Chapter 11

Approaching the ‘Spiritual Gospel’: Nonnus as Interpreter of John

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We may therefore make bold to say that the Gospels are the first fruits of all the Scriptures, but that of the Gospels that of John is the first fruits. No one can apprehend the meaning of it except he have lain on Jesus’ breast and received from Jesus Mary to be his mother also.

Origen, Commentary on the Gospel of John 1.6 (ANF IX, 300)

1 ‘In the Beginning was...’

In the first part of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Faust, considered by many to be one of the most famous and widely read works of German literature, the reader cannot remain completely indifferent to one of the most fascinating scenes of the whole tragic play, when the protagonist, in his quest for the light of Revelation—which, according to him, shines in no other writings as significantly as in the New Testament—begins immediately an accurate translation of the Gospel of John:

Geschrieben steht: ‘Im Anfang war das Wort!’
Hier stock’ ich schon! Wer hilft mir weiter fort?
Ich kann das Wort so hoch unmöglich schätzen,
Ich muß es anders übersetzen,
Wenn ich vom Geiste recht erleuchtet bin.
Geschrieben steht: Im Anfang war der Sinn.
Bedenke wohl die erste Zeile,
Daß deine Feder sich nicht übereile!
Ist es der Sinn, der alles wirkt und schafft?
Es sollte stehn: Im Anfang war die Kraft!
Doch, auch indem ich dieses niederschreibe,
As soon as Faust opens the Gospel to translate the first words, he runs into a serious difficulty: how to translate the incipit of John’s Gospel (‘In the beginning was the Word’), without misunderstanding the deep and true meaning of its context? How is it possible to focus on such a sophisticated concept for human comprehension by using only a simple written expression? In Faust’s view a doubt immediately arises: is it true that everything was accomplished by God through his word? Or should we think that everything was created by God through his thought, or even better, through his divine power? None of these words sounds appropriate in Faust’s perspective and his last translation suggests: ‘In the beginning was the Deed’. The crucial issue, posed by him, derives from the Greek word λόγος, used for the indwelling logic, or rational order of things, but it also refers to the figure of Wisdom from the Hebrew scriptures. The prologue of John deals with three different ways of understanding the power of God’s ‘Word’: creation, incarnation, and the communication of the ‘good news’ of the Gospel (1:1–14).

To find in any other Western European language a possible term, able to translate the Greek word λόγος, is extremely difficult. The richness of its meaning and its semantic spectrum are so wide as to leave disoriented even a qualified scholar who possesses a high level of competence in the ancient Greek language. As we can note, for everyone who begins a translation from the Greek, the term λόγος represents one of the most complicated and serious problems to be dealt with. Faust’s solutions are neither appropriate nor useful for the translation of the Greek word: each of the four words chosen by him (‘Word’, ‘Thought’, ‘Power’, ‘Deed’) has a vague point in common with λόγος, and none of them covers all its semantic ground. The final choice seems to be a free and personal translation of the general meaning of the Johannine text, far from a precise interpretation. The German word Tat appears as a reflection of Faust’s ideals and expectations, rather than the result of a highly ponderating analysis of the Greek term, derived from the study of its meaning within the Johannine context.

What is interesting about Faust’s episode is that in his difficulty he walks scholars through a reading of the Fourth Gospel, provoking in them the same deep disorientation he feels. Why does this happen? The scholar who decides to approach the Fourth Gospel will be not completely satisfied if he does not first choose to engage with the cultural, literary, social and historical background in which the Gospel of John was composed. The interpretation of its words or concepts must be based on a critical and doctrinal exegesis, where

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1 I quote from the edition by Trunz (1999).