

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE AMBROSIASTER AND ISAAC THE CON-
VERTED JEW.*

THE commentary on St. Paul's Epistles, which is usually cited as "the Ambrosiaster" because it has been ascribed to St. Ambrose, is praised by Bishop Lightfoot¹ as "one of the best Latin commentaries." Some account, therefore, of recent researches into the mystery of its authorship cannot fail to be interesting to English readers.

Once again it is Dom G. Morin, O.S.B., to whose critical insight we owe the discovery of the probable author of the *Te Deum*, who has patiently studied this thorny question until a clue has presented itself, which seems to satisfy all the conditions of the problem. He has stated his theory² modestly. He claims only to have introduced into the famous debate, for the first time, certain coincidences of language between the writings of the Ambrosiaster and two treatises of Isaac the converted Jew, who was a contemporary of Damasus. But the argument, by which he proves that to accept Isaac as the author of the former would at once make plain mysterious characteristics in the internal evidence, will, we are confident, appear convincing to most readers. The suggestion has been already accepted as a most happy discovery by Prof. Theodor Zahn,³ who is able to confirm it with an important quotation from St. Jerome.

Dom Morin assumes that the Ambrosiaster was also the author of the "Questions on the Old and New Testament," which have been wrongly attributed to St. Augustine. There is abundant internal evidence to prove this. The author was certainly a contemporary of Pope

¹ *Galatians*, Ed. 7, p. 232.

² *Revue d'histoire et de littérature relig.*, 1899, iv. No. 2.

³ *Theologisches Literaturblatt*, 7th July, 1899. I am indebted to both writers for copies of their articles.

Damasus, 366-384. (*Amb.*¹ 471 D: "ut cum totus mundus Dei sit, ecclesia tamen domus eius dicatur, cuius hodie rector est Damasus.") In Question xlv. 2243, it is stated that 300 years had passed since the destruction of Jerusalem; and in Question cxv. 2349, that the writer lived in Rome.

With these writings we have to compare: (i.) a short treatise by one Isaac on the Trinity and the Incarnation; (ii.) an exposition of the faith, which may be traced to the same pen.

i. The only old MS. of the treatise on the Trinity which has survived (Paris, B.N. *lat.* 1564 of the 9th century) contains the title, *INCIPIIT FIDES ISATIS EX IUDAEO*. The first editor, Sirmond, with great probability identified this Isaac with the converted Jew of that name who calumniated Damasus.

ii. The exposition of faith, published by Caspari² from a MS. at Milan, from Bobbio (*Cod. Ambrosian.* I. 101 *sup. saec.* viii., which contains also the Muratorian Fragment), is only a fragment; but it has many points of resemblance to the treatise on the Trinity, and may have been derived from a common source.

Both of these writings have close resemblances in phraseology to the writings of the Ambrosiaster. In fact, the number is surprising when it is remembered that, taken together, they would not fill three pages of Migne's *Patrology*. Dom Morin singles out such phrases as *hoc genere, nascibilitas, solitarius, ratio non admittit, non cadere in, mysterium Trinitatis, ac per hoc*. He has found this last phrase 121 times in the Commentary, and 65 times in the Questions.

Not less striking are the resemblances in teaching. Both Isaac and the Ambrosiaster teach that it is wrong

¹ *Amb.* = Migne, *Patr. Lat.* 17, 45-508. *Qu.* = *ib.* 35, 2213-2416.

² *Kirchenhistorische Anecdota*, pp. 304-308.

to use adverbs of time, place, or manner, with reference to the Son of God,—that the resurrection is given as an example.

Isaac teaches that man, and man only among God's creatures, has been made in His image. The Ambrosiaster explains that the woman was not created in the image of God, and the same thought recurs in the Questions. Such eccentric theology excited much indignation, the echo of which was heard 150 years later, when another pope, writing to Cæsarius of Arles, took occasion to condemn such views.

The formula, *tres unum sunt*, which became popular in sermons on the Creed, is applied to the Trinity by Isaac, and in Question lxxxvii. 2280 f. The Procession of the Holy Spirit is expressed in similar terms in the Exposition, the Commentary, and the Questions. He is said to proceed from the Father, and to receive from the Son.

Having proved the possibility that these writings had a common authorship, it remains to state what is known of the Jew Isaac, and the conclusions to which the internal evidence of the writings of the Ambrosiaster seem to point.

