

Procopius the Christian Sophist

Catenist, Compiler, Epitomist

Edited by

Dimitrios ZAGANAS,
Jean-Marie AUWERS, Joseph VERHEYDEN



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Introduction

Dimitrios ZAGANAS, Jean-Marie AUWERS, Joseph VERHEYDEN

Πολύχους μὲν οὗτος καὶ πολύστιχος ὁ ἐξηγητής,
[...] Καὶ ἡ φράσις δὲ αὐτῷ εἰς τὸ ἄριστον ἦσκηται.

Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 206.

Procopius the Christian sophist, until now generally identified as the famous rhetor from Gaza, is essentially known for having composed exegetical compilations on the Old Testament. Indeed, under this name we find epitomes-commentaries on the Heptateuch and on Isaiah, scholia on the books of Kingdoms and Paralipomenon, and catenae on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Photius, who read a large part of Procopius' work, wrote a note about "this diffuse and voluminous commentator", whose style seemed to him to be "refined to perfection". Procopius' biblical commentaries are indeed of great importance, as much for the ancient evolution and posterity of exegetical catenae as for the patristic texts they transmit. However, they have only attracted very limited attention from modern scholars, perhaps because of their composite nature. The only monograph dedicated to Procopius as a compiler of exegeses is that of L. Eisenhofer (1897), and most of the Heptateuch epitome remains unpublished in Greek and for this reason is only accessible through the Latin translation of C. Clauser (1555). It is only since the end of the 1970s that scholars have started on the one hand to explore the manuscript tradition of Procopius' writings, and on the other hand to study their contents and appreciate the testimony that they provide to previous exegeses. With the exception of what remains of the catena on Ecclesiastes, published in 1978, the critically edited texts have appeared quite recently: the catena on Song of Songs in 2011, the epitomes on Genesis in 2015 (first full edition) and on Exodus in 2020 (editio princeps).

Procopius' exegetical works are gradually being brought to light, but the work of exploring and exploiting them is at a rather rudimentary

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stage. For example, there are numerous passages whose source has not yet been identified, and many questions surrounding the figure, method and specific interests of Procopius, while the work of comparison with other compilations on the same biblical books is generally lacking. In order to know a little better, or at least less poorly, Procopius the indefatigable compiler of patristic exegeses and in order to appreciate more fully the contribution made by his works, we organised an international conference from 6 to 8 December 2021 at the Faculty of Theology of the Université Catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) with the support of the F.R.S.-FNRS, the Institute Religions, Spiritualités, Cultures, Sociétés (RSCS) of UCLouvain, and the Louvain Centre for Eastern and Oriental Christianity (LOCEOC) of KU Leuven. The idea for this conference came from Dimitrios Zaganas' previous postdoctoral project on the *Commentaries on Isaiah* of Ps.-Basil and Procopius, supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. Most of the contributions included in this book are based on papers that were presented during the conference.

A form of prolegomena on Procopius is provided by Dimitrios ZAGANAS (Louvain-la-Neuve), who asks if the profane works and the Christian works assigned to Procopius the sophist are of one and the same author. His arguments support a negative answer, and consist of the following: the absence of the specification "of Gaza" in the title of Procopius' biblical commentaries, the silence of Choricus, in his *Funeral Oration for Procopius of Gaza*, regarding a possible exegetical activity by his master, the fact that Photius does not establish a link between the rhetor and the exegete, as well as the clear opposition between the exegetical works and the rhetorical works, which contain no references to the Holy Scriptures. Instead of presuming that two opposing souls lived in Procopius, one pagan and one Christian, would it not be more reasonable to think that there are two homonymous writers? This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that Procopius' *In Genesim* includes texts which are posterior to the death of the rhetor of Gaza around 528. A re-examination of the sources leads to the affirmation that this work was written at the earliest in the middle of the sixth century, in a context that has yet to be defined.

Based on the critical edition of *In Genesim* that K. Metzler provided in the collection "Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte" (GCS), three contributions focus on different aspects of this important text. Emanuela PRINZIVALLI (Roma) concentrates

on the reception of Origen's exegesis and Origenism. She provides a detailed analysis of the commentary on some verses from the first chapters of Genesis (Gen 1:1-3.26-27; 3:21) in Procopius' *In Genesim*, to show how he treats the Origenian exegesis of these verses. Procopius is well aware of the importance of Origen and his influence on later theological reflection, but he clearly distances himself from both the Alexandrian's anthropology and his allegorism, which he judges excessive and which he fears favours Manichaeism. The fact that Procopius does not accept the doctrine of the pre-existence of souls leads him to reject Origenian exegesis in its entirety and even to misrepresent it, in his constant desire not to give a foothold to the dualists.

