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# WRITING THE FIRST CHRISTIAN COMMENTARY ON A BIBLICAL BOOK IN ANCIENT ROME: HIPPOLYTUS

*Jörg Rüpke*

## 1. Susannah

Hippolytus' commentary on Daniel has been read as a testimony to the threat and inflicting of martyrdom onto the Christian community of the early third century, thus writing another chapter in a history of a religion persecuted close to extinction and rising out of this very situation to domination of the Roman Empire. By carefully reflecting on the hermeneutical preconditions of this type of interpretation, this chapters asks for a new approach and offers a reading of the text as a testimony to a history of often widely shared religious practices, modified by individuals' appropriations of traditions and perceptions of situations who are fighting for and being attributed authority. The formation of religious groups is not seen as a precondition of that history, but as a reversible process, contested and partial, but also sought after and propagated.<sup>1</sup>

But let me start this contribution to a volume on interpretation by not giving an interpretation but by offering the basis for an interpretation and that is to say, by telling a story. There was a wonderful and faithful Jewish woman with the name of Susannah and she used to spend her leisure time in a nice and closed garden cared for by two females servants. Now the beauty of this woman was well known in this Jewish community at Babylon and two elderly but very respectable persons – two elders as they are called, office-holders whom we have to imagine as people being responsible for the whole community – these elders tried to get glimpses of her. One day when she was in that garden they managed to get into the garden in order to observe her. Unaware of that she sent her two servants away and asked them to close the doors of the gardens and thus to remain undisturbed. Now, this situation was used by the two elders and they advanced to her asking her to have sexual intercourse with them. And threatening her that if she would not agree and if she would cry out for help they would accuse her of having sent her servants away in order to meet her lover. She reflected for a short time, seeing destruction in both alternatives, but then of course she opted for the moral path and cried out for help.

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Things ran as they were expected to run. The elders accused her claiming to have seen her with her (unfortunately unknown) lover whom they just have seen running away. Unfortunately they could not get hold of him as they were very respectable and elderly persons. They succeeded with their suing of her and she was sentenced to death.

This would have been a very sad story, if not in that very moment immediately after sentencing her to death a young man turned up. He did not declare himself to be the lover, which would have been a nice variant of the story. Instead the young man by the name of Daniel shouted out that these elders despite their respectable status had been lying and that Susanna were innocent. Now, as there was a death sentence already pronounced, it was not so easy just by one crying young man to overturn it. But at least as Daniel was claiming to have a prophetic vision and prophetic power they listened to him and on his suggestion they cross-examined the elders. And he asked them separately to tell them under which tree they had seen Susanna with her lover. As we can imagine the one claimed the tree to have been a cedar and the other claimed the tree to have been an oak. Thus it turned out that in fact they had been liars and therefore Susannah got rid of the charge.

The scene is nicely captured in the painting by the German Johann Carl Loth (1632–1698), “Susannah and the Elders” from the last quarter of XVIIth century



*Johann Carl Loth (1632–1698), Susannah and the Elders, fourth quarter of XVIIth century, oil on canvas. Courtesy by the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.*

and it is just one of an endless number of visualizations of this story. This might be explained by the fact that it is a story from the bible. That said, the statement is already a test of confessional identity. First, this story is an appendix to the book of

Daniel. The book of Daniel, however, is in itself an appendix to the Hebrew bible. That is to say, one can find a lot of printed bibles that do not contain the story of Daniel at all, Hebrew bibles of course, but also many translations building on it, Protestant bibles for instance. And others would feature the book of Daniel, but unfortunately would leave out the story of Susannah. To cut it short, the mixed Aramaic and Greek tradition makes it a difficult text in terms of textual presence and authority. But whence the popularity? Certainly, part of that popularity of this story with storytellers and with painters for instance in the early modern period of Europe laid in the fact that any pretext – and nothing better than a biblical or religious pretext – was used to paint nude women.

Now, maybe to the reader's displeasure I am not going to go on to talk about this nice woman. I will not even talk about those observing this nice woman. I will talk a bit on the person of the narrator who is observing the observers but even more I will be talking about ourselves and others observing the observers of Susannah. Thus my contribution to the topic of interpretation will be on at least three different levels. The first level is about the interpretation of the story in the complex of the book called Daniel. The second layer is Hippolytus as somebody interpreting this story in the early third century. The third level is the logical or historiographical level of us being observers of Daniel and being in a tradition of interpreting Hippolytus within different frameworks.

