



Pelagius Revisited

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Perhaps the relationship between the author and the text is akin to the relationship between the heretic and the heresy. Once written, the text has a life of its own; once professed, the heresy has a life of its own. Both text and heresy leap away from their initiatory contexts, from the intentions of authors and heretics entirely. Such has been the case with Pelagianism. The synonym most commonly attached to the heresy of “works-righteousness” would have properly horrified the heretic. Not works, but baptism would have been his topic of conversation—and that conversation would have been a tough one.

Yet converse with Pelagius we must. We must get beneath the denunciations “heretic” and “heresy” before we can grasp his understanding of the Christian faith. We must get beyond the slurs before we can enter the world of late Latin theology. We must return to those small Bible study groups composed of middle- and upper-class Romans before we can see why people yearned for his teaching. Indeed, we might have preferred Pelagius’s Bible study groups at Rome to Augustine’s cavernous cathedral at Hippo. We too have often and probably will continue to be attracted to a Christianity that is concrete, disciplined, and well-plotted out. That was and is Pelagius’s enduring appeal.

The burden of this article, then, is to provide the background for that conversation between Pelagius and the present. The background is three-fold: an examination of the world in which Pelagius moved; an articulation of the salient points of his teaching; and finally, an assessment of Pelagius’s enduring appeal.

I. THE WORLD OF PELAGIUS

To return to the world of Pelagius is to traffic with people who were masters of invective. We have only rough portraits of Pelagius, and they are from the pens of his opponents. Who could fear more formidable enemies than Augustine and Jerome? They were powerful and eloquent, and their verbal arsenals were stocked with everything from Scripture to classical rhetoric.

Pelagius, Augustine, and Jerome—these men hurled Scripture at each other, passages from Paul and the prophets, passages of judgment and condemnation. Yet no one of them had the same version of Scripture in Latin! Their translations differed ever so slightly on key texts (e.g., Rom 5:12!), a situation replicated time and again throughout the Latin-speaking world, until Damasus, bishop of Rome, dragged out of a complaining and exhausted Jerome a single authoritative version of both Old and New Testaments in Latin. By the time the *Vulgata*

appeared, however, Pelagius had been in exile for over a decade. Nothing more was heard from him; he was unable to defend himself.

When a hot temper did not allow time for a scriptural consultation, name-calling was always available. Here Jerome takes honors for sheer venom. Certain that Pelagius's disciples had burned down his monasteries in Bethlehem, he spared the monk no censure. Pelagius was a "dolt weighed down with Scots' porridge, able to rage more effectively with his heels than his teeth."¹ Jerome slyly suggested that Pelagius's contacts with the rich women of the Roman aristocracy were more amorous than pedagogical.

Less bombastic, but more serious is the condemnation from Augustine. Augustine was respectful of Pelagius's reputation, possibly even envious of his popularity at Rome. Early on in the controversies, Augustine conceded that Pelagius was a "holy man," who had "made no small progress in the Christian life."² But when Augustine finally received and read Pelagius's Pauline commentary, he concluded that the monk was an enemy of the grace of God. Words in his *Retractions* are final and solemn: "long before the Pelagian heresy arose we debated as though we were already debating against it."³ It is an impressive statement, but hardly credible. Indeed, Pelagius had turned to the earlier works of Augustine, particularly to his unfinished commentaries on Romans, before he embarked on his own commentary on the works of Paul. The very work that had so angered Augustine merely presented him with his earlier writings on nature and grace, material that he would now have to emend, if it could not be forgotten entirely. It is difficult to trust the portraits of Pelagius that emerge from the pens of either of his arch-enemies, Augustine or Jerome.

Of Pelagius himself we know little. His origin is uncertain; his end was in exile. He was variously dubbed a Briton, a Scot, an Irishman born in Britain, a clergyman, a layperson, a monk (*monachus*). After his condemnation in 417, he literally disappeared. We know more about the world in which Pelagius moved. In understanding that world, we can grasp the context that framed Pelagius's thinking. Of that world, then, three facets are critical. First, it was a world in which martyrdom had ceased. Second, it was a world turning to the writings of Paul. And finally, for Pelagius, it was the world of Rome before Alaric. Each of these facets warrants further study.

First, Pelagius's world was one in which martyrdom had ceased. He lived long after the Edicts of Galerius (311) and Milan (313), which promised toleration to Christian communities that had known only persecution. Almost immediately, things changed: Christian worship could be public again; church coffers

¹J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975) 311.

²Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* 3.1.

³Augustine, *Retractiones* 1.8.6.

would fill. Less immediate, however, were changes in spirituality and practice. Martyrdom had offered a grisly, but concrete way of living out one's faith. It was the second baptism, after which no sin could occur. It was a literal imitation of Christ, his suffering, his death, but also the promise of his resurrection. The enemies of the faith were visible, graphically represented in the Roman jailers and magistrates. Evil was external and identifiable. Holiness was concrete and palpable. The saints were visible, and the pathway to sainthood was clear. What would happen when martyrdom was no longer an option?

The second critical facet of Pelagius's world is that he and his contemporaries were turning to Paul. Indeed, Peter Brown remarks: "The last decades of the fourth century in the Latin Church, could well be called 'the generation of Paul': a common interest in St. Paul drew together widely differing thinkers and made them closer to each other than to their predecessors."⁴ There are commentaries on various letters of Paul from Marius Victorinus, Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, and Jerome. There are unfinished attempts from Augustine, who had encountered Paul as a Manichaean and turned, in the decade after his conversion, to a Christian reading of the same apostle. The apostle who had boasted of being a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks, now became a Roman to the Romans. What did Paul say to the Romans in the final decades of the fourth century?

The third critical facet of Pelagius's world is that Pelagius was in Rome. He saw his calling quite clearly: it was interpreting Paul to Romans of the late fourth century. It must have been a difficult task. Many Christians had become so by convenience—by marriage or by political conformity. Was there any discontinuity between their pagan past and their Christian present? These new converts, many of them, lived as if there were little. Moreover, paganism was itself making a last stand in Rome itself. Symmachus, prefect of the city in 384, was an eloquent advocate for pluralism. We hear him pleading for the same rights for which Christians pleaded only a century before. Symmachus was unsuccessful; all the oppressive machinery that pagan Romans had turned against a Christian minority was now turned by Christian Romans against a pagan minority. But Symmachus's plea attests to the presence of paganism and religious syncretism at Rome. How would Pelagius articulate the Christian faith in such a context?

We actually possess Pelagius's articulation. Commentaries on Paul's epistles, commentaries that Pelagius used in his teaching, have been passed down through the centuries under the authorship of Jerome. It is an attribution that would have enraged the exegete. Yet, thanks to Jerome, we have the writings of one of his most bitter enemies. Alexander Souter, who prepared a critical edition of these commentaries from various Latin manuscripts allegedly by Jerome, argued for a "community of ideas" throughout the commentaries.⁵ But he did not elaborate. The task is ours. What might we have heard from Pelagius on Paul, had we been among his study groups at Rome?

⁴Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969) 151.

⁵Alexander Souter, "Introduction," *Pelagius's Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of Paul*, ed. A. Souter (Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 9; 3 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1922-31) 1:90. Hereafter cited as *Expositions*.

II. THE TEACHINGS OF PELAGIUS

Pelagius articulated a creation-centered theology. Cracking it is best accomplished along lines he himself suggested: Creator, creature, Christ, and the Christian life.

Who is the Creator? As we have seen, it was within the context of religious pluralism and a renewal of pagan religions that Pelagius presented his understanding of the Christian God. In the face of the polytheism of the Roman pantheon, in the face of Manichaean dualism, Pelagius presented God as Creator of the universe. He elaborated in lapidary fashion: God is, and God is just. Moreover, this should be obvious to the creature:

For every creature testifies that it is not God and shows that it is made by another, whose will it must obey. For if God is the highest reality, invisible, incomprehensible, inestimable, if God is above all things, that is, one to whom nothing can either be preferred or equalled, either in greatness, glory, or power, it is clear that this can apply to no creature, which is seen by the eyes, grasped by the reason and judged by the judging faculty. No creature is greater than all others in every respect, because all surpass one another in turn: some in size, like the sun, the moon, and the stars; others in depth, like the sea. Therefore, it is clearly seen that God is no element. Further, that these things were made, is shown by their mutability, which cannot pertain to eternity. That they did not make themselves, however, is clear, because if they had made themselves, they would have already had to exist before they came into being, in order to be able to make themselves—which is absurd. In varying and changing their ranks, in yielding one to another, they show that, on the one hand, they were made by one author, and on the other, that they carry out not their own will, but that of their Lord, whose rule they cannot transgress.⁶

The passage is both eloquent and intriguing. Characteristically, Pelagius links knowledge and perfection, ignorance and sin. What creatures see around them leads them naturally to affirm the existence of the “one author” and the “highest reality.” Knowing that this is God leads creatures necessarily to obedience of their Lord, “whose rule they cannot transgress.” God is.

