IS THERE AN ANTIOCHENE READING OF ISAIAH?

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1. Introduction

Much has been written on Antioch, the city founded by Seleucus on the river Orontes, second only to Alexandria in importance for the Jewish community in the Hellenistic and Roman period, the first place where the followers of Jesus were called ‘Christians’ (Acts 11:26). The glory of this city, first as a focus of Hellenism and later as a pole of expansion of early Christianity is paramount. However, in the framework of the history of the biblical text, when asking for the Antiochene or Lucianic reading, we do not refer only to the city, but to the district of the διοίκησις with an ecclesiastical jurisdiction which includes the whole school of the Antiochene Fathers: Eusebius of Emesa, Diodore of Tarsus, Eustathius, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and John Chrysostom.

It is my purpose in this contribution to focus on the reading of Isaiah in this geographical area which produced some of the most brilliant and original commentators and exegeses of the Septuagint. After some remarks on the Scriptures as read by the Antiochene Fathers, I will concentrate on the analysis of the Antiochene text commonly used in the public reading of the Bible to conclude with the kind of exegesis and hermeneutics carried out by the authors living in this district, the subject of some relevant monographs written over the last decades.

* May these notes contribute to honour Arie van der Kooij, an excellent and appreciated scholar, and a loyal friend since our first meeting, many years ago, when we both were young and postgraduate students.

† See the recent monograph of Robert C. Hill, Reading the Old Testament in Antioch (Bible in Ancient Christianity 5; Leiden, 2005); Wayne A. Meeks and Robert L. Wilken, Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era (SBL.SBibSt 13; Missoula, 1978), and especially Andrée-Jean Festugiére, Antioche païenne et chrétienne. Libanios, Chrysostome et les moines de Syrie (Paris, 1959).
At the level of the biblical canon it is worth emphasizing the priority given by the Antiochene Fathers to the Old Testament as a Christian collection of Jewish Books, Christianized mainly through the new hermeneutics. As John Chrysostom states: ‘While the books are from them, the treasure of the books now belongs to us; if the text is from them, both text and meaning belong to us.’ The priority of the Old Testament is one of the characteristics of the exegesis of Theodoret, who dedicates the largest part of his commentaries to the books of the Hebrew Scriptures in Greek, those inspired if obscure Scriptures, as stated in Isa 29:11: ‘and all these things shall be to you as the words of this sealed book’. Another feature of the Antiochene reading is the primacy of the literal, historical sense, while emphasizing the coherence and συμφωνία in the interpretation of the whole Scripture, the Old and New Testament.

It can be deduced from the biblical books quoted in their commentaries, that the local canon of Antioch included 4 Esdras according to the Vulgate, whose chapters 3–14 contain the Apocalypse of Ezra, a Jewish writing of the first or second century CE. It is generally recognized that there was a Semitic original of this Apocalypse lying behind the lost Greek text. The seventh vision (Chapter 14) gives an extra-biblical account of the loss of the Jewish Scriptures under Manasseh and their recomposition by Ezra. Diodore quotes the story to support his view that the Psalms had to be collected anew and that their titles were not original. Theodoret cites it to defend the inclusion in the canon of the Song of Songs. Besides the Apocalypse of Ezra, the Antiochene canon includes some of the deuterocanonical and apocryphal/pseudepigraphic books such as Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch (but not the Epistle of Jeremiah) and 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, and Judith, while any form of the Book of Esther was, apparently, missing. Theodoret refers also, although with less frequency, to 1 and 2 Esdras and to 3 Maccabees. His text of Daniel (in the version of Theodotion) comprises chapters 1–12 plus verse 1 of Bel and the Dragon, but not Susanna, although the story is widely known to the Antiochenes.

The Antiochene Fathers rely on the local form of the Septuagint and do not know the Hebrew, though they are the first Christians to recognize

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2 Sermon 2 to Genesis (SC 433.188.1).
3 Hill, Reading the Old Testament, pp. 23–25.