## 2. Hippolytus

This Hippolytus is an enigmatic figure. Let me quote from the prosopographical lexicon, edited by me a few years ago, the short biographical article written by Anne Glock offering what still might be called a *opinio communis*:

Hippolytus (1), 2nd half of the 2nd century–after 235. According to his own testimony, Hippolytus already expressed opinions on questions of dogma under bishop Zephyrinus [...], which may indicate a high position in the community at that time, already perhaps presbyter. It is not certain whether Hippolytus had himself consecrated (rival) bishop during the conflict with Zephyrinus' successor Calixtus [...] over questions of expiation and opposition to the teaching of Noetus, as he is often described as doing by later sources, thus instigating the first schism of the Roman Church. The only contemporary testimony to his career documents that in 235 as presbyter he was exiled to Sardinia. It says much for his prominent position in the clergy that he was the only cleric to be exiled with bishop Pontianus. [...] The fact that Hippolytus was buried in Rome and officially venerated as a martyr may suggest that the supposed schism was resolved during his lifetime. He was interred in the cemetery area on the *via Tiburtina*, which in the 8th century received the name *coemeterium Hippolyti*. [Attested religious activities:] Hippolytus delivered a sermon *de laude Domini* in the presence of Origenes. [Attested literary activities:] Hippolytus' substantial literary oeuvre embraces heresiological, liturgical, exegetical, and chronographical texts, most of them serving a practical purpose, whether in the context of polemics with other theological tendencies or with regard to the liturgy. Besides the *Refutatio*, examples of texts held to be of substantial influence in Antiquity and of considerable significance for theology – not to mention the history of the reception of Greek philosophy in the 2nd and 3rd centuries – are his commentaries on Daniel and the Song of Songs (oldest extant exegetical works), *Traditio apostolica* (significant in the history of the liturgy), as well

as an epigraphical Easter canon (on calculating the Easter festival independently of the Jewish Passover), and a chronicle.<sup>2</sup>

This unitarian view has been questioned but also very recently severely defended. If you take a radical stance, this figure of Hippolytus has never been a bishop or any responsible figure at Rome, but is at least one or maybe two different figures from the eastern part of the Mediterranean. There is a high probability that some of the texts attributed at different stages of manuscript production and literary history to an Hippolytus were not written by the same author.<sup>3</sup> But confronting all the arguments I take sides with scholars like Allan Brent and some Germans patristic scholars<sup>4</sup> that it is still reasonable or – to formulate it even more careful – that among the many vague theories it is still the most reliable to think of an author Hippolytus, who wrote a number of books (among them exegetical treatises) at the beginning of the third century, a person who had some important position in the city of Rome. We will have a closer look of that through the lens of the text, which contrast “teachers” (named in first position) and the “order of episcopoi, priests, and levites”.<sup>5</sup> In any case, it was some important position of responsibility that later was interpreted as him being a bishop in the city of Rome.

The discussion about identification is pointing to a wider issue which lays at the heart of this chapter. Within the thematic framework of interpretation I would like to reflect about what is called a hermeneutical circle and give it an historiographical twist. That is to say that our framework of understanding, our frame of reference, which is informing our understanding, our reading of texts, our whole horizon of interpretation is not only determined by our present circumstances, by our intellectual formation, and by what we know about a text or its historical circumstances. In more concrete terms this is to say that to a high degree in a scholarly enterprise we are informed by previous research that in itself is part of an ongoing tradition. If we interpret that text from the Roman Empire as part of what is called (and what I am going to question) early Christianity, our reading of the text is intimately related to the reading of selected other texts from this period. These very texts inform later readings and informed the readings of the heroes of the discipline from the XIXth and early XXth centuries as much as our own teachers and in the end our own thinking. Thus by switching the frame of reference suddenly the interpretation of a text turns into another direction which then of course is informing the image of the period in consideration. This is what is called hermeneutical circle, the permanent informing, modifying and reconfiguring of our understanding of a concrete text and its historical context.

Hippolytus’ commentary on Daniel is fully transmitted only in translation into ecclesiastical Slavonic and in one Greek manuscript from the Mount Athos featu-

2 Rüpke 2008, n° 1905 (without notes and references). For older studies see Döllinger 1853; Achelis 1897; Nautin 1947; Chadwick 2013.