Equally important to Pelagius was the assertion that God is just. The justice of God was called into question by the Manichaeans. Arguing that a just God would never have condoned a “fall” into matter, much less a creation destined to fall, the Manichaeans separated the God of creation from the God of redemption. Pelagius attacked this separation in his commentaries. God is one; God is Lord of both creation and redemption. The surrounding dangers of Manichaeism and polytheism framed Pelagius’s discussion of God.

Who is the creature? Fashioned in the image of God, the creature is “just and holy and true—even as God is.”⁷ Through its created nature, the creature has knowledge of its Creator. In its created nature, the creature retains the capacity or possibility (*possibilitas*) to do the will of its Creator. To speak of created nature being somehow incapacitated is equivalent to charging the Creator with injustice! To take away human possibility to do the good is

⁶*Expositions* (Rom 1:19) 2:13-14.

⁷*Expositions* (Eph 4:24) 2:369.

equivalent to submitting to the Manichaeans, who hold that anything created or material is already “fallen”! Against the Manichaeans, Pelagius asserted that nature was created good and retains the possibility (*possibilitas*) to do the good. He based this assertion on what every creature knows of its Creator: God is, and God is just. Thus, divine justice is the basis for creaturely possibility.

What compromises creaturely possibility is creaturely will. Neither Adam’s sin nor the habit of sinning that Adam’s sin has injected into his progeny affects creaturely possibility; both, however, have a devastating effect on creaturely will. One can document the effect

chronologically. Created nature always has the ability to sin and the ability not to sin: *posse peccare, posse non peccare*. In creation there is both a will to sin and a will not to sin: *velle peccare, velle non peccare*. Adam, however, has upset the equilibrium; in him and for his progeny the habit of sinning gains such momentum that the will to sin (*velle peccare*) gains dominance. Under the law there are only a few who are able to exercise the will not to sin (*velle non peccare*). Most of humankind is entrapped in the habit of sinning and can only will to sin (*velle peccare*). Christ restores the will not to sin (*velle non peccare*) and points humankind to the future, when there will be both a will not to sin (*velle non peccare*) and no will to sin (*non velle peccare*). Indeed, in this time of glory, there will no longer even be an ability to sin (*posse peccare*). Pelagius describes this in words that recur throughout his Pauline commentaries: “It does not yet appear what we will be, but we know that when he appears, we will be like him” (1 John 3:2).

Who is Christ? How then can we “be like him”? Who is Christ anyway? Throughout the commentaries, Pelagius speaks of Christ, deflecting all the proper heresies. He rages against the subordinationism of the Arians, the docetism of the Manichaeans, and Apollinaris’s truncation of Christ’s human nature. Pelagius stresses the unity of operation (*una operatio*) both between the Father and the Son and between Christ’s human nature and his divine nature. What distinguishes Pelagius’s thinking about Christ is not his christological formulations, but their soteriological implications.

Pelagius has long been charged with having an impoverished exemplarist soteriology. He actually saw the work of Christ as three-fold. “By forgiving sins, by his *doctrina*, and by example he frees us from the wrath of judgment, since we already possess freedom in hope.”⁸ The locus of forgiveness is the crucifixion and resurrection. All sins were forgiven, and the creature was *repurchased* by God, literally, *redeemed* by God. Pelagius explains this in a way that is surprisingly “un-Pelagian”: “He not only redeems us, but remitting sins, he makes us just without our work.”⁹ Baptism is participation in these events; it reenacts the passion of Christ, representing forgiveness of sins for believers. Second, Christ taught *doctrina*. *Doctrina* does not mean “doctrine” in the modern sense; rather, it is the proper interpretation of Scripture, directed toward right faith and right practice. *Doctrina*, or proper interpretation of Scripture, is the means to faith, and the end does not take precedence over the means. Again, Pelagius’s statement of this is not very “Pelagian”: “Not in the believer’s own righteousness or *doctrina*, but in faith in the cross, through which all sins are forgiven to

⁸*Expositions* (1 Thess 1:10) 2:420.

