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# Early Medieval Evidence for 12 Homilies by Origen on the Apocalypse

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**EARLY MEDIEVAL EVIDENCE FOR TWELVE HOMILIES  
BY ORIGEN ON THE APOCALYPSE**

BY

JOSEPH F. T. KELLY

An anonymous Irish commentary on the Apocalypse,<sup>1</sup> written in Latin, survives in more than twenty manuscripts, the most important of which date to the late eighth and early ninth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The text is brief, and its exegetical method is primarily allegorical and moralising. The author usually cites a word or short phrase from the Apocalypse and then provides an almost equally brief interpretation. In the Middle Ages this work was usually attributed to Saint Jerome.

One manuscript, Bamberg Staatliche Bibliothek Patr. 102 (B.V. 18), fols. 101-110, saec. ix, contains a prologue which lists the sources used in the compilation of the commentary. This manuscript was edited by K. Hartung in 1904,<sup>3</sup> and although no other manuscript contains the prologue, A. Hamman includes it in his edition. This prologue refers to twelve Apocalypse homilies by Origen; we cite the relevant section of the prologue exactly as it is printed:

Iam nobis requirendum est, qui super hoc exposuerunt librum (= Apocalypsim); multi quidem inveniuntur auctores, tamen aliquos ex illis perferam in exemplis. Invenimus librum antiquitum nobis exploratum super hoc, qui in priscis temporibus tractatum est, tamen auctor non invenitur. Et inveniuntur XII homelie Origenis super hoc opus, inveniuntur etiam tractatus Anticonii (= Ticonii) donatistae: quamvis multa mala miscent, tamen illud, quod bonum, retineamus; verbi gratia gemma, si in luto cadat, suam non perdit decorem, sed inde abstracta in opere ponitur, ita et verba haereticorum, quamvis multa dicant mala, tamen et bona in quibusdam miscent: ergo non nobis considerata persona dicentis, sed intellectus sermonis.

Adhuc invenitur expositio super hoc volumine Primasi Affricae regionis episcopi et discipuli sancti Augustini, qui in modernis temporibus multis de istis patefecit miraculis. Sufficiat quod diximus.<sup>4</sup>

No homilies of Origen on the Apocalypse are known to exist.<sup>5</sup> Nor are there any references to such anywhere but in this prologue. Nor is there any record of such an Origenian pseudepigraphon. In 1911 C. Dio-

bouniotis and A. von Harnack edited some scholia on the Apocalypse which they considered to be Origen's,<sup>6</sup> but the authenticity of these scholia is not relevant here because they cannot be the work referred to in the prologue. Scholia are simply not homilies, and the forms are sufficiently diverse so that confusion of the two is almost impossible. In addition, the work edited by Diobouniotis and Harnack is in Greek, which the Early Medieval Irish, with some few exceptions, did not read.<sup>7</sup> This Apocalypse commentary manifests no knowledge of Greek on the part of its author; indeed, his Latin is awkward in places.

The existence of twelve homilies on the Apocalypse and attributed to Origen is thus known solely from this prologue. This raises three questions about such homilies: 1) did they actually exist? 2) could such a collection survive only in an Early Medieval Irish circle and nowhere else? 3) are the homilies authentic or pseudepigraphal?

The first step in determining whether such an Origenian work or pseudepigraphon existed is to examine how reliable is the prologue's identification of the commentary's sources. The relation of the prologue to the commentary is, in Bernhard Bischoff's words, "questionable,"<sup>8</sup> because of the reference to Primasius who wrote *in modernis temporibus*, an implication that the prologue and commentary date to the sixth or early seventh century. Friedrich Stegmüller accepted this and dated the commentary and prologue *circa* 600.<sup>9</sup> Robert McNally rejected it and dated the Irish commentary to the mid-eighth century and the prologue to the ninth century, that is, the date of the Bamberg manuscript.<sup>10</sup> In a recent article, the present writer argued that the prologue can also date to the mid- or late-eighth century, and that the phrase *in modernis temporibus* does not necessarily imply that the prologue is contemporary with Primasius.<sup>11</sup> But whether or not the prologue was part of the original work or whether it can be associated with the commentary before the date of the Bamberg manuscript does not affect the question of the Origenian work. The author of the prologue claimed to know the sources of the commentary. If the same person wrote both, then he definitely knew them. If not, the author of the prologue could still have determined the sources of the commentary by analysing the work, and if he knew of twelve Apocalypse homilies attributed to Origen and he found these used in the commentary, his observations would still be reliable. The way to determine his reliability is to see if he correctly identified the other, verifiable, sources.