3 Certainly the *Traditio apostolica* in its received form cannot be related to that author, see Marksches 1999b; Baldovin 2003; Cerrato 2004; Stewart-Sykes 2004.

4 See Scholten 1991; Brent 1995; Brent 2004; Volp 2009; Heintz 2011; see also Cerrato 2002; Cerrato 2004; Heine 2004.

5 Hippol. *Dan.* 1.18.

ring several blanks, damaged pages.<sup>6</sup> The commentary consists of four books and usually in order to make sense of it, it is read backwards, starting from the last book. Here Hippolytus is interpreting visions from the main part of the book of Daniel, where the latter, according to Hippolytus, is talking about the future reappearance of Christ making an end to persecutions and the like. From here the general interpretation of the whole text has been developed that this is the central interest of the text and thus the instigation for the whole business of interpretation. By commenting upon an older biblical text Hippolytus was to give consolation to his fellow Christians who were under the pressure of persecution and who might be taken out of their day-to-day life every moment by some pagans leading them to execution at the end of the day.

Due to this interpretation and the few dates known about the lifetime of Hippolytus himself and some key events of the epoch, the text has been dated to 204 AD, pointing to an edict of the emperor Septimius Severus to persecute Christians. This is already the first instance of the working of the hermeneutical circle referred to before. The *Historia Augusta* offers the testimony for that event, but this text is not only for the biography of Septimius Severus an utterly unreliable witness. The same Septimius Severus is attested as having figures of Abraham and Christ in his bedroom and venerating these figures. This is a nice image of imperial syncretism but again it is like many other political information of the biography hardly credible. As a consequence, scholars stopped to believe in the decree on persecution, but they did not stop to date the text to 204 AD. In the most recent monographic interpretation of the Daniel commentary by Katharina Bracht the dating based on the *Historia Augusta* and thus the year 204 is regarded as unreliable, but on the basis of the known fact that Septimius Severus (like many Roman emperors, I should like to add) liked to present himself as a god and that there is a polemic against veneration of images already in the text of Daniel and of course in the commentary, it is regarded as probable that the commentary is a reaction to this. The emperor (thus the argument runs) loved being venerated as Hercules as there is some coin showing him as Hercules of the year 203 AD. Thus the reader is admonished by Bracht to cling to the dating of Hippolytus' commentary to the year 204.<sup>7</sup> Is this supported by the evidence?

τὸ εἶδωλον τὸ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ προσκυνούμενον (Hippol. *Dan.* 2.24).  
the image, which was venerated by him.

It is clear from the Greek text that neither in Daniel nor in Hippolytus we can find any evidence for the idea that Jews were opposed to the cult of images because they would have to venerate the emperor as a god. The passage refers to the Persian respectively Babylonian king who is venerating some god under the form of an image that is clearly differentiated from him. In the book of Daniel there is no trace of the idea that the image represented the king. And there is no hint at all in Hippolytus

6 Recent editions and commentaries: Lefèvre 1947; Magny 2006; Bracht 2007; Shelton 2008; Hippolytus 2010; Bracht 2014.

7 Bracht 2014, 58–64.

that he read it in this manner. So again this dating to 204 has no foundation in the text whatsoever.

Drawing lessons from this case and from the hermeneutical circle pointed out before, I propose to step back and to start the interpretation from the fact that apart from reading the Commentary in the way just questioned there is no serious reference to persecutions in Rome at the time, there is no text that is evidence for the topic of the Roman emperor enforcing his veneration onto people and Jews (whether followers of Christ or not) and other Romans being forced to venerate him in the form of image. Instead I propose to imagine people who at times conceptualize themselves as belonging to a religious minority in a rather peaceful time and a Christ-oriented intellectual witnessing an enormous growth in terms of co-believers and an intensive process of institutionalization of Christianity in the city of Rome as well as elsewhere as the context of this text. Against such a background we have read this text again, being led by questions like: Why did he write, what did he write, how did he come to write the first bible commentary in this period? I suggest to do this under the three headings of first authorial voice, that is, how did he present himself? Secondly of implied reader, that is, what is the audience as far as we can reconstruct it from the text? And thirdly, what is the collective identity of these two or rather, what is shared by the author or narrating persona with his readership or audience. After that I will come to the conclusion by turning back again in the hermeneutical circle to the question of historical context.

