CHAPTER NINE

JUDAISM, AUGUSTINE AND POPE BENEDICT XVI ON THE PLURALITY OF OPINIONS

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For reasons that will not be immediately obvious to the reader, Johannes van Oort is equally fascinated by all three parties mentioned in the title. He has been involved in Augustine’s alleged Jewish sources since, in his dissertation, he proposed an influence of the Jewish-Christian Pseudoclementines upon Augustine. One can hardly hope to match van Oort’s subsequent impressive series of studies on the Jewish elements in Augustine. Van Oort’s appreciation of pope Benedict XVI is perhaps harder to explain. An ecumenical approach to protestantism is hardly pope Benedict’s daily concern. His former fellow student Cardinal Kasper seems more the one steering that wheel, with pope Benedict handling the brakes. I guess that pope Benedict’s conviction that Augustine is not just an antiquated source of knowledge but a highly relevant guide for modern man, is what fascinates van Oort. Even in his painstaking historical research, van Oort has always searched after the relevance of Augustine for problems and challenges of our time. It seems appropriate then, to deal with the issue of plurality of opinion in these three parties. Without suggesting in the least a direct historical influence between the Jewish sources to be treated presently, and Augustine, I am convinced of

a profound similarity in outlook. After dealing with both Judaism and Augustine, I will confront the results with a modern thinker on the same topic, the theologian Joseph Ratzinger.4

1. Jewish perspectives on plurality of opinions

The sources in the Talmud dealing with plurality of opinions are quoted so often that one may well hesitate to quote them once more. Still, their significance is not so easy to assess. The story of the Tannaitic rabbi Joshua in debate with his contemporary rabbi Eliezer (2d century CE),5 the two most important pupils of rabban Johanan ben Zakkai, is often told to prove the rabbinic predilection for debate and differences of opinion. Before we relate the long but fascinating story it is perhaps necessary to consider what its aims were. It can hardly be meant as a factual account of things that happened as described. In addition, we know that quite a few Jewish groups have barely left a trace in the whole of Rabbinic literature, at least not in a positive sense: (Jewish) Christians of different shades, Samaritans, Gnostics, Sadducees, Essenes, to mention only the most important ones. It is obvious that rabbinic literature has narrowed down Jewish tradition in the first centuries of the common era, by excluding literature written in Greek, such as Philo, by rejecting or assimilating into Talmud and midrash stories that we can find more extensively in pseudepigrapha of Jewish origin, but preserved and here and there Christianized by the Church(es). The formation of the Biblical canon itself is a testimony to that consolidation, both on the Jewish and on the Christian side.6 Having said this, our task remains to assess what kind of pluralism the story wants to convey. Here and there we will interrupt the story for some commentary:

(There is an oven which R. Eliezer declared clean and the sages unclean).

It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward all arguments of the world and they were not accepted. Then he said: ‘Let this carob-tree prove that the halakha prevails as I state,’ and the carob was (miraculously) uprooted to a distance of one hundred cubits, and according to others

4 I switch from Benedict XVI to Joseph Ratzinger to express the level of a free theological exchange.