Moving from Origen's reception to that of his greatest critic, Benjamin GLEED (Tübingen) asks whether and to what extent Procopius' *Eclogai in Genesim* give us access to Theodore of Mopsuestia's lost commentary on Genesis. Among the Greek and Syriac fragments preserved mainly in the catenae, the vast majority deal with mankind's divine image and likeness, his status in paradise and his subsequent fall; some more substantial Syriac pieces also deal with Cain and Abel and the flood. Thus, for the text itself, we are comparatively well-informed about Theodore's views on Gen 1:26-8:14, but know barely anything about the rest. Gleede begins by recapitulating what we know about Theodore's commentary and especially about the way it was exploited by later authors, in particular the East Syrian authors. He methodically establishes four premises: 1) Procopius actually did recur directly to Theodore's commentary in his *Nachlese* and exploited it to a considerable degree; 2) Procopius' tendency to blend material is not a pervasive characteristic of his selection, but is limited to certain passages; 3) The numerous agreements between Procopius and the Eastern Syriac material are often specific enough to postulate a common source behind them; 4) This source is most likely to be Theodore, especially if Eusebius of Emesa can be excluded on the basis of the Armenian version of his commentary. He concludes his paper with quite an impressive list of material that is most probably Theodorian on the first three chapters of Genesis.

Tiziano F. OTTOBRINI (Vercelli), in turn, examines certain parallels between Procopius' *In Genesim* and John Philoponus' *De opificio mundi*. The comparison of the two exegetes highlights an evolution in the way in which Genesis was commented on in the first half of the sixth century: in the form of an epitome for Procopius; in the form

of a progressive commentary in the context of a philosophical controversy for John Philoponus, which represents an innovation that would not have much future. Two quotations are analysed, to show how Procopius used John Philoponus: on Gen 1:4b and Gen 1:26. Procopius only uses the text of the LXX, whereas John Philoponus employs the translations of Aquila and Symmachus, which are likely to promote another interpretation. Procopius' use of Philoponus' text is problematical if we identify, as Ottobriani does, the author of *In Genesim* as the sophist of Gaza, whereas Philoponus' *De opificio mundi* is dated to c. 546 at the earliest. Since the hypothesis of a common source on which both Procopius and Philoponus drew is highly improbable, the author suggests solving the problem by supposing that Philoponus' ideas circulated before being written down in his treatise.¹

As could be expected, the recent publication of the editio princeps of *In Exodum* (GCS), thanks again to the work of K. Metzler, is the subject of two contributions. The editor of the text, Karin METZLER (Berlin), studies the way in which Procopius chooses and treats his sources. She shows how, in the commentary on Exodus, Procopius' role evolves from compiler to author: he does not merely abridge a previous catena (indeed, in the prologue to *In Genesim*, he criticises the repetitive nature and extreme length of the catena genre), but is perfectly willing to rework the fragments that he finds in the catena and, above all, returns to the original works. The article shows how he has rewritten passages taken from Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis* and from Cyril of Alexandria's *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*. This process of returning to the source texts also leads Procopius to draw widely on a work by Didymus the Blind, who is represented in the *Catena in Exodum* only by a few fragments.

Agnès LORRAIN (Aix-en-Provence) seeks to specify the literary genre of *In Exodum* by analysing several passages that relate to the first eighteen chapters of Exodus. Having described the overall appearance of the work, she examines the explanations that are developed either for a verse or for a coherent pericope, in order to describe their composition. She shows that the organisation of the text is generally based on

¹ In the first contribution of this book, D. Zaganas draws *inter alia* an argument from the same passage of *In Genesim* on Gen 1:4b to affirm that this work is necessarily posterior to the death of the rhetorician of Gaza. The reader will form his own opinion by considering the respective arguments of D. Zaganas and T. F. Ottobriani.



the desire to follow each source in its coherency, avoiding fragmentation. The composition can be structured either according to a thematic progression, or by a distinction between the different meanings of the holy Scriptures, sometimes at the expense of the verse order. Different examples of composition are presented that highlight the polyphony of the text. A major difference with regard to *In Genesim* and the project defined in its prologue, which emphasised the use of a pre-existing compilation as well as its abridgement, is that, in order to write *In Exodum*, Procopius spent much more time on the direct sources than on the chain mentioned in the prologue, and that he ended up giving them the priority.