Besides Origen, two authors are named, Tyconius and Primasius. A comparison of the Irish commentary with their Apocalypse commentaries shows that the two African writers were indeed sources for the later writer,<sup>12</sup> so in these cases the prologue is correct.

The third source is anonymous, a *liber antiquitus*<sup>13</sup> written *in priscis temporibus*. Can this be identified?

The sources are listed in this order: *liber antiquitus*, Origen, Tyconius, and Primasius. The last three are in chronological order, which implies that the author of the prologue considered the *liber antiquitus* to antedate the other three. This was Hartung's opinion, and he suggested Hippolytus as the anonymous autor, a suggestion adopted by Stegmüller.<sup>14</sup> The famous list of Hippolytus' works on the base of his statue includes an *apologia pro apocalypsi*,<sup>15</sup> and Hippolytus did—just barely—antedate Origen. This *apologia* does not, however, survive in the Greek original, nor does it survive in any translations, nor is there any record of its ever having been available in Latin.

An attribution to Hippolytus encounters the immediate hurdle that few Early Medieval Irish writers could read Greek (as noted above), and this writer does nothing to make us think that he is an exception. It is possible that Hippolytus' work was available in a Latin translation, but this is piling hypothesis upon hypothesis: the Irish exegete used a now non-extant Greek work in a now non-extant Latin translation for which there is absolutely no record in Antiquity or the Middle Ages. The answer should be sought elsewhere.

There is another Apocalypse commentary upon which the Irish exegete could have drawn, that of Victorinus of Pettau († ca. 304), a commentary which survived in two forms, Victorinus' original and a recension made by Jerome.<sup>16</sup> Parts of this commentary found their way into Tyconius' work and thus became known to Medieval writers through the Donatist intermediary. There are passages in it which are not repeated in Tyconius' (or Primasius') work but which parallel passages in the Irish commentary and these prove that Victorinus' commentary is the anonymous *liber antiquitus*. For example, both associate the *septem tonitrua* of Apocalypse 10:3 with the gifts of the Spirit, and both associate the second angel of 14:8 with preaching.<sup>17</sup> The parallel passages appear in both Victorinus' original and the Hieronymian recension. [My concern here is to prove the Victorinus' commentary is the *liber antiquitus*; later I shall suggest which version of Victorinus' work the Irish exegete knew.]

Yet this identification seems to create a problem. The Irish exegete cited his sources in this order: anonymous author *in priscis temporibus*, Origen, Tyconius, and Primasius; as noted earlier, the last three names imply that the order is chronological. If, however, Victorinus is the anonymous author, the chronological sequence is broken because he died a half-century after Origen, and Jerome died more than a century after Victorinus. But this problem is only an apparent one. The breaking of the chronological sequence is evident only to those who know the name of the anonymous author, which the Irish exegete did not. He had just the book, and therefore he had to judge the age or era of the author solely by the book's contents, in much the way that contemporary New Testament exegetes try to date the gospels and the Catholic epistles. The contents of the book convinced him that its author lived *in priscis temporibus* before Origen. What might those contents have been?

The parallel passages between the Irish and Victorine commentaries prove that the latter was a source for the former, but they do not prove which version of Victorinus was available. I suggest that the Irish writer used the original version. Origen opposed chiliastic exegesis, and it is highly unlikely that any Apocalypse homilies circulating under his name would have contained that type of exegesis. Victorinus, on the other hand, favored it, as a reading of his original commentary proves. If the Irish exegete knew the original form of the commentary but did not know the author's name, he would naturally think that these outdated sentiments had originated in an age earlier than Origen. This would not, however, have been his conclusion if he knew the Hieronymian recension. Jerome modified Victorinus' commentary to bring it into the mainstream of contemporary Christian thinking; witness, for example, his comments on Apocalypse 20:3: "Nam *mille annorum* regnum non arbitrator esse terrenum."<sup>18</sup> Such an updated work which occasionally bore the obvious marks of being a recension simply could not have been written *in priscis temporibus*.

