CHAPTER 26

On “Rotten Stones” and a Couple of Other Marginalia in the Shepherd of Hermas

Joseph Verheyden

1 Introduction

Michael Holmes loves doing textual criticism, and he loves the Apostolic Fathers. At least, I guess that is what one may conclude from browsing through his bibliography.¹ The present essay wishes to offer a small contribution on the second of these two areas of research, more specifically on Hermas’ vocabulary and phraseology. As is well known, certain aspects—the Semitisms and Latinisms—have received some attention already in the past.² I will not come back to these. Instead, I would like to discuss a couple of selected cases of, what are in my opinion, remarkable words and phrases that can be found in the work and somehow are representative of it. The selection was made with no other criterion or rationale in mind than to allow for some variety in the cases listed here. So, all “marginalia” indeed.

2 “Rotten Stones”

Hermas is famous, or rather notorious, among modern scholars for its seemingly endless explanations and “boring” repetitions.³ Such judgements are certainly not altogether incorrect, but it must also be noted that every now and then the repetition is made perhaps a bit more bearable by the presence of a

³ I will use Hermas for referring to the work as a whole and Hermas for the character by that name.
rather uncommon or unexpected word or phrase. One such case can be found in S 9/82.2, and again right after that, in 9/83.4. The construction of the tower is suddenly halted, even though the work is not finished. It naturally provokes Hermas to ask the Shepherd for the reason. He is told that first the Lord has to come and examine the work and the quality of the stones that have been used, in order to replace such stones that are found to be “defective”: ἵνα ἐάν τινες λίθοι σαπροὶ εὑρεθῶσιν, ἄλλαξῃ αὐτοὺς (82.2). Upon inspection it turns out that seven sorts of stones are disqualified. They are listed one by one in 83.4 and are then all subsumed under this one same heading:

αὗται ἦσαν αἱ ποικιλίαι τῶν λίθων τῶν σαπρῶν εὑρεθέντων έις τὴν οἰκοδομήν.

these were the various kinds of defective stones found in the building.5

The motif of the inspection and classification of the stones used for the construction had been dealt with already at great length in V 3/10–15; it will be further developed in S 9/84–86, and briefly picked up once more in S 9/103.6 The various lists of the disqualified stones are not fully identical. That of S 9/83.4 runs as follows: stones that turn black as soot when struck, become rough, develop cracks, are too short, are neither white nor black, become uneven so

4 V, M, S refer to the three main parts of the work (Visions, Mandates, Similitudes), but in order not to burden the references by each time giving the double system that is still in use, I first identify the chapter within that part in a general way, while using the continuous numbering for the more specific reference: S 9/82.2 = ninth Similitude, chapter 82.2.

5 English translations of Hermas are from Lightfoot-Harmer-Holmes (L-H-H), unless otherwise indicated. For other translations, see Fransciscus Xaverius Funk, Patres Apostolici, 2 (Tübingen: Laupp, 1901); Auguste Lelong, Les Pères apostoliques, 4 (Paris: Picard, 1912); Kirsopp Lake, The Apostolic Fathers (2 vols.; LCL; London: Heinemann; New York: Macmillan, 1913); Martin Dibelius, Der Hirt des Hermas (HNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1923); Robert Joly, Hermas le Pasteur (sc 53; Paris: Cerf, 1958); Norbert Brox, Der Hirt des Hermas (kav 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991); Martin Leutzsch, Hirt des Hermas (SUC 3; Darmstadt: WBG, 1998); Carolyn Osiek, Shepherd of Hermas (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Bart D. Ehrman, The Apostolic Fathers (2 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).


6 On the first of these passages, see esp. Norbert Brox, “Die weggeworfenen Steine im Pastor Hermae Vis 111,7,5,” ZNW 80 (1989): 130–133.