Commentary on Daniel IV.9

Christian citizenship and Roman citizenship

Date: 203 CE to 204 CE
Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Commentary

Reference: IV.9

The extract above is taken from a Commentary on Daniel, often attributed to Hippolytus, probably most commonly associated with the voluminous Refutation of all Heresies which is attributed to him. The text’s authorship, however, has been intensely debated. The Commentary on Daniel is one of the oldest scriptural commentaries in our possession. Its precise authorship is debated (for detailed discussions of the history of debate over Hippolytus’s writings, particularly in reference to the hypotheses of an “eastern Hippolytus” and a “Roman Hippolytus,” see J. Cerrato, Hippolytus between East and West, and also the commentary on this website on IV.8), but these discussions cannot be entered into here, so for the purposes of this commentary, we will simply refer to “the author” of the text. The reconstruction of the Greek text is based entirely upon quotations from catenas (verse by verse scriptural commentaries which collect together the exegesis of different commentators), which attach the name of the author to each section of commentary on a particular biblical verse (over the years, scholars have collected more and more fragments from catenas, and a list of manuscripts can be seen in Nathanael Bonwetsch, Die datierung der Geburt Christi, p. xxvii). However, the reconstructed text is considered to be relatively reliable. In essence, the extract describes the birth of Christ, which is described as occurring in the “forty-second year of Augustus Caesar,” as the beginning of what was effectively a new race of people, the Christians, membership of which would transcend the barriers of language and geographical location.

The notion of citizenship and belonging in the Roman world was clearly of importance to Christian authors as far back as the first century, when Jesus’s story was just beginning to be recorded. Like the present text, the Gospel of Luke famously situates the birth of Christ within the context of a universal census ordered by Caesar Augustus (see Luke 2:1-3; for other Christian discussions of this census in relation to Christianity’s relationship with the Roman empire, see the commentaries on John Chrysostom, Homily on the Date of Christmas 2; Orosius, Seven Books of History Against the Pagans VI.22; Chromatius, Sermon XXXII). As has been identified by numerous scholars, the historical information given by the author of Luke is problematic. However, as Hervé Inglebert has recently reminded, to obsess over this issue is to miss the importance of the Lukan author’s inclusion of the census in his narrative (“Christian Reflections,” p. 100). Indeed, as Philip Esler argues, that the fact that he includes these details suggests that among Luke’s audience there were people specifically interested in Christianity’s position “in the context of Roman history,” and the fact that Luke has Jesus’s parents dutifully trek to Bethlehem to obey the imperial order suggests that the author does not necessarily see Christian discipleship as being in direct conflict with the Roman empire (Philip Esler, Community and Gospel, p. 201-202). The same does not seem to be true, however, for the author of the present Commentary on Daniel.

As Inglebert identifies, the author of this passage draws a contrast between “the Lord’s census-taking and that of Caesar, between the name Christian and the name Roman” (“Christian Reflections,” p. 101). Similarly to several other Christian texts, including some from the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 4:1-11; see also, for instance, the discussion on the Apocryphon of James), the author argues that because the Roman empire is a kingdom “of this world,” ruled by “a king of the earth,” it is subject to the influence of, and thereby arguably controlled by Satan. In contrast, those who can be counted as Christians fall under the domain of a ruler in heaven, and as such can claim that they belong to a kingdom greater than that of “this world” (see John 18:36; the vast discussions of Christian “citizenship in heaven,” stemming from Paul’s comment in Philippians 3:18-21 are also hugely relevant in this regard). In Inglebert’s words, “Augustus’s universal census, presented by Luke and by the author of the Commentary on Daniel as the first of its type, is here defined as a satanic reaction to the Nativity, which was going to endanger the royalty of this world” (“Christian Reflections,” p. 101).
The author claims that the census was intended to identify the most “well-born” men from among the nations and claim them as “Romans” who could wage war. Inglebert has pointed out that the Romans generally enlisted soldiers from among Roman citizens, sometimes offering the Roman citizenship as a reward for aliens who agreed to fight for them. Such individuals who served as auxiliaries would typically be granted their citizenship at the completion of their service. When necessary, Roman citizens were obliged to enlist if required, both in the East and the West, and so there would be a very clear link between war and citizenship, which sheds light of the author’s decision to connect the census with Rome’s participation in wars (“Christian Reflections,” p. 101). It seems that for this author, the names of “Roman” and “Christian” were fundamentally incompatible, because the former favours war and the latter peace. This is an issue which Tertullian wrestles with, discussing in two separate tractates the problems with Christians serving in the Roman military, a troubling reality which had come to pass (see On the Military Garland I.1-4; XI.1-4; On Idolatry XIX). When considered alongside the Lukan text from which the present extract takes its inspiration, we can see the contrasting attitudes which Christian authors adopted over the course of the early centuries CE to the relationship between Christianity and Rome. For some, as arguably is the case of the Lukan author, Roman dominion need not necessarily present a direct challenge to those wishing to follow Christ. However, for authors such as that of the Commentary on Daniel, writing, we must remember, after the church had suffered periods of violence at the hands of Rome, the two could not flourish side by side, and represented a battle of cosmic proportions between the forces of good and evil. Indeed, as Gerhard Lohfink argued many years ago, the author of this text understood the “Roman state as a demonic imitation of the true state, that is the Christian people” (Jesus and Community, p. 165). Essentially, Lohfink suggested, the Roman empire is seen as a “counter society” to that of the Church, which Christ created from all peoples (Jesus and Community, p. 166).

Keywords in the original language:

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- name
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- Roman citizenship
- Roman people
- war

Bibliographical references:

- Bardy, Gustave, Lefèvre, Maurice, Hippolyte: Commentaire sur Daniel (Sources chrétiennes 14; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1947)
- Bonwetsch, Nathanael, Die datierung der Geburt Christi in dem Danielkommentar Hippolyts (Göttingen: Commissionverlag der Dieterich’schen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1895)
- Brent, Allen, Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop (Leiden: Brill, 1995)

Other sources connected with this document:

Luke 2:1-4

A census is ordered by the emperor Augustus

- Read more about Luke 2:1-4

Tertullian, On Idolatry XIX

Christians and military service

- Read more about Tertullian, On Idolatry XIX

Tertullian, On the Military Garland I.1-4

A Christian soldier is imprisoned because he refuses to wear the laurel crown
Tertullian, *On the Military Garland XI.1-4*

The contradiction between Roman military service and God’s laws

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness

Philippians 3:18-21

“Citizenship” in heaven

John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Date of Christmas 2*

That God inspired Caesar Augustus to conduct the census at the time of Christ’s incarnation

Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans VI.22.5-8*

Christ’s desire to be a Roman citizen