⁹*Expositions* (Eph 1:7) 2:346.

me, that I might die to the world, and the world to me.”¹⁰ Finally, Christ provides the believer with an example of righteousness, which the creature is exhorted to pass on to others. Throughout the commentaries, Pelagius places the christological indicative before an exhortation to those who would follow in Christ’s footsteps: “Even as Christ..., let us then....” Whereas the *imago dei*, the creature’s natural knowledge of God, and the example of Christ direct the believer in the present, the *imago Christi* gives the believer hope for the future.

What is the Christian life? While the future transformation is not clear in the present, the character of the Christian community is. Pelagius presents a perfectionist image of the church.

Because Christ has *already* died, because Christ has *already* been resurrected, sins have *already* been forgiven. Commenting on Ephesians 2:2, Pelagius stresses the past tense: “It is to be noted that the apostle says that ‘you had walked in sins,’ not that ‘you walk.’”¹¹

If exhortation were insufficient, Pelagius could move into imperatives. He demanded that all who sinned were to be excluded from the church. Those who were unclean should not be allowed to enter in the first place, since “the body of Christ is not allowed to accept them.”¹² Those who were already within the church and proceeded to sin should either “reform their behavior or be separated from the church.”¹³ The church is the body of Christ, and the holy body of Christ is violated by the presence of sinners.

One is incorporated into the church through baptism, the ritual by which believers literally become members of the body. The church is pure and holy, as was the body of Christ. Entering it through baptism is an act of sanctification. Pelagius read sanctification as beatification: “we are made saints through baptism.”¹⁴ Baptism makes of the believer a new creation.

It is faith that leads the believer to baptism and into the church. Faith is initiated by the call of God and is chosen freely by the creature. Pelagius was quite clear that faith is *both* by the willing of the creature *and* by the mercy of God. Faith, then, has both divine initiation and creaturely response: one is called to faith by the will of God, then believes by his or her own will.

Although Pelagius obviously meant by the phrase something quite different than Luther, he turned repeatedly to the expression *sola fide* to speak of the critical significance of faith. The frequency of the Reformation phrase is so striking that Friedrich Loofs was prompted to comment: “Pelagius was the most strenuous representative of solafiducianism previous to Luther.”¹⁵ Faith, then, leading to baptism, is the beginning of a new life and anew creature. In this life are commanded not works of the law, but works of faith.

In the next life, however, Pelagius maintained that even faith would pass away. Not *sola fide* but *sola caritate* governs the future. “In the present are these three: faith, hope and love. In the future love alone [*sola caritas*] will remain: love of God, love of the angels, love of all the saints. For what will always be is

¹⁰*Expositions* (Gal 6:14) 2:342.

¹¹*Expositions* (Eph 2:2) 2:351.

¹²*Expositions* (1 Thess 4:7) 2:430.

¹³*Expositions* (1 Cor 5:2) 2:150-51.

¹⁴*Expositions* (1 Cor 1:2) 2:128.

¹⁵Friedrich Loofs, “Pelagius, Pelagian Controversies,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel M. Jackson (12 vols.; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908-12) 8:439.

greater than what will at some time cease: faith and hope.”¹⁶

III. RE-ASSESSMENT

We are not in the next life, however, and cannot assess the accuracy of Pelagius’s predictions on the eschatological status of faith, hope, and love. But we can and should reassess the heretic himself and the sum of his heresies. When one steps out of the world in which Pelagius moved and the teachings he expounded in tiny Bible study groups all over the city of Rome, two things are striking. The first is the startling continuity of Pelagius’s thinking with the

spirituality of the martyrs. The second is the equally startling discontinuity of Pelagius's thinking with the thinking of Augustine in his later—but surely not his earlier!—years. Both the continuity and the discontinuity bear closer examination. What of the continuity of Pelagius's thinking and the spirituality of martyrdom? From this perspective, Pelagius's thinking appears necessary and concrete, impressively short-sighted and astonishingly anachronistic. Martyrdom had made evil external and identifiable; and it had made holiness concrete. The saints had been visible, and the pathway to sainthood was clear. When martyrdom ceased, how would one define evil and sin, sainthood and holiness?