It is known that a converted Jew, Isaac by name, played a prominent part in the troubles which arose after the election of Pope Damasus. When Ursinus, the chief of the schismatic party, had been exiled to Cologne, Isaac was charged with the task of stirring up accusations against Damasus. He succeeded in bringing a capital charge against him in the Court of the Prefect. The Emperor Gratian intervened, and saved Damasus from great danger. A synod of 43 bishops was held, before which the accusers were unable to substantiate their charges. It appears that two deacons, Concordius and Callistus, were put forward as complainants, though Isaac was the moving spirit. Isaac was then banished to Spain, under penalty of death

if he should raise any further disturbance. The *Records of the Synod* of 378 refer to his denial of the faith and return to Judaism; *qui facto ad synagogam recursu celestia mysterio profanavit.*

Prof. Zahn suggests that there is a reference to him in the following comment of St. Jerome¹ on Titus iii. 9: "Audiui ego quendam de Hebraeis, qui se Romae in Christum credidisse simulabat, de genealogiis domini nostri Jesu Christi, quae scripta sunt in Matthaeo et Luca, facere quaestionem, quod videlicet a Salomone usque ad Joseph nec numero sibi nec vocabulorum aequalitate consentiant. Qui quum corda simplicium pervertisset, quasi ex adytis et oraculo deferebat quasdam, ut sibi videbatur, solutiones, quum magis debuerit iustitiam et misericordiam et dilectionem dei quaerere et post illa, si forte occurrisset, de nominibus et numeris disputare."

These words simply imply that St. Jerome had heard a Jewish Christian lecture in Rome, who had thrown off the mask of an hypocritical Christianity since he left Rome. Such apostasy was rare, and the mention of Rome leads at once to the identification of the anonymous teacher with the Jew Isaac. As an apostate he was regarded as *dead*,² and is therefore not named, but the stress laid on justice, mercy, and the love of God, in opposition to the Jew's proud disputing and unjust accusations, seems to contain a reference to the merciless injustice of the accusers of Damasus.

This argument is confirmed by the fact that the name Isaac was very rare in the West. Prof. Zahn³ has looked for it in vain in the inscriptions relating to Roman Jews.

It remains to prove from the internal evidence that the Ambrosiaster held a position similar to that of the apostate Isaac.

¹ Ed. Vallarsi, vii. 735.

² Cf. *Ignat. Smyrn.* 5, *Philad.* 6.

³ p. 316 *Berliner Gesch. d. Jud. in Rom*, i. 55.

He complained (*Amb.* 475 D, 476 A) that the custom of the Synagogue to do nothing without the advice of the elders, which had been transmitted to the Church, was no longer observed. He attributed this to the indolence of teachers, or their pride in wishing to be alone in their importance. Prof. Zahn¹ makes use of this argument to prove that he could not have been a priest. The Bible of the Ambrosiaster and the Vulgate distinguishes between *seniores*, the honoured old men, and *presbyteri*, the priests. The author suggests that the *seniores* have been deprived of the influence due to their experience through the pride of the official teachers (*doctores* = bishops and priests). Lange,² who identified the Ambrosiaster with the priest Faustinus, founded his argument on a passage in Question cxx., which is plainly part of a sermon preached at the beginning of Lent. It is very doubtful, however, whether priests had the right to preach at all in Rome during the 4th and 5th centuries. Dom Morin notes the way in which the writer speaks of "Our priests" (*Amb.* 466; *Qu.* cix. 2325), which makes it almost certain that he was a layman. Nor is it strange that a layman should take so much interest in doctrinal questions. Tychonius the Donatist, and in Rome Victorinus, the celebrated professor of rhetoric, were as eager theological disputants during that period as some laymen of our own time. As to the homily, it is quite possible that it was written for some one else. Thus St. Jerome was invited to write an Easter sermon, *Praeconium Paschale*, for a deacon Praesidius.³

The Ambrosiaster complained further that the Jewish custom of appointing masters to teach children to read had fallen into disuse. He grumbled at the way in which relief was dispensed to widows, asserting that some recipients were of bad character, and that some had husbands still

¹ p. 317. ² *Gesch. der Römischen Kirche*, Bonn, 1881, p. 600 f.

³ Morin, p. 24.

living. He traced the abuse to the negligence or culpable complicity of influential persons.

