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A NOTE ON JOHN VII. 37-8

These verses have long been a difficulty to myself, and I expect to others also ; having come to a definite opinion on the matter, I record it in the hope that it may be of some help to others. Two translations are possible, according as one takes the words *καὶ πινέτω* ("and let him drink") with what precedes or what follows. The alternatives are well set forth by Père Lagrange in his commentary on the gospel.¹ If we take the words with what precedes, we must put a full stop after them, and then continue : "He that believeth in me, as the scripture saith, rivers of living water shall flow from his belly". With this translation, the believer himself must obviously be understood to be the source of the living water.

But if we take the two words with what follows, we must translate : "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink, even he that believeth in me. As the scripture saith, 'rivers of living water shall flow from his belly' ". With this translation, the drink is supplied by Christ, to whom the "his" refers. It is from Christ's body that the water flows. The next verse expressly says that Christ was speaking of the Spirit, which those who believed in Him were to receive. This is the rendering preferred by Lagrange, though he allows that the explanation given first in this note is probable. He refers to C. H. Turner's note in the *Journal of Theological Studies* "on the punctuation of St John vii.37-8",² and to Armitage Robinson's "The Passion of St Perpetua", in *Texts and Studies*.³

I myself was finally convinced of the second view by two formidable articles in German by Father Rahner, S.J., in *Biblica*, the large quarterly of the Biblical Institute, Rome.⁴ They are entitled "*Flumina de ventre Christi : die patristische Auslegung von Joh. vii.37-8*". But the best summary of the question seems to be that in the note by the late C. H. Turner in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, already mentioned, "on the punctuation of St John vii.37-8". His chief purpose is "to examine the early patristic evidence". "Origen", he explains, "is the great pillar of the 'received' interpretation" (p. 67). He appears to have been the earliest Christian exegete to have interpreted Jn. vii.38 of the Christian rather than of Christ,⁵ and his influence was very strong both upon Greeks and Latins (*ibid.*). "Cyril of

¹ Gabalda, Paris : pp. 214-7. I am using the 7th edition (1948).

² xxiv (1922-3), pp. 66-70.

³ 1, no. 2 (1891), p. 98 (which however Lagrange by a slip quotes as no. 3).

⁴ xxii (1941), pp. 269-302, 367-403.

⁵ Rahner, *art. cit.*, p. 273.

Alexandria *ad loc.* adopts the same punctuation and exegesis".¹ But in the West a series of writers in different countries and before A.D. 260 agree in the translation given second in this paper: Turner quotes (after two anonymous writers) Cyprian, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, and the letter of the churches of Lyons and Vienne.²

Origen's teaching is much concerned with *Gnosis*, a word meaning literally "knowledge", but used by him and others in a special and technical sense of a superior and quasi-mystical kind of knowledge, which may be compared to the higher contemplation of the Christian mystics. From the Divine Substance come inside the Divine Life three streams, Father, Word and Spirit: through the Spirit-imparting of Christ these are broken up and poured upon mankind through the revelation of the mystery hitherto hidden in God.³ In the chosen soul this Trinitarian life reaches perfection. This inner source of the water of *Gnosis* (whence the word "Gnostic") can become so strong as to burst its banks, so that the Christian Gnostic becomes himself a mystagogue to others and a source of the Spirit; and in this sense Origen understands Jn. VII.37-8, which may thus be said (if so understood) to imply his whole ascetical and theological system of Christian *Gnosis*. Christ not only requires us to drink of the spring which is Himself, but the believer who drinks likewise becomes a spring, himself overflowing to enrich others.

But Origen also connected Jn. VII.38 with Jn. XIX.34: Christ was struck, and His Body gave forth blood and water. From His side comes the water of the New Testament, of which there is also question in Jn. IV.14. And if we ask, where did Origen find the biblical passage referred to in Jn. VII.38, the answer seems to be, in Prov. V.15-16, which runs in the Hebrew:

Drink waters out of thine own cistern,
and running waters out of thine own well.
Should thy springs be dispersed abroad,
and be rivers of water in the streets?

Perhaps for "Should" it would be better to render "Let", turning the question into an exhortation. The Greek Old Testament has a somewhat different version of the last two lines:

Let not the waters from thy spring overflow,
and thy waters course through thy streets.

It will be seen that the New Testament quotation is not a close one; but that is characteristic of many New Testament quotations, which

¹ Turner, *art. cit.*, p. 67.

² In Eusebius' *Church History*, BK VI. V, sect. 22.

³ Rahner, *art. cit.*, p. 274.

sometimes (as here) bring out the sense without being quite literal. St Ambrose and St Jerome, who both drew so much on Origen, and had so much more of him to hand than we have, make this connexion between Jn. vii.38 with Prov. v.15-16 classical in Latin exegesis, and almost exclusive.¹ Père Lagrange accepts the reference to Prov. v.15, but not as entirely satisfying.

More attractive is the comparison of Christ's human Body to the spiritual Rock, the source of spiritual water gushing into eternal life, as suggested by Irenaeus and Hippolytus (Rahner, pp. 278-9, 369) with a strong foundation in St Paul (1 Cor. x.4). In 1 Peter ii.1-10, the rock is connected with milk. When the lance pierces Christ's side, the living and life-giving waters gush forth, waters prefigured in the striking of the rock by Moses (Exod. xvii ; Num. xx). Upon this exegesis the "his" of Jn. vii.38 is of course referred by Christ to Himself.

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¹ Rahner, *art cit.*, p. 282.