iniquity": Old Testament Prophecy in Fourth Century African Exegesis

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Introduction

All through its history, the Christian community has had to wrestle with the "doubleness" of being called to witness to regeneration in the Spirit, while at the same time being all too aware of participating in the commonality of sin. There have been many different responses which have tended to define the different ecclesiologies in the broad spectrum of Christian discipleship. It was a major issue in the ferment of religious thought and experience in the Reformation, but it was just as central in the debates and schisms of the African churches in the third and fourth centuries. What are the signs of the presence of Antichrist? Where is the locus of evil? Is the Christian community called to be a purified remnant witnessing to the nearness of the Second Coming? Is there to be a separation of the just and the unjust? Does the very presence of sinful members sully the regenerated community streaming with light from the waters of baptism? Can sinners be truly incorporated into the Body of Christ? How does the church recognize the "mystery of iniquity" of whom the Apostle warned (2 Thessalonians 2:7)?

A privileged vantage point for following the debates that raged through a Christian community for generations is to focus on the writings of a North African theologian and exegete, the Donatist layman, Tyconius. It is the controversial writings of this man who, teaching on these very issues, was rejected by his own Donatist community. At the same time his thought exercised a profound influence on the ecclesiology of Augustine of Hippo. Through the mediation of Augustine, the legacy of this Donatist thinker may still be traced. This paper will examine

the contribution of Tyconius, an older contemporary of Augustine of Hippo, to the question of the holiness of the church and the locus of evil. It was a question that engaged the leading thinkers of the African church for more than two hundred years and has influenced the understanding of the nature of the church in western theology.

“Separateness” and Holiness in the African Churches

Historians of the early church can trace something of the tumult of the third and fourth centuries for the Christian communities of North Africa in the remarkably abundant archaeological remains stretching from Morocco to Libya. That history is also reflected in the rich literature of the period, including that of Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine among a host of other writers from a church marked by its fervent appropriation of the scriptures as much as by the factionalism that posed a constant threat to its spiritual and institutional unity. While factionalism within the communities may be traced to local jealousies and ambitions between rival clerics or even wider social issues between rural and city communities, divisive theological issues were all too evident. The rigorism of the call for “separation” from the unholy by Tertullian and Novatian in the third century found echoes in the Donatist disputes throughout the fourth century. The African church “searched the scriptures” all the more intensely, and was drawn particularly to the prophetic books of the Old Testament and to the apocalyptic writings of the New Testament. It is in the writings of the Donatist exegete Tyconius that we may still appreciate the significance, for Christian communities today, of the debate about the presence of sinfulness within the body of the church.

This remarkable Donatist author has left a small but impressive legacy for the church in his lost commentary on the Book of Revelation, a commentary¹ which remains embedded in the strata of medieval commentaries. His only surviving work, the *Book of Rules*,² was especially recommended to exegetes by Augustine who included a summary of the seven chapters of the *Book of Rules* in Book 3 of his magisterial work on biblical interpretation, *De doctrina christiana*.³ One can only surmise what was the theme and content of another of Tyconius’s works, *Bellum intestinum*, mentioned by Gennadius

of Marseilles in his listing of ecclesiastical authors. However, there is enough material in the *Book of Rules* as well as in the fragments of the Apocalypse commentary not only to appreciate Tyconius's originality as an exegete but also to understand some of the problems that beset the Christian communities of North Africa at his time.⁴

Tyconius's contemporary, Optatus, bishop of Milevis, in his response to Parmenian, the Donatist bishop of Carthage, had decried the divisive spirit which set "altar against altar".⁵ The writings of Optatus against Parmenian are to be dated from the late sixties to the mid-eighties of the fourth century. Speaking from within the Donatist community, Tyconius stigmatized this same divisiveness as a very sign of the presence of Antichrist, of the "mystery of iniquity" of whose coming the church had been forewarned (2 Thessalonians 2:7).⁶ In Tyconian terms, this divisive spirit spreads death and destruction "spiritually" throughout the church. More exactly, it was the intention of Tyconius to focus on those texts which warned of the presence of evil already "in the midst" of the church.