This means that the apparent break in the chronological sequence of the authors is actually a quite logical deduction on the part of the Irish exegete. He had before him four books, the commentaries of Tyconius and Primasius, the (supposed) homilies of Origen, and a book by an anonymous author whom we now know to be Victorinus. He examined the contents of the anonymous book and concluded that the author, an advocate of chiliasm, must have lived before Origen. Therefore, when the Irish exegete listed the books, he listed them in the evident

chronological order. This means that the author of the prologue did indeed know the sources of the commentary, and that he can be considered reliable when he tells us that there were twelve homilies attributed to Origen circulating in the Early Middle Ages.

Verification of the prologue's list of the sources for the commentary leads to the second question: is it possible for an otherwise unknown Origenian work or pseudepigraphon to have survived in Early Medieval Irish circles and nowhere else?

The answer is Yes. A good example is a text of Fortunatianus of Aquileia which survives solely in a ninth-century Irish primer on the gospels.<sup>19</sup> The only known Latin rendering of the Book of Jubilees survives from the Irish monastery of Bobbio in the seventh century.<sup>20</sup> Of almost equal importance, there are several patristic works which are known from other than Irish circles, but for which Irish manuscripts are major, if not the most important, witnesses. These include Pelagius' *Expositiones* on the Pauline epistles, the Latin version of Theodore of Mopsuestia's commentary on the psalms, and Gregory the Great's commentary on Job. There is thus no *a priori* reason why an Origenian work or pseudepigraphon could not have survived in an Irish circle while being lost elsewhere.

We come now to the last and the major question: were these twelve homilies by Origen? To answer it, one would have to reconstruct at least a small part of the work for analysis, and that cannot be done at this time. One could first eliminate all the passages taken from Victorinus, Tyconius, and Primasius. One could next eliminate passages from the Irish exegetical tradition by comparing this commentary with other Hiberno-Latin ones, including the only other extant Irish Apocalypse commentary.<sup>21</sup> But there would be no guarantee that the surviving material derived exclusively from the homilies.

The commentary's style complicates matters. The excerpts and interpretations are very brief. For example:

(13:2) *Ista bestia rex qui primus erit in solatio Antichristi. Bestia illa similis pardo diversitas haereticorum intellegitur; pedes sicut ursi propter fortitudinem. (13:3) Unum de capitibus unum de regibus; quasi occisum quia in suo loco alius intraturus est.*<sup>22</sup>

Reconstructing homilies from such brief phrases would be virtually impossible, and so there is no way to analyse the material for Origen's style or thought. We must concede that at this time there is no way to answer the question of authenticity.

This concession is, of course, a disappointment, but, on the other hand, we have demonstrated that at the least an Origenian pseudepigraphon on the Apocalypse existed in the Early Middle Ages, and that there is the real possibility of an authentic work. Perhaps the eternal hope of historians, evidence yet to be discovered, will answer the question. In the meantime, I pass along an interesting suggestion made to me about this text by Dr. W. H. C. Frend, that homilies by Origen on the Apocalypse may lie behind the comments on that biblical book made by Dionysius of Alexandria and preserved by Eusebius.<sup>23</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Edited by G LoMenzo Rapisarda, *Incerti Auctoris Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, Miscellanea di Studi di letteratura Cristiana Antica 16 (Catania 1967), reprinted in *Patrologiae Latinae Supplementum*, ed A Hamman (Paris 1970) 4, 1850-1863 [References will be to Hamman's reprinting = PLS ] For the Irish character of the work, cf Bernhard Bischoff, *Wendepunkte in der Geschichte der lateinischen Exegese im Frühmittelalter*, *Mittelalterliche Studien* (Stuttgart 1966) 1, 268

