Chapter 28

Nonnus and Prophecy: Between ‘Pagan’ and ‘Christian’ Voices

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Introduction

In his two great poems Nonnus offers many opportunities to compare pagan and Christian systems and to explore the extent of their common ground, or rather the common ground which Nonnus’ literary treatments are prepared to accord them. The one I shall focus on in this chapter is prophecy and its various aspects: anticipations and foreshadowings, prefigurations, portents, oracles and predictions. The subject seems a particularly important one because, while it provides the opportunity for close focus on aspects of diction, narrative technique, and so on, what is at stake is no less than pagan and Christian expositions of the notions of futurity, of fate, of a divine plan for the world, in short, of the destiny of the cosmos. And precisely because Nonnus’ idiom remains so similar in the two poems, we are encouraged to reflect on questions which are currently at the heart of Nonnian scholarship. If we discover shared features in their conception of prophecy, should we attribute this to a late antique environment of conscious or unconscious syncretism, of shared cultural patterns, or might we accommodate it in other frameworks which have been proposed for the interpretation of the poems—for instance, Livrea’s notion that the Dionysiaca was designed, by a Christian author, to demonstrate that paganism anticipated some aspects of Christianity avant la lettre; or that of Kontrastimitation, which suggests that Christianity appropriated matter from paganism in order to deprive the latter of its power?1

The place to begin is the obvious fact that both poems have long literary histories behind them which have heavily influenced their attitudes to the future. Behind the Dionysiaca stand the classic works of paganism, now consecrated and canonised in Greek paideia—the Iliad, a long war with a fated outcome; the Orphic poems (which provide the background for the theogonies, the generation of proto-Dionysus and his successor, and a ‘soteriological’ function for the latter; perhaps also the role of prophecy in guaranteeing a

new divine regime); and depictions of Delphi, especially in Euripides’ Ion and the Iphigenia in Tauris, and Callimachus’ hymns. Possibly relevant, too, is the Aeneid, insofar as the Dionysiaca has a double teleology, not only anticipating, and then realising, the various facets of Dionysus and his cult, but also looking further forward to the coming of the Romans and the establishment of their kingship and justice and especially the law school at Berytus. On the other hand, behind the Paraphrasis, and perhaps even more fundamental to it because of the very nature of a paraphrase, is a Gospel tradition that sees Jesus’ career as the fulfilment of the predictions of scriptural prophets, which are now read precisely as long-distance prophets,2 and as the precursor to a further series of predestined eschatological events.

The Paraphrasis is thus to a large extent constrained by the Gospel which underpins it. There are constant back-references to the Old Testament, some in the form of ‘fulfilment citations’ which allude to a passage of scripture à propos of what is presumed to be its realisation in the present, and further prophecies by John and by Jesus of his imminent fate and of the eschatological crisis that is to come. The Dionysiaca—a poem which massively expands the Homeric devices of prolepsis (and to a lesser extent analepsis) to incorporate universal history into a more restricted framework—is altogether more elaborate. Here, Nonnus has deployed a number of overlapping techniques for anticipating the future as well as incorporating the past.


The Dionysiaca (and the Paraphrasis)

Following its epic models, the Dionysiaca anticipates both events within the time-frame of the poem and those external to it. Internal prolepses anticipate the highlights of Dionysus’ family history, starting with Cadmus’ marriage (3.88–89, 97–122) and the foundation of Thebes (2.690–691, 4.304–305, 348–349), the birth of his precursor Zagreus from Zeus’ union with Persephone (6.15–103), and his own birth (7.141–155, 201–202, 318–343, 8.6–33), followed by the emergence of his cult, his specialisms (viticulture, 12.113; the wine-press, 12.328–330; irrigation systems for the vine, 11.164–166) and associates (Ampelus, 11.91–93, 12.101–102, 145–171; Telete, 16.399–402). Once Dionysus has been well and truly born, the next task is to get him to win the Indian War, so the next main series of anticipations concerns that victory (14.407, 18.312, 25.361–367, 26.3, 30.294–295, 36.413–416, 38.15–45, 62–63, 39.107). In light of the significance attached to the births of the first two Dionysi, it is passingly curious that the birth of the