CHAPTER 18

Jerome: Gethsemane—An Incident of Propatheia

In his commentary on Matthew, Book 4, Jerome addresses the relevant passage in chapter 26:36–46.¹ Two major concerns can be gleaned from his interpretation. First, Jesus did not suffer from any of the passions, including fear. The philosophical concept of passions is a fundamental assumption in his interpretation. Second, Jesus’ sorrow was purely altruistic. Cultural parameters on death and fear resonate in both these concerns. Let us see how this unfolds in Jerome’s comments.

18.1 Altruistic Agony

Jerome’s comment on the narrative introduction in Matt 26:36 is telling. Jesus asks his disciples to await his return “while the Lord prayed alone for everyone (pro cunctis).” Jesus did not pray out of agony for his own destiny but out of his concern for everybody. Accordingly, the scene is portrayed as an intercession and the prayer is seen as anticipating the cross, which, of course, paves the way for an altruistic interpretation. The prayer becomes an intercession anticipating the purpose of his suffering on the cross: “he prays for all, just as also he suffers for all (solus orat pro omnibus sicut et solus patitur pro universis, 26:43).” In his tractate Against the Pelagians, Jerome says that the drops of blood gushed forth (guttae sanguinis) in the garden (Pelag. 2.16),² and that these drops of blood were to be shed in full in the passion (totum erat in passione fusurus). The mentioning of blood thus bridges Gethsemane and Golgotha. Jerome compares Jesus’ agony to Jonah, who sorrowfully prayed for Nineveh. This brings to mind a passage like Matt 23:37–38 where Jesus bemoans Jerusalem (cf. Luke 19:41),³ although Jerome does not bring that out explicitly. From his exposition, it is nonetheless clear that Jerome combines such a passage with the agony in the garden. Especially in Luke’s Gospel, the prayers of Jesus are staged as

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¹ The Latin text is CCSL 77:253–57; the English translation is St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew (tr. Thomas P. Scheck, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).
² CCSL 80:75–25–27.
³ It is, of course, highly relevant to note that according to Luke 19:41 Jesus cried over Jerusalem, which forms a link to the emotional agony in Gethsemane, particularly as it is fashioned in the longer Lukan version.
intercessions (Luke 13:8–9; 22:32; 23:34), though the last passage is a later addition. Interpreting Gethsemane in terms of intercession falls into this Lukan pattern.

Jesus’ intercessory prayer in Gethsemane is “on account of the most wretched Judas, and the falling-away of the apostles, who were scandalized, and the rejection of the people of the Jews, and the overturning of pitiful Jerusalem” (26:37). This interpretation comes to Jerome not only through contemplating the woes of Jerusalem, but also from considering the meaning of “unto death” (ἕως θανάτου, Matt 26:38). He achieves this by drawing on Jonah 43, where the prophet says: λελύπημαι ἕως θανάτου. To Jerome, Jonah prefigures Christ, so Jonah’s sorrow anticipates Christ’s agony in Gethsemane and provides a helping hand in understanding what caused the sorrowful prayer. Jonah’s emotional outburst for the withering bush is taken as his concern for his “dwelling place (tabernaculum suum),” which he was unwilling to see perish. Jesus is likewise concerned for his “dwelling place,” which to him was Jerusalem and the Jews. Like Jonah, Jesus was not sorrowful “on account of death, but even to death, (non propter mortem sed usque as mortem) until he delivers his apostles by his Passion.” Jerome’s interpretation of the preposition is telling. Jesus was not concerned about his impending death, but about being able to complete through his death what he had been sent to achieve.

In this way, Jerome removes from Jesus’ words in Matt 26:38 any concern about impending death. The preposition ἕως is only a reference to time, “until his death.” Jesus remained sorrowful until his death had accomplished what his intercessory prayer was about, the salvation of humankind. The cup prayer is to be interpreted accordingly, says Jerome. It is not uttered out of agony about self but is intimately connected with his death for the benefit of others. Jerome makes the point that Jesus does not mention “the cup,” but rather “this cup (τὸ ποτήριον τοῦτο), “that is, the one belonging to the people of the Jews.” The level of sophistication is certainly heightened, as this demonstrative is now brought into the discussion. We have seen above that Origen made the same observation, but with a notably different outcome.

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5 The preposition triggered an early discussion and Jerome was certainly not alone in his interpretation; see also Origen, Comm. Matt. 90 (GCS 38:1.207); Hilary of Poitiers, In Matthaeum 31.5 (SC 258:230–32).
6 Chapter 14 of the present study.