Throughout the *Book of Rules* Tyconius drew upon texts from the Old and New Testaments which warn of the "mystery of iniquity" insinuating itself into the very heart of the community. "Now" there are already signs of the "invisible/spiritual" presence of evil, "the abomination of desolation" in the midst of the church. The church must be constantly on guard against this secret enthronement of evil. Careful scrutiny is to be given to the signs of this secret enthronement, "now", rather than to strain for recognition of signs of the end-times; "then", the presence of Antichrist will be manifest to all and there will be no need for the discerning eye of the biblical interpreter.

This independent-minded Donatist incurred the wrath of his bishop, Parmenian, for insisting on the importance of recognizing the signs of evil already within the life of the church all too clearly visible in the lovelessness between Christian communities. This hatred between Christian and Christian was proof of the presence of Antichrist "in the midst of" the community. Whereas the Donatists were seeking to preserve the "purity" of the community by a regime of "separation" of Christian community against Christian community, that effort literally set "altar against altar". The documentation of the time records rigorists actually scraping altars of "polluted"

consecrations (as well as incidents of scraping scalps of the oils of "polluted" baptisms). In the years after Augustine's return to North Africa after his baptism in 387, he had to acquaint himself with the situation within the Christian communities of his homeland since he had spent his late teens and early manhood as a Manichean hearer. In his first years as a priest Augustine plunged into the history and theological implications of the Donatist schism, which by that time had split the African churches for more than eighty years.

Augustine was impressed by the independence of thought of Tyconius in refusing the Donatist ecclesiology that had been powerfully articulated by Parmenian, Donatist bishop of Carthage for close to thirty years since coming to Carthage in the early sixties of the fourth century. By the time of Augustine's active involvement in the Donatist controversy, Parmenian was dead, and we hear nothing more of Tyconius himself. Augustine carefully examined the literature in which Parmenian had attacked Tyconius⁷ for rejecting the rigorist image of the church as the pure remnant eagerly awaiting the end-times. In line with the rigorist tendencies which had been repudiated by Cyprian and his fellow bishops in debates with the Novatian faction in the middle of the third century, Parmenian had urged an uncompromising separation of the Donatist communities from the threat of being "polluted" by the rest of the church. Tyconius had countered by insisting that the separation of the good and evil is not for "now", but for the Judgment. No separation until the Judgment is a constant theme of Tyconian ecclesiology, a theme that will be well evidenced in Augustine's anti-Donatist writings. Tyconius is just as aware of the power of evil as is his bishop, Parmenian, but he refuses to "externalize" evil by locating the presence of evil outside his community. In other words, Tyconius refuses to demonize the "other" as the locus of evil, a ploy to which a "holiness church" is often prone.

The Enthronement of Evil "in the midst" of the Church (Isaiah 14:12-21; Ezekiel 28:2-19)

The theme of Satan's aspiration secretly to infiltrate the church has had a long history in Christian art and literature. In the great Grunewald altarpiece at Colmar, it requires sharp

observation to notice Lucifer among the choiring angels at the birth of Christ. Medieval plays shocked (and delighted) their audiences as they followed the machinations of Antichrist to be enthroned in Jerusalem. Tyconius is much more direct. The theme of the enthronement of evil in the midst of the church is clearly announced and explored in every one of the seven sections of the *Book of Rules*. Rule 1 concludes with an acknowledgement that the church as the Body of Christ daily “grows into the holy temple of God” (Ephesians 2:21), but also warns that there is another (unholy) temple secretly growing against which the church must remain on its guard, and “from the midst” of which it will one day depart.⁸