He criticised the Canon of the Mass in which Melchizedek was called "High Priest of the Most High," affirming that Christ only had a right to the title.

He brought many charges against the Roman clergy, blaming their boastfulness, *iactantiam Romanorum levitarum*, and reviewed somewhat complaisantly the ambition and worldliness of Church dignitaries, accusing them of homicide, immorality, and all sorts of crimes (*Amb.* 482 C). These were precisely the charges which were made by the accusers of Damasus. And it is noteworthy that, though he condemns light gathering of accusations against those in high place as Vicars of Christ, yet he allows murmuring against them in a just cause, and urges that there must be no hesitation in denouncing them when their blameworthiness is beyond doubt.

His intimate acquaintance with all things connected with Judaism, which has been suggested in the foregoing description of his interests, may be illustrated again and again. His opinions on Church affairs were often coloured by Jewish feeling. He showed knowledge of Jewish legends and apocryphal books. He made out that St. Paul in 1 Corinthians ii. 9 quoted the apocryphal Apocalypse of Elias, and saw in 2 Timothy iii. 8 a reference to the apocryphal books of Jannes and Mambres. On 1 Corinthians xiv. 31, he mentioned a tradition of the Synagogue which the Apostle would have us observe. In religious discussions all should be seated, the most honoured on chairs, the next on benches, the rest on mats spread on the floor.

Another interesting personal trait is the profound respect which he exhibits for Roman law, and the considerable knowledge which he shows as a jurist. He quotes by memory a constitution of Diocletian against the Manicheans, which is only known through one small collection of the end of

the 4th century. He mentions a law which forbade the practice of astrology in Rome, and the ancient Roman custom which forbade women to drink wine.¹ With reference to Novatian he recalls the principle that it is not possible to be judge and accuser in the same case.

From this evidence of a cold and critical spirit, of full acquaintance with Judaism, and of legal interests, it may surely be argued with some confidence that the unknown Ambrosiaster was the converted Jew Isaac. After his shameless apostasy his writings were circulated anonymously or under false names. Within twenty years an anonymous work, which can be identified with great probability as Question cix. (on Melchizedek) was sent to St. Jerome by a priest called Evangelus. St. Jerome answered in an aggrieved tone that he did not know whether it was his correspondent or the writer, who was unwilling to acknowledge the authorship in the desire to avoid criticism. St. Augustine² ascribed these writings to St. Hilary of Poitiers. Some writers have therefore concluded that they were written by some other Hilary. But it is more probable, as Prof. Zahn³ suggests, that the Roman booksellers sold them in Africa under a false name. In former times they used to send books which did not sell in Rome to Utica or Ilerda (*Hor. Epist.* 1, 20, 13) Zahn quotes the complaints of an African Christian of the 4th century about their avarice. During the middle ages it was usually the name of St. Ambrose which was attached to these writings, and supplied the derivation of the familiar name "the Ambrosiaster."

In conclusion we may echo Prof. Zahn's wish that some

¹ Another sidelight on the social history is given by a reference to the autopsy made on the bodies of criminals.

² *c. duas epp. Pelagianorum*, iv. 4.

³ p. 314.

⁴ *Can. Mommsen. a. E.*

one would write a large book on the materials so concisely described by Dom Morin, and ratify his convincing argument. It should prove a very interesting subject.

A. E. BURN.

APOCALYPTIC SKETCHES.

X.

THE GREAT WHITE THRONE.

REV. xx.

IN the preceding chapter we had the overthrow first of the woman, with the coming forth of the pure bride of God; next of the beast and the false prophet, his ally, before the conquering Bridegroom. In this chapter we have the overthrow of the dragon, "that old serpent the devil," followed by the appearance in heaven of "the great white throne," before which are gathered all nations for the final award of weal or woe.

We have then before us two great subjects: (1) the overthrow of Satan; (2) the general judgment. It so happens, however, that in setting forth the former of these there comes in a reference to an interval of 1,000 years, during which Satan is represented, not as yet destroyed, but bound, and cast into the abyss, after which he is to break forth again with new energy and rage, only to share at last the fate of the beast and the false prophet, which had been cast into the lake of fire.

This millennium comes in only as an episode, and scarcely even that, for it is treated merely as an incident in the victory over Satan; and there is no other reference to this precise period in any other part of the book, nor indeed in any other part of the Bible. Yet, strange to say, this exceedingly obscure and difficult passage in a corner