Reinhart CEULEMANS (Leuven) examines the relationships between the *Scholia in Regnorum libros* attributed to Procopius (CPG C 4.3), the type B catena on I-IV Kingdoms (C 4.2) and the *Catena Lipsiensis* compiled by Nikephoros Theotokis in 1773 and loosely reproduced by J.-P. Migne in PG 87/1. Ceulemans identifies the exegeses added by an anonymous annotator in the margins of the main witness to the *Scholia*, MS Munich, BSB, gr. 358 (9th c.): these exegeses are taken from the type B catena. Ceulemans then clarifies the link between the *Προκοπίου sections of the *Catena Lipsiensis* and these marginal exegeses. He shows how the two documents are linked by the type B catena, so that we may infer the content of the type B catena from the *Catena Lipsiensis* and its similarities to and differences with the direct tradition of the *Scholia*. Ceulemans details the authenticity of all the Προκοπίου sections of the *Catena Lipsiensis* and corrects a number of misconceptions about the text of the *Scholia*. He concludes by showing that the type B catena raises questions about the dimensions, scope and origin of the *Scholia in Regnorum libros*.

Meredith DANEZAN (Leuven) draws up a list of the catenae on Proverbs placed under the name of Procopius, in order to show that the attribution to Procopius does not have the same value according to whether the text in question is the “Epitome of Exegetical Extracts on Proverbs by Procopius the Christian Sophist”, discovered by M. Richard in two manuscripts from Athos, or the “Catena of Paris”, which derives from it, or the “Catena of Cambridge”, which now bears no title, but which we can show originally bore the same title as the catena of Paris, which it expands with passages taken from the *Commentary on Proverbs* attributed to John Chrysostom. Within the “Catena of the Vatican”, the name of Procopius refers to a

catena wrongly identified by the catenist as Procopius' *Epitome*. In the "Catena of Brussels", the indication Προκοπίου was arbitrarily added by a scribe before thirty scholia that had no attribution in his model. As to the Ἑρμηνεία on Proverbs published by A. Mai (and reproduced in *PG* 87/1), its attribution to Procopius could originate in an accident during the manuscript transmission and proves, at any rate, that only the rich get credit.

In a second contribution, Dimitrios ZAGANAS (Louvain-la-Neuve) presents the *Epitome in Isaiam*. This work has barely received any attention until now. It is attested in only eight manuscripts, the oldest of which dates to the ninth century and the others to the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. The only available edition is that of J. Curterius (1580) reproduced by J.-P. Migne in *PG* 87/2. Procopius amalgamates his sources to provide here a continuous commentary, without mention of the authors he uses. The principal sources are the *Commentaries on Isaiah* by Eusebius of Caesarea and Cyril of Alexandria, as well as, for the first sixteen chapters, the commentary attributed to Basil of Caesarea. In order to illustrate Procopius' method, the article demonstrates how Cyril's work was used in the *Epitome* to comment three passages of varying lengths (Isa 6:1-5; 9:13-20; 17-18). Procopius does not merely collect, organise and abridge his sources: he compares, reworks and sometimes comments on the sources he uses. In this way, he reveals himself to be an astute reader of the patristic exegeses of Isaiah.

Finally, Tiphaine LORIEUX (Leuven) identifies the use of a similar method in catena III on Obadiah, an anonymous and as yet unpublished catena. As for Procopius' *In Isaiam*, the extracts are rendered anonymous and abridged so that they blend into a continuous commentary. The examination of two passages demonstrates two different methods at work. In the first case (on Obad 1), the authors' extracts are placed next to one another and articulated by simple coordinating conjunctions, so that the reader has the impression of a continuous commentary written by a single author. In the second case (on Obad 15-16) it is the polyphony of the biblical text that is underlined by the choice of exegeses that are not in agreement. The common elements between catena III on the Minor Prophets and Procopius' *Epitomes* are numerous: the different extents to which the sources have been rewritten, the interest in the grammatical explanations and the hexaplaric variants, the elimination of digressions, repetitions and scriptural quotes, which all lead to a refocusing on the biblical text at the expense

of interpretations that support a theological account. The method is similar, but the sources are different, since catena III makes massive use of 'Theodoret of Cyrus' *In XII Prophetas*, while Procopius' compilations, for their part, use Theodoret's commentaries very sparingly.

We would like to thank the authors of the articles for having accepted to participate in the conference and to contribute to this volume, which is dedicated to the memory of Françoise Petit († 18 January 2021), whose name and works were often evoked during the conference.