### 3. Authorial Voice

Unfortunately, no preface has been transmitted in any of the versions of the text. There might have been one, but if it ever existed all we can assume about its contents would have to be based on the surviving text. What is the actual start of the text? In offering you my own English translation, I have to point out that despite the enormous amount of energy spent on biblical exegesis, there are not many translations of Hippolytus' commentary into modern languages.<sup>8</sup>

1.1 Τὴν ἀκριβείαν τῶν χρόνων τῆς γενομένης αἰχμαλωσίας τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ ἐπιδείξει βουλόμενος καὶ τὰς τοῦ μακαρίου Δανιὴλ τῶν ὁραμάτων προφητείας, τὴν τε τούτου ἐν Βαβυλώνι ἐκ παιδὸς ἀνατροφὴν, πρόσειμι καὶ αὐτὸς μαρτυρήσω ὅσῳ καὶ δικαίῳ ἀνδρὶ προφήτῃ καὶ μάρτυρι Χριστοῦ γεγενημένῳ.

The precise time of the prisonership of the sons of Israel I wish to demonstrate, and also the prophecies of the visions of the blessed Daniel, his education from childhood on in Babylon. Thus I will be giving witness for the holy and just man who became prophet and martyr of Christ.

The beginning sets the tone. “The precise time”, the very first words, are indicating the authorial voice of somebody who is up for precision in chronology. This is an

8 In the XXth century we find a French translation: Lefèvre 1947. A recent English one is Hippolytus 2010. The most recent German one is based on the Slavonian text and stems from the end of the XIXth century (Bonwetsch), even if it has been reprinted in the 2000: Richard, Bonwetsch 2000.

indication of a historiographic or even chronographic interest,<sup>9</sup> already noted by Porphyry in his critique of Christian texts. Such an interest is not unknown in writings of the period that base themselves on the biblical tradition, as exemplified by Flavius Josephus earlier or the roughly contemporary Iulius Africanus.<sup>10</sup> As a chronographer the author will soon engage in debate and dissent. Above all his interest is to embed the story of Daniel into a larger historical narrative. If this is the program, it is fulfilled by supplying the exact dates of the kings related to the story, that is the time of the Babylonian exile and the exact date of Daniel being around there. The dealing with chronology is explicit and critical.<sup>11</sup> However, in the course of the text, arguments are more and more replaced by narrative. The narrator allows himself even digressions, in order to produce suspense.<sup>12</sup>

There is a clear idea of historical consciousness and it is important for the type of interpretation offered. The distance in time is admitted and has to be bridged through reading or preaching and thereby accessing the prophetic contents of Daniel's visions. This is a worthy and important effort. It is very interesting against the background of the traditional reading of the text that this activity of doing research about precision in time is called "giving witness" (*martyrêzôn*), employing the same stem as the immediately following "martyr" Daniel. Again, authorial promises are held. The key term of *akribeia*, "precision", that is, careful research, is taken up several times in the text.<sup>13</sup> Hippolytus spends pages (or, for a listener, minutes) in fixing the dates of this or that king, of the occupation of Jerusalem and so on. Only after fixing the date of Daniel in a lengthy narrative and synchronism in the chapters 2 to 5 the story starts. The author's is a very intellectual and historical approach. In his retelling of the story he is also rearranging the story.

Unfortunately, we have no clear idea of how the text of Daniel was like before being reused by Hippolytus. At Rome, it was the translation of Theodotion rather than a Septuagint text.<sup>14</sup> Hippolytus knew and used texts that had a certain prominence at Rome like the tractate "To the Hebrews".<sup>15</sup> Such an observation does not allow us to speak of some knowledge of the "Old" or "New Testament".<sup>16</sup> At this time there was no corpus called "New Testament", there were different texts which were later called "Old Testament" and "New Testament" by those who identified themselves as Christians. These texts were available in different versions and translations. In details, differences were important. In many instances Susannah is naked (which is a nice and valued motif for painters in societies that were reluctant with regard to the representation of nudity), because she intended to take a bath. But this is not in the text of Daniel as transmitted by some

