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# Rosetta

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**Ali Bonner, 2018. *The Myth of Pelagianism*. Oxford: British Academy Monograph, The British Academy by Oxford University Press. Pp xviii & 342. £80(Hbk). ISBN: 978-0-19-726639-7.**

Reviewed by Anna Persig.

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Bonner's book provides a fresh and enlightening perspective on one of the much discussed and controversial figures of early Christianity, Pelagius. By citing the original sources and comparing them with other contemporary texts, Bonner brilliantly succeeds in demonstrating that 'Pelagianism' is a fictional concept, artificially created by Pelagius' opponents and supported by modern scholarship. The surprisingly rich manuscript tradition of Pelagius, despite his conviction as a heretic, stirred Bonner's curiosity when working on her doctoral thesis on the manuscript transmission of the *Letter to Demetrias* and motivated the further examination found in this book. The volume is divided into seven chapters, each of them developing an argument in favour of the thesis that Pelagianism has never existed, in addition to a thorough introduction, conclusion and appendix.

The introduction begins with a brief biography of Pelagius, which could have been slightly expanded for the benefit of non-specialists, making precise reference to the trials at which Pelagius was discussed and the positions taken by popes in the controversy. In the following section, Bonner introduces the theological issues discussed throughout the book in an exceptionally clear way. The doctrine of 'the triune', which entails the idea of original sin, its transmission to mankind and the possibility of salvation through God's prevenient grace and election (predestination) is opposed to an optimistic view of the goodness of human nature and a belief in the possibility of achieving salvation thanks to human willingness (free will). The latter was supported by Pelagius and the ascetic movement. Bonner lays out the conclusions, the proofs that support them, and the theological and historical importance of reclassifying Pelagius and his followers as ascetic authors.

In chapter one, Bonner analyses each of the fourteen tenets attributed to Pelagius by Augustine to prove that only half of one of these was really taught by Pelagius, namely that individuals have free will and that their merits trigger the assistance of the Holy

Spirit. Bonner affirms that Pelagius believed in goodness of humanity, free will and cooperation between human merits and God's grace. She also explains how Augustine forged a negative image of Pelagius, characterised by arrogance. Commendably, Bonner's points are always supported by citations from Pelagius' writings, which are quoted in English in the body of the text and in Latin in the footnotes, making them accessible to a large audience as well as to scholars who want to read them in the original language.

Chapters two and three constitute the core of the book and contain the main arguments proving that Pelagius' teachings were not original but also propounded by other Greek and Latin authors of the fourth and fifth centuries affiliated to the ascetic movement. Chapter two deals with three writings preceding Pelagius' literary activity, Athanasius' *Life of Antony* and its Latin translations by an anonymous author and by Evagrius of Antioch. Chapter three analyses in detail Jerome's positions, followed by mentions of those of Ambrose, Ambrosiaster and Apponius, who by and large agree with Pelagius.

Athanasius' views seem to be more extreme than those of Pelagius: he believes that souls are created sinless and that perfection can be achieved if individuals are willing to strive and lead an ascetic life. On the other hand, Evagrius makes a considerable shift from Athanasius' idea that God's grace is subsequent to human virtue. Instead, he assumes that grace is a reward for merits. Bonner stresses this point to demonstrate that the only tenet really asserted by Pelagius had already been stated by Evagrius. Some of the inferences employed to charge Pelagius with arrogance are also attested in Athanasius and especially Evagrius' writings: the denial of original sin, the idea that perfection can be achieved and that salvation is a matter of personal will. Bonner, analysing the use of the word *charis/gratia*, concludes that according to these authors, grace is not prevenient but is a gift given by God to the righteous ones.

Bonner successfully proves that Jerome, who was one of Pelagius' accusers, shared similar beliefs in the goodness of mankind, free will, a binary choice between good and evil, cooperation between human virtue and God's grace being given according to merits. Jerome admits the possibility of reaching perfection on earth through chastity and the rejection of possessions and affirms that the wealthy cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, a tenet later associated with Pelagius. These were ascetic teachings

fashionable among the Roman aristocracy of the time. Bonner plausibly hypothesises that Jerome's change of mind around CE 414–5 and his attack on Pelagius were due to Jerome's fear of losing prestige and his awareness that his ideals were more extreme than those of Pelagius. As a consequence, he inconsistently tried to combine free will with Augustine's doctrine of prevenient grace.

Chapter four concerns the Pelagian movement which, in Bonner's opinion, never existed because the alleged members did not share common beliefs. According to Bonner, the notion of a movement arose from Caelestius' affirmation that he met Rufinus the Syrian at Pammachius' house. However, saying that Caelestius' mention of the meeting was an attempt to 'deliberately' (p. 211) denounce Jerome's involvement through his association with Pammachius seems to me not entirely grounded. This chapter requires expansion. Bonner could have included a brief mention of other individuals associated with the movement, such as Cassian, Julian of Aeclanum and Eucherius, in order to find possible similarities and differences to Pelagius.

Chapter five contains a summary of scholarly attempts to define Pelagianism and identify Pelagian elements. Bonner shows that scholars disagree on the distinctive characteristics of Pelagianism and fail to distinguish it from ascetism. Inserting the literary review near the end of the book is an unusual but sensible decision in that at this point the readers have a clear understanding of the issues at stake, the difficulties of categorising them and the risk of circular reasoning.

In chapter six, Bonner explains why Pelagianism was invented by using the sociological theory of interactionism, which implies a structured process from the creation of new rules presented as traditional to the identification of a 'deviant', his depersonalisation and exclusion from the main group. The ruler creator, in this case Augustine, is presented as a slanderer not inclined to compromise and desirous of power. Although Augustine is the main opponent of Pelagianism, it would be worth analysing the position of other adversaries, such as Prosper of Aquitaine. The second part of the chapter contextualises and better explains the creation of Pelagianism in light of acute political and historical observations: Pelagius' positive anthropology was at odds with the loss of certainty following the sack of Rome. The fact that free will entails an individualistic relation with God, making unnecessary the mediation of the

episcopacy, was probably considered to be subversive and consequently condemned by Emperor Honorius.

Chapter seven considers the manuscript tradition of Pelagius as collateral proof of the myth of Pelagianism. Bonner argues that Pelagius' works were abundantly copied in the Middle Ages because readers failed to recognise heretical elements, but spotted thoughts typical of ascetic literature later merged into monasticism. Because of the similarity of content with Jerome's works, they often circulated under his name: this proves that Pelagius and Jerome shared ascetic ideals and Pelagius neither propounded a new doctrine nor was the starter of a movement.

Bonner concludes that the construction of Pelagianism was an attempt both to control believers by imposing dogmas and to unify the Church in a period of major uncertainty and division. Although the book is clearly structured, it is sometimes repetitive: the same arguments in favour of Bonner's thesis are listed in the same order at the end of chapter seven (pp. 298–9) and in the conclusion (pp. 302–3) at a distance of a few pages. The reason for the inclusion of the text of Ambrosiaster in the appendix is not clear to me, considering how little space is given to this author, whereas the lengthy citations from Pelagius and Augustine's writings are all inserted in the text. It is a pity that the accuracy of the book is compromised by the presence of typos and mistakes in the accentuation of Greek words, which could be easily corrected. On the whole, the strengths of the book are its interdisciplinary character, being of interest to theologians, historians and classicists, and its clarity, which never becomes simplification and makes it a good read for both scholars and postgraduate students. Generally speaking, *The Myth of Pelagianism* gives us an important lesson on how misreading sources and drawing unwarranted inferences can lead to a major historical falsification.