Chapter 9

Pentecost Homilies and Late-Antique Christian Exegesis

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1 Introduction

Divergent pragmatics are responsible for the divergent character of late-antique Christian homiletic texts and late-antique Christian exegetical literature as that literature is attested in genres such as commentaries and Questions-and-Answers. Nevertheless dogmatic and pastoral issues do occur in exegetical writings and, vice versa, exegetical motifs and decisions are important for homiletic texts. In a narrow sense, exegetical efforts in late-antique Christian literature deal not with the general meaning but with the particular wording of a biblical text in explaining distinct terms, threatening offenses, and counterbalancing seemingly contradicting biblical texts. Concerning exegetical literature on Acts 2, however, Kenneth Bruce Welliver’s statement is correct: “we discover very few expositions of Acts 2 itself.” In a broader sense, exegetical observations help underline dogmatic, spiritual, and moral points important for homilists as well as the exegete who aims to serve not only scholarly but also ecclesiastical necessities.

The authors that will concern us are, in the Greek-speaking East, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Severian of Gabala, Ps-Chrysostom, Proclus of Constantinople, and Basil of Seleucia;

4 According to Edward Yarnold, Cyril of Jerusalem, The Early Church Fathers (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 44, it was Cyril who made extensive use of the sacred sites connected with each feast.
in the West they are Maximus of Turin, Ps-Ambrose, Augustine,\(^5\) Leo the Great, Peter Chrysologus, Eusebius Gallicanus, and Caesarius of Arles.\(^6\)

World-structuring terms such as those for quantity, both specific late-antique numbers (7, 10, 40, 50, 120) and general terms (πάντες), for space (the upper room of Acts 1:13), and for migration (up vs. down) as well as extraordinary motifs (fire, tongues) with metaphorical implications can all inspire mutually illuminating combinations of biblical texts. In addition, specific issues or circumstances mentioned in the texts can impose the necessity of counterbalancing problematic texts with other biblical texts or with contemporary reality: Why does Luke tell a post-ascension story about the Holy Spirit’s mission when, according to John 20:22, Jesus had already given the Spirit to his disciples, after Easter? Why does the miracle of speaking in other languages (Acts 2:4) not happen again? Where is the Holy Spirit today?\(^7\)

### 2 General Issues of Pentecost Homilies

Both dogmatic corroboration and exhortation to celebrate Pentecost in a spiritual way are very often the pragmatics of Pentecost homilies;\(^8\) anti-heretical polemics directed against Marcion, Mani, the Donatists, or the so-called πνευματομάχοι and reflections on the work of the Holy Spirit past and present are other general issues to be correlated to these pragmatics, which can also

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6 In general, the number of homilies on Ascension far exceeds the number of homilies on Pentecost.


8 Cf. in general Robert Cabié, La Pentecôte: L’évolution de la cinquantaine Pascale au cours des cinq premiers siècles, Bibliothèque de Liturgie (Tournai: Desclée, 1965), 222–237.