Rule 7 of the *Book of Rules*, entitled *De diabolo et eius corpore*, is devoted to two enthronement texts, the first, Isaiah 14:12–21, the aspiration of the King of Babylon to set his throne in the heavens, and the second, the lament for the Prince of Tyre, who had exulted in claiming to be “in the dwelling place of God in the heart of the sea” (Ezekiel 28:2–19). In both texts, Tyconius insists that the interpreter must examine carefully the style of the prophetic language. He points to the ambiguity of the persona signified by the titles, “King of Babylon” (Isaiah 14:4) and “Prince of Tyre” (Ezekiel 28:2). On the one hand, he notes that the King of Babylon is condemned for his arrogance in claiming to place his throne in the heavens. “I will arise above the clouds. I will be like the Most High. But now you will go down to the underworld in the deeps of the earth. All who see you will stare at you in amazement and will say: this is the man who makes the earth tremble, who shakes the kings, and makes the whole earth a desert” (Isaiah 14:14–17a). On the other hand, Tyconius reminds us that “the king of Babylon who devastated the Lord’s land and killed the people, i.e., Nebuchadnezzar was clean at his death and does have eternal life.”⁹ Tyconius insists that the biblical interpreter must distinguish between the individual in history, in this case Nebuchadnezzar, who repented of his sin of arrogance, and the persona referred to in veiled symbolic language. In Tyconius’s terms prophecies treating of an individual in history like Nebuchadnezzar or Solomon or David in a language that is more or less prosaic are *species*-type prophecies, while prophecies which use hyperbolic language are *genus*-type prophecies.¹⁰ The exaggerated, poetic language of *genus*-prophecy alerts the inter-

preter that the referent of the text is not an individual in history, but rather that, through the prophetic text, the Spirit is warning evil members of the church about the end that awaits them if they do not repent.

Who is the King of Babylon, then, and where is his throne to be found? “How the Daystar rising in the morning has fallen from heaven! He who sends out to all the nations has been broken to pieces on the earth! You said in your heart: I will ascend to heaven; I will set my throne above the stars of God” (Isaiah 14:12–13). Because of the poetic exaggeration of the language, Tyconius immediately dismisses the identification of “Lucifer, the Daystar” with either the historical King of Babylon or with Satan.

The devil promises himself no such thing. He was not strong enough to resist being cast down; and he retains no hope that he can ascend to heaven by striving once again. Even less can a man have such hopes. Yet it says that this is a man: “this is a man who makes the earth tremble.” But beyond this reasoning, according to which neither devil nor man can hope to be able to ascend to heaven and, enthroned above the stars of God, be like God, scripture itself also admonishes us to make inquiry on another point. For, if he says that he will set his throne in heaven or above the stars of God, how is he going to sit on the high mountains or above the high mountains to the north or on the clouds so as to be like the Most High? For the Most High has no such seat.¹¹

It is ironic that Tyconius urges us to be attentive to the style of prophetic language while at the same time he is so literalistic and insensitive to the poetry of the prophetic text. It is instructive to compare his treatment of the text with that of his older contemporary, Athanasius of Alexandria. In his critique of Arian exegesis, his great treatise, *Against the Arians*, completed in the middle of the fourth century, Athanasius points out that the Arians have misapplied Proverbs 8:22 “The Lord made me the beginning of his ways”, as a proof of the created status of the Son because they had been totally insensitive to the poetic genre of the book of Proverbs in their focus on such words as “made”. Athanasius insists that one cannot build an exegesis (let alone support a theological system) on such false foundations.

For it is written “The Lord created me the beginning of his ways for his works” (LXX Proverbs 8:22); since however these are proverbs, we must not expound them nakedly in their first sense, but we

must inquire into the person, and thus religiously put the sense on it. For what is said in proverbs, is not said plainly, but is put forth latently....¹²

A further example of Athanasius's attention to literary genres is found in his classic essay on the interpretation of the psalms, *The Letter to Marcellinus*, where he explains to his readers the difference between prosaic style and poetic style. The imagery and the heightened language that characterizes the poetic style of the psalms is precisely what enables them to pass beyond the experience of the individual and to be open to appropriation by later generations. Athanasius notes: "For the Book of Psalms has the special characteristic of communicating in song what is detailed in prose in the other books, thus rendering in melody this same subject matter but giving it a more general treatment."¹³

The sensitivity to biblical style that characterizes the genius of Athanasius is completely lacking in Tyconius. His treatment of the scriptures seems wooden and literalistic in comparison with the Alexandrian theologian whose brilliance as an exegete has been consistently ignored by scholars bent on studying imperial politics of the period or dogmatic niceties while neglecting the biblical foundations of his anti-Arian polemics.