9 Likewise Marksches 1999a.

10 See for details Burgess, Kulikowski 2013, 110–117, with my review in Rüpke 2015.

11 Hippol. *Dan.* 1.5.

12 Hippol. *Dan.* 1.7–9; similar in 2.19.

13 E.g. in 2.11 (not transmitted in the Greek text).

14 See the discussion in Bracht 2014, 17 and 43–47.

15 See Bracht 2014, 49.

16 See now Vinzent 2014a; also the arguments on the process of redaction of the collection in Zwierlein 2009 and Zwierlein 2010. This is not to say that referring to Scripture was not an all important practice: see Lieu, North, Rajak 1994; Rajak 2009b; Rajak 2009a.

old translations and the text as being added to the Septuagint. But it is in a translation of the Roman imperial period where the reason of the stay of Susannah – and this has entered into most modern translations – is being given as bathing, which for Romans and their culture of public bathes was much more important than for many Greek authors.

As indicated before, Hippolytus is allowing even for digressions. Feeling obliged by the criterion of precision, he is, however, aware of justification needed in such cases. In 1.5 for instance he is stating that he is narrating the story in its chronological sequence, but that he now will add, what is already in the beginning of the biblical book. And yet, temporal precision is not a value in itself, as is stated in 1.18:

ἐκ τῶν προσκαιρῶν τὰ αἰόνια προσδοκᾶν  
out of the temporal to learn the eternal

This is even more important for the later books and the calculation of eschatological events on the basis of temporal ones. In the first book, however, the qualitative, the moral aspect proves important: we have to be precise in small things to learn about the bigger issues, that is the moral impact of the story. Nevertheless the author remains aware of the impact of narrative and heightens its impact by rearrangements. In the biblical pre-text, Daniel appears right after the pronouncement of the death penalty. Not likewise in Hippolytus. At the very moment of the pronouncement Hippolytus indulges in the imagination of the execution of this penalty. For about several chapters, maybe ten minutes in listening, he reflects about the cruelty of killing such a young and beautiful woman in the form of reflections on the imminent death by Susannah or her friends, thus creating tension in his audience. Only then Daniel appears, stopping the procedure.<sup>17</sup>

In the first book, interpretation is re-narration, telling the story anew, not so much explicating a difficult text. Daniel's prophecy is prepared by the narration of a preceding vision he had. And yet, Hippolytus points out that this vision is not part of the biblical text, but how it must have been.<sup>18</sup> Re-narration is fuller narration. And yet, there is a change in the authorial voice if we look beyond the first book, regardless whether the later books were part of the first publication or later additions. Within the course of his text, the historiographer takes on the role of a professional exegetic, an interpreter of texts. As such, he shows off in fireworks of quotations.<sup>19</sup> If we capture his enterprise by the concept of "rewritten bible", a re-narration of biblical stories,<sup>20</sup> rather than "commentary", the historical as well as the exegetic tone in the authorial voice should not be missed. Daniel in the lion's den, the three young men in the oven, the hand writing on the wall in Belsazar's (i.e. Nebucadnezar's) palace – all these stories that form part of the core of later biblical imaginaries and for instance European visual and narrative culture – are interpreted in much more detail, more conforming to our notion of commentary. Here Hippolytus' *akribeia* is the precision of the intellectual. He presents himself as a resourceful

17 Hippol. *Dan.* 1.23–27; Daniel 1.28.1.

18 Hippol. *Dan.* 1.29.1.

19 E.g. Hippol. *Dan.* 1.18 and 29.

20 The term has been coined in 1959 by Geza Vermes.

interpreter and much better reader than his audience. This is not only an intellectual quality, but a religious one, as two later passages underline:

2,11 ἀναγκαῖον δὲ <ακριβῶς> ἐπιζητεῖν τοὺς φιλαλήθεις, καὶ μὴ μόνον ἐν πάραδρομῇ ἀναγινώσκοντας

It is necessary to precisely search for those who love truth, and not to read *en passant*.

4,1,2 καὶ ἑτέροις τοῖς βουλομένοις μετὰ πίστεως ἐρευνᾶν τὰς θείας γραφὰς προφήτης ἀποδειχθῆ

in order that he is shown as a prophet also to those who fully believing wish to search the divine writings.