<sup>2</sup> Rapisarda discussed the manuscripts in vol 15 of the same series for which he edited the text, pp 119-140, his discussion should not be used without consulting a later work, Bernard Lambert, *Bibliotheca Hieronymiana Manuscripta*, *Instrumenta Patristica* 4 (Turnhout 1970) 3B, 396-398, no 491 Neither of these authors includes a Karlsruhe manuscript mentioned by Robert McNally, *Isidoriana*, *Theological Studies* 20 (1959) 437, n 2

<sup>3</sup> *Ein Traktat zur Apokalypse des Apostels Johannes* (Bamberg 1904)

<sup>4</sup> PLS 4, 1851

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster, Md 1964) 2, 45-51, Berthold Altaner and Alfred Stuber, *Patrologie* (Freiburg 1966) 201-203 I also wish to thank the Rt Rev Dr R P C Hanson for discussing the range of Origen's works with me

<sup>6</sup> *Scholienkommentar zur Apokalypse Johannis* Texte und Untersuchungen 38, 3 (Leipzig 1911)

<sup>7</sup> Robert E McNally, 'The 'Tres Linguae Sacrae' in Early Irish Biblical Exegesis, *Theological Studies* 19 (1958) 395-403, Walter Berschin, Griechisches bei Iren, in *Die Iren und Europa im fruheren Mittelalter*, ed Heinz Lowe (Stuttgart 1982) 1, 501-510

<sup>8</sup> Bischoff, *Wendepunkte*, 268

<sup>9</sup> *Repertorium Biblicum Medii Aevi* (Madrid 1951) 3, 491, no 5271, in a supplementary volume (1977) 9, 268, the editions are updated and more manuscripts are listed, but no change is suggested for the date

<sup>10</sup> Isidorian Pseudepigrapha in the Early Middle Ages, in *Isidoriana*, ed M Diaz y Diaz (Leon 1961) 311-312

<sup>11</sup> Bede and the Irish Exegetical Tradition on the Apocalypse, *Revue Bénédictine* 92 (1982) 393-406

<sup>12</sup> Primasius' work is in *Patrologia Latina* 68, 793-936 For the Irish writer's use of Primasius, compare PL 68, 870D and PLS 4, 1859 For Tyconius, cf Francesco Lo Bue, *The Turin Fragments of Tyconius' Commentary on Revelation*, *Texts and Studies*, n s 7

(Cambridge 1963). Lo Bue, however, refrains from equating these fragments exactly with the original of Tyconius' text. For the Irish writer's use of Tyconius, compare Lo Bue, 178-180, with PLS 4, 1859.

<sup>13</sup> I have found no instance of *antiquitus* as an adjective, but there can be no doubt that the author of the prologue understood it to be such since he used the phrase *invenimus librum antiquitum nobis exploratum super hoc*. Had *antiquitus* been intended as a noun, it would have been in the genitive case. Therefore I will cite the phrase as the Medieval author used it.

<sup>14</sup> Hartung, *Ein Traktat*, p. vii; Stegmüller, *Repertorium* 3, 491, no. 5271.

<sup>15</sup> Quasten, *Patrology* 2, 197; Altaner-Stuiber, *Patrologie*, 167.

<sup>16</sup> Victorinus' original and the Hieronymian recension are edited by J. Haussleiter in *Victorini Episcopi Petavionensis Opera*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 49 (Vienna 1916) 11-154.

<sup>17</sup> CSEL 49, 90-91 and PLS 4, 1858; CSEL 49, 130-131 and PLS 4, 1860.

<sup>18</sup> CSEL 49, 145

<sup>19</sup> Bischoff, *Wendepunkte*, 242-243. Text of Fortunatianus edited by Bischoff in *Corpus Christianorum series latina* 9 (Turnhout 1957) 366.

<sup>20</sup> Martin McNamara, *The Apocrypha in the Irish Church* (Dublin 1975) 20-21.

<sup>21</sup> The commentary is part of a larger work; cf. Bischoff, *Wendepunkte*, 231-236.

<sup>22</sup> PLS 4, 1860.

<sup>23</sup> *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7, 24-25, ed. E. Schwartz, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller* 9 (Leipzig 1908) 684-700.

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