The Prophetic Call to Inner Conversion

The purpose of the present inquiry is not so much a critique of Tyconius's method of scriptural interpretation, but an analysis of how his method of biblical interpretation is focused upon the reception of the exhortations and warnings of the prophetic texts for the Christian communities of his day. In a sense Tyconius *is* attentive to the subtle shifts in tone and style of the biblical texts since he has been taught by his own classical education to be appreciative of the skills of rhetoric. For Tyconius, the Spirit speaking through scripture is the supreme Rhetor, using every skill of language to communicate a message of love and encouragement on the one hand, and on the other, to warn and admonish sinners to conversion of life. In Rule 4, in which Tyconius describes most carefully the need for watchful attention to the "subtle" discourse of the "manifold Spirit" (Wisdom 7:22), he is at constant pains to explain that this dual discourse (encouragement and warnings) of the

Spirit to the church actually reveals the nature of the church as a “bipartite”, with both saints and sinners in the Body of Christ.¹⁴

This insistence on being attentive to the shifts in scriptural style between a literal historical referent and poetic exaggerations in Tyconius’s hermeneutical system is well exemplified in the second passage treated in Rule 7 which focuses on the prophetic lament for the Prince of Tyre. Tyconius had first explained his use of the terms “species” and “genus” in Rule 5, where he noted that the exaggerated prophetic language describing the complete and irrevocable sentence of destruction passed on the cities of Damascus and Tyre was not to be taken literally. Tyconius points out to his readers that both cities were still in full commercial activity at the time of writing.¹⁵ For Tyconius the referent of Ezekiel’s prophecy is the present evil membership of the church, not the long-dead inhabitants of the city of Tyre at the time of the prophet’s writing. Hyperbolic style speaks beyond the immediate, the individual, and the historical (the “species” type). It signals that the Spirit is speaking directly to the church (“genus” style) in calling its members to repentance.

The commentary on Isaiah 14 in Rule 7 is an excellent example of Tyconius’s exegetical method. After establishing that it is not the historical King of Babylon that is the referent of the text, Tyconius focuses attention upon the location of the throne itself. He poses the question that if it is not literally the heavens where the King of Babylon seeks to place his throne, what are we to understand by “heaven”? The answer lies in being attentive to the subtle shifts in biblical style. “As we shall see as scripture proceeds, it is the church that he calls ‘heaven’. And it is from this heaven that the morning star falls.”¹⁶ The poetic exaggeration of setting a throne in the heavens itself signals that it is not a literal throne or a literal place in Israel’s historical experience but that the Spirit is addressing the mystery of the church.

Just as attentively as an interpreter must read the subtleties of the shifts of the biblical texts, so must the church watch for the signs of fidelity and infidelity to Christ within its midst. It does this not by imposing a rigid withdrawal from all possible sources of contamination from the outside (the mark of a sect, rather than a church). Rather, it watches for the ultimate sign

of the presence of antichrist which is lovelessness and hatred. The First Letter of John is a constant focus in the thought of Tyconius.

For the Lord and the church are one flesh. If he believes that a person is in that flesh, why does he not love him—or crueller still—why does he hate him, when it is written “anyone who does not love” his brother “remains in death”, “and anyone who hates his brother is a murderer”? (1 John 3:14–15). He has declared that there is no greater or plainer sign for recognizing antichrist than a person who denies Christ in the flesh i.e. who hates his brother.¹⁷

For Tyconius, the prophetic text which speaks of the aspiration of the King of Babylon to place his throne in the heavens serves as a warning to the church to watch for the signs of ultimate infidelity—hatred and lovelessness, a betrayal of the great commandment of Christ within the very community of the baptized. This was the spiritual death and destruction of which the prophetic texts warned. This was the mark of the presence of antichrist. The prophetic texts called for inner conversion of the church, rather than anxious discernment of the signs of the end-times.