#### 4. Implied Reader

Who was the audience? There is an intensive interaction with the audience, especially in the first book. Time and again there is a dialogue with what might be called a “fictitious interlocutor”,<sup>21</sup> but there is also a direct address of the audience. The most direct address is found in 1.23.2:

<παντες οι ταύτην τκην γραφήν ἀναγινώσκοντες, γυναῖκες καὶ παρθένοι, μικροὶ καὶ <μ>εγ<α>λοι,

(I ask) all who read this book, women and virgins, small and big.

Here he is exhorting his audience to reflection. It is interesting that he has in particular a female readership in mind, even if the reconstructed Greek text uses inclusive male forms of *mikroi* and *megaloi*, based on the Slavonic text. In a text of half a century earlier, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, we have a parallel phenomenon. Here we find an interpreter of his own visions who is also addressing males and females conceptualized as different audiences.<sup>22</sup> For the present text gender is even more important. Evidently, Susannah is not only a personification of the “Church”, but she is developed as a female role-model for female individuals. If that is true, the prophet Daniel must also be read as a role-model for male recipients. The agency of those inferior, be it in gender, Susannah, be it in terms of age, the young Daniel confronting the “Elders”, must have been one of the attractions of the text for Hippolytus. This interest is in coherence with other texts from the era, which show an awareness of individuality, individual options, decisions, and obligations of moral and religious character.<sup>23</sup>

There seems to be a shift in the audience regarding different books. The audience of book 3 is an audience very much interested in other issues, calculations of time on the basis of older texts and visions in particular. It is interesting to see that Hippolytus remains very critical of this interest. Time and again he teaches his audience that eschatological calculation was not the interest of the original texts and

21 E.g. Hippol. *Dan.* 1.29.1; 2.35.8.

22 See Rüpke 2005 for the communicative strategies of that text. For the change from plural to singular in the books 3 and 4 see Bracht 2014, 96–97.

23 See Rüpke, Woolf 2013.

should not be the interest of their readers.<sup>24</sup> But again there is an interesting shift. In book 4, Hippolytus himself is sharing this interest. Thus, there is a clash of approaches, of warning in book 3 and practicing in book 4. This seeming incoherence might be softened by the results achieved in Hippolytus' calculations in book 4. Having to wait for further three hundred years is beyond any life expectancy, and that is to say, must be accepted by the audience as being without importance for their own lives.<sup>25</sup> The Roman Empire will go on for a long period and a long sequel of emperors will rule. Hippolytus is indulging in the description of eschatological woes, but at the same time undercutting the expectations of his audience. These eschatological expectations were presumably a strong concern with this audience – and an expectation Hippolytus felt he had to deal with.

The shift in audience, taken together with other indicators like cross-references,<sup>26</sup> suggests a long production process and a “publication”, perhaps as known from the *Shepherd of Hermas* in written and oral form, of the individual books, maybe over a period of years.<sup>27</sup> The first book on Susannah as well as the later books focus on very short passages within a longer literary context and could easily be imagined as autonomous publications addressing different audiences.

## 5. Collective Identity

Do we have any clues for the identity of this larger audience? The first clue is given by what is quoted. There are some other indicators to which I will turn later, but the readings the author imagines as shared offer important evidence. Intensive knowledge is presupposed and intensive quotations are given, among them the most lengthy literary quotation beyond the text of the Book of Daniel itself, from 1 and 2 Maccabees.<sup>28</sup> Historically, these are stories about Jewish martyrs in the period of Seleucid kings (167/166 BC), and it is in these very books that the idea of martyrdom as endurance into death on behalf of religious convictions and in reliance on religious salvation is developed. The book of Daniel itself is, maybe in younger passages, referring to these books. Obviously, Hippolytus' audience has a predilection for books from the mid second century BC and is interpreting its situation in the light of these texts.<sup>29</sup> As such there is no difference of this audience to what we know about other Jews' literary predilections of the period and their interest in martyrs.<sup>30</sup> It has to be pointed out that the book of Daniel offers a happy end – the qualification of “martyr” does not rely on the actual death of such a figure.

24 E.g. Hippol. *Dan.* 4.16.6; 21.4–22.1.

25 See Magny 2006, 430.

26 See Bracht 2014, 119–120, who points to the restriction of cross-references between books to book 4 pointing back to book 3.

27 See Rüpke 2017.

28 E.g. Hippol. *Dan.* 2.20 (2 Macc) or 4.42 (1 Macc).

29 See for the interest in Daniel during the (early) Empire: Oegema 2008; Theodoretus 2006; Hill 2007; Tilly 2007; Oegema 2013.