Pelagius had a ready answer. He adapted the spirituality of martyrdom for an imperial church. He loaded all the significance of second baptism onto the first. He made that first baptism tantamount to beatification, and he exhorted total discontinuity between one's previous life and the new life in Christ. Evil was still external: sin was the rust from the habit of sinning accumulated on the soul. The Christian could—indeed, must!—scrape it off. Holiness is concrete. Building on the indicative that through baptism one was given a new life in Christ, Pelagius proceeded to exhort Christians to live authentically. His actual rhetoric was less in the form of discrete imperatives than it was in the form of exhortations grounded in a christological indicative: the saints are visible; they are those seeking this authentic Christian life in Pelagius's conventicles at Rome.

Dismissing Pelagius's thinking as “works-righteousness” diminishes the significance Pelagius placed on baptism. Baptism in his thinking effects an actual conversion in the believer; baptism makes the believer a new creation. Pelagius merely exhorted the believer to live up to what had already happened. Pelagius reinterpreted the spirituality of martyrdom and its notions of holiness for a church in which martyrdom was no longer an option. He was creating a conventicle form of Christianity in a church fast becoming the imperial religion of the Roman Empire. Surely his theology was no more or less subtle than the popular theology of martyrdom.

What of the discontinuity between Pelagius's thinking and that of Augustine in his later years? The Augustine who finally tackled Pelagius had had his fill of repositionists. The Donatists in North Africa had proposed an even bolder return to the spirituality of martyrdom. Theirs was the only true church, for it was the church that could boast of having stood faithful during the persecutions. Episcopal succession appealed not to the apostles, but to the martyrs. Ritual purity marked all the members of the sect. Doing battle with the Donatists affected Augustine quite deeply.

¹⁶*Expositions* (1 Cor 13:13) 2:205.

Pelagius and Augustine shared the same pessimism in regard to human willing. Where they differed was in their understandings of human nature. Pelagius was at pains to show the continuity between creation and redemption; he insisted repeatedly that nature was created in the image of God and remained good, even after the Fall. Adam's Fall injected into the human race a habit of sinning, but Christ broke this habit. As incorporation into the life of Christ, baptism constitutes a new beginning for the believer. The point of discontinuity in the life of faith, for Pelagius, is at the moment of baptism. At that point the believer is severed from the preceding life of sinning and exhorted to live an authentic Christian life.

For Augustine matters stand differently. The point of discontinuity in the life of faith was

at the moment of Adam's Fall. So grave was this that it effected for all of Adam's progeny a new nature, a second nature tainted with sin. This talk of a second nature effected by Adam's Fall was new with Augustine. Neither his contemporaries nor his predecessors had used such language to describe the effects of the Fall. Such a shift affected Augustine's thinking on baptism accordingly. Baptism is not the moment of beatification that it was for Pelagius. Rather, for Augustine baptism is the moment of diagnosis. It initiates one into a long period of convalescence. Here Christ is no example; he was the Physician. Evil is internal; holiness is impossible. The true saints are invisible, and the pathway of the Christian in this life is one of terminal convalescence.

Given the relative status of the creature in Pelagius and Augustine, it is not surprising that they finally differed on what could be known of God. Pelagius assumed that a natural knowledge of God is possible; indeed, such knowledge is fundamental to his thinking. As Augustine aged, he became less and less certain what one could know about God. The inscrutability of God loomed larger and larger in his theology. While Pelagius admitted to some uncertainty, his favorite Bible verse was hearty: "It does not yet appear what we will be, but we know that when he appears, we will be like him" (1 John 3:2). In stark contrast, the passage that recurs throughout Augustine's massive theological history of the Roman Empire, *The City of God*, as well as his own personal odyssey of faith, *The Confessions*, is haunting: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33).

On a theological level, the differences between Augustine and Pelagius are profound. They are differences that raise all the classical theological problems. What happened in Adam's Fall? Did human nature fall inevitably, necessarily, or merely accidentally? Is evil internal or external? Is it a matter of powers and principalities, in institutions and governments? Or is it lodged in the deep recesses of the human heart? Is the question itself properly an either/or question? Who is Christ? What did he do? What happens in baptism?

On an existential level the differences between Pelagius and Augustine are deeply troubling. All our hopes turn toward Pelagius; all our experience, however, confirms Augustine's dark spirit. We have often and probably will continue to be attracted to a Christianity that is concrete, disciplined, and well plotted out. That was and is Pelagius's enduring appeal. After all, it is always more attractive to be on the pathway to perfection than in the hospital; it is always more appealing to be saint than convalescent.