It is not surprising that both Donatists and Catholics found the lay-exegete a somewhat uncomfortable and enigmatic figure. They puzzled over his writings, found holes in his logic, argued with him, but could not, and did not, ignore him.¹⁸ My purpose (unlike Mark Antony’s oration) has been neither to praise nor to bury Tyconius or his exegetical methods. When one visits Carthage and its hinterland today, the voices of the vociferous Christian communities of the past are hushed. Shattered monuments give scant indications of the vigour and creativity of those vanished communities. In turning to these ancient writings it is not to praise nor to criticize methods which are so alien to contemporary exegesis. The aim has been to observe how the interpretation of scripture became an occasion for self-reflection and inner conversion in fourth century North Africa where factious and divided Christian communities turned on each other in internecine recrimination, denying each other the vivifying presence of the Spirit.

Conclusion

One of the most refreshing aspects of reading the texts of the Early Church is the very “distancing” one experiences from

current questions of biblical exegesis. Sixteen centuries lie between us and the African communities immersed in a world that literally centred upon the Mediterranean. Christianity is no longer Euro-centred, and all the compressed experience of the collapse of the Roman administration, the whole history of medieval Christendom, the Reformation and the Enlightenment lie between us and the Donatist exegete who read the prophetic texts so intently as the communities of his time grappled with the “mystery of iniquity” within the church. However, in spite of the real distance, not only in historical perspective, but in exegetical methods, it may be argued that the central insight of Tyconius still rings true for Christian communities today. The scriptures continue to call the whole church to an inner conversion of love, so that its holiness may be celebrated in the triumph of Christ over the “mystery of iniquity” whose presence is manifest in that very lovelessness and separateness that Tyconius deplored in his own community.

Notes

- ¹ K. Steinhauser, *The Apocalypse Commentary of Tyconius: A History of Its Reception and Influence* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987).
- ² William Babcock (trans.), *Tyconius: The Book of Rules* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989). Hereafter abbreviated as *Tyconius*. All English translations from Isaiah and Ezekiel are quoted from Babcock’s translation of the *Book of Rules*. These translations are from the Old Latin versions of the prophetic texts used by Tyconius.
- ³ Charles Kannengiesser, “The Interrupted De Doctrina Christiana”; Pamela Bright, “Biblical Ambiguity in African Exegesis,” in Duane Arnold and Pamela Bright (eds.), *De Doctrina Christiana: A Classic of Western Culture* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, January 1995).
- ⁴ Pamela Bright, *The Book of Rules of Tyconius: Its Purpose and Inner Logic* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1988).
- ⁵ O. R. Vassall-Phillips (ed. and trans.), *The Work of Optatus Bishop of Milevis: Against the Donatists* (London: Longmans and Co., 1917).
- ⁶ See the treatment of “the mystery of iniquity”, Pamela Bright, *The Book of Rules*, 113 and following.
- ⁷ See *Augustine: The Writings Against the Manicheans*, and *Against the Donatist Controversy*, J. R. King (trans.), Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, volume 4 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994. Original print 1887).
- ⁸ Pamela Bright, *The Book of Rules of Tyconius*, 44.
- ⁹ William Babcock, *Tyconius*, 128.
- ¹⁰ Pamela Bright, *The Book of Rules of Tyconius*, 69–76.

- 11 William Babcock, *Tyconius*, 117.
- 12 *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, Archibald Robertson (trans.), *Against the Arians* 2.44, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, volume 4 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978) 372.
- 13 Charles Kannengiesser (ed.), *Early Christian Spirituality*, "Athanasius of Alexandria on the Interpretation of the Psalms" (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 61.
- 14 William Babcock, *Tyconius*, 57.
- 15 *Ibid.* 69.
- 16 *Ibid.* 117.
- 17 *Ibid.* 113.
- 18 In a letter to his friend Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, Augustine notes, "On my part I am not forgetting what you asked about the seven rules or keys of Tyconius, and as I have written many times, I am waiting to hear what you think of it." Letter 41 *St. Augustine's Letters*, volume 1, W. Parsons (trans.) (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1951) 179.