THE ORIGIN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
QUOTATION IN JOHN 7:38*

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Introduction

In John 7:37b-38, the fourth evangelist presents Jesus as speaking the following words on the last and greatest day of the Festival of Tabernacles:

37 ἐν τῇ δυσί ἔρχεσθαι πρὸς με· καὶ πινέτω. 38 ὁ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμὲ, καθὼς εἶπεν ἡ γραφή, ποταμοὶ ἐκ τῆς κοιλᾶς αὐτοῦ μείζωσαν ὕδατος ζῶντος.

37 If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. 38 He who believes in me, as scripture has said, rivers of living water shall flow from his inside.

The evangelist then explains, in 7:39, that Jesus spoke about the Spirit, which believers would receive after his glorification. This typically Johannine parenthetical remark1 makes clear that, whatever punctuation one prefers in vv. 37b-38 (see below), the entire v. 38 should be considered as a direct discourse of Jesus: it is usual in John for the comments to follow immediately after the commented sayings.2 It is also obvious that the quoting formula refers to what follows, not to what

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* It is with great pleasure that I offer Joost Smit Sibinga these pages on the use of the Old Testament in the New, a topic of shared interest.
1 The words πρὸς με are omitted in P66 א B d e f. The omission can be explained by “scribal oversight” (so B.M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament [London/New York: UBS, 1971] 218) or by influence of Rev. 22:17: ὁ διώκειν ἐρχόμενον. On both accounts, the longer text of John 7:37 has the better chances to be the original one.

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precedes formulae marking quotations and beginning with comparative conjunctions such as καθότι, usually precede quotations. 4

Jesus’ words, rendered here with the punctuation of NA27 (and almost all other editions5) and translated accordingly, confront the exegete with three problems:

(1) How to punctuate the text: with a stop after πιστεύω (“punctuation A”) or after δὲ πιστεύεις εἰς ἐμέ (“punctuation B”)?
(2) To whom does αὐτός in v. 38 refer: to Jesus or to the believer? In the former interpretation, Jesus refers to himself in the third person; which is not an anomaly,6 because his words are presented as a quotation from Scripture.
(3) Which Old Testament passage is quoted in 7:38? There is no OT passage that literally agrees with the words adduced here as a scriptural quotation.

In this paper, I shall concentrate upon the question of the origin of the quotation, but without neglecting the two other questions. It is often supposed that the punctuation determines the referent of αὐτός, and the identity of the referent is then thought to have consequences for the possible source(s) of the quotation.7 However, the questions of punctuation and referent are not so tightly connected, although it remains true that the identity of the referent bears upon the possible provenance of the quotation.

It may seem to be somewhat pretentious to think that there is room for a new endeavour to determine the origin of the scriptural quotation in John 7:38, after so much energy has been spent on this riddle, so far without conclusive results.8 Almost every possible solution has

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4 Some examples: John 6:31; 12:15; Rom. 1:17; Heb. 3:7; Rom. 6:14; 1 Cor. 48:2; Philo, Gen. 145; Mk. Exod. 15:5 (Shirata, 5.1.9 Lauterbach). Exceptions (Mk. 1:2-3 in the usual punctuation; John 1:23; Rom. 2:24) are apparently caused by the function of the quotation in its context, and in such cases it is clear where the quotation is to be found. Nevertheless, some scholars have—unsuccessfully—tried to identify in John 7:37-38 words that precede the quoting formula as an OT quotation; so, e.g., G. Reim, Studien zum alttestamentlichen Hintergrund des Johannesevangeliums (SNTSMS 22; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1974) 71.

5 A notable exception is the Greek-English Diglot (London: BFBS, 1960).

6 As Fce (“John 7.37-39,” 116) and many others think.