30 See Van Henten 2010; see also Shelton 2003, 69–78; Shelton 2008.

There are other quotations. Very occasionally from historical books and even more rarely of the *Tenakh*, which had not been canonized yet. Paul figures as *ho apostolos*, “the apostle”, a few times quotations are taken from the *apokalypsis* of John and even from the gospel ascribed to the same John. In general however, the few references to “the gospel” are generic references to the life of Jesus, not to any particular text and most certainly not to Marcion, Luke, Matthew or Mark. Jesus, the “Logos”, is already active in the story of Daniel, for instance in the shape of the angel talking to the three young men in the fire.<sup>31</sup> In sum, we see Jews for whom Christ is an important figure. They seem to conceptualize themselves at times by the name of *Christianoi*. The term is used rarely, but the “name” – and that is the name of Christ – figures frequently.<sup>32</sup>

The ambiguous identity thus claimed by me is not the usual interpretation of Hippolytus’ text. The latter is built on the passage in 1.15 referring to the Elders as references to two peoples:

οἱ δὲ δύο πρεσβύτεροι εἰς τύπον δείκνυνται τῶν δύο λαῶν τῶν ἐπιβουλευόντων τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, εἰς μὲν ὁ ἐκ περιτομῆς καὶ εἰς ὁ ἐξ ἔθνων.

The two Elders typologically show the two peoples that are detrimental to the Church, the one of the circumcision, the other of the nations.

Are these simply “Jews” and “pagans”? Other passages do not support this simple view. Throughout the books expressions are chosen very careful. Only very occasional Jews *in toto* are identified as those who will also bring “oppression” about.<sup>33</sup> Otherwise, the wordings could be reconciled with the interpretation proposed here that the basic community is the *ekklesia*, the Jewish people from the start of history,<sup>34</sup> among whom now some still cling to circumcision,<sup>35</sup> but these are not “the other”, but a sub-group among others. The same holds true for the “pagans”, for instance in 1.21.3:

ἵνῃκα γὰρ ἂν οἱ δύο λαοὶ συμφωνήσουσιν διαφθεῖραι τὰς τῶν ἁγίων ψυχὰς, παρατηροῦνται “ἡμέραν εὐθετον” καὶ ἐπισηελθόντες εἰς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ, προσευχομένων ἔχει πάντων καὶ τὸν θεὸν ἀνυμνοῦντων, ἐπιλαβόμενοι ἔλκουσίν τινας καὶ κρατοῦσιν λέγοντες• δεῦτε, συγκατάθεσθε ἡμῖν καὶ τοὺς θεοὺς ἡμῶν θρησκεύσατε. “εἰ δὲ μή, καταμαρτυρήσομεν” καθ’ ὑμῶν. τῶν δὲ μὴ βουλομένων, προσαγαγόντες αὐτοὺς πρὸς τοὺς βικα<ρίους> κατηγοροῦσιν ὡς ἐναντία τοῦ δόγματος Καίσαρος πράσσοντας καὶ θανάτῳ κατακρίνονται.

For when the two peoples are in harmony to destroy the souls of the holy ones, they closely watch for a convenient day [probably a “lucky day” in a astrological sense] and enter the house of God and grasp somebody saying (whereas the other pray and praise God): “Alas, join us and venerate our gods. If not, we will accuse you. If they do not want, they bring them to the governors (*vicarii*) and accuse them of acting against the will of the Caesar and they were sentenced to death”.

31 On Hippolytus’ angelologic Christology see briefly Bracht 2014, 291 and 296–297; in general Bucur 2009.

32 E.g. Hippol. *Dan.* 1.22; 2.34.

33 Hippol. *Dan.* 1.22.2; 4.50.3.

34 See Marcus 2011, in particular 395–396.

35 Cf. for the issue of circumcision already in Hadrianic times Bazzana 2010, in particular 96–97.

The situation imagined here is not described in every detail, but it fits better interaction between people who loosely know each other and could be imagined to join in for a religious service rather than strangers breaking into a meeting. This might point to apparent co-believers and porous boundaries rather than clearly differentiated “confessions” or “religions”. This impression is supported for instance by the interpretation of the elders’ observation of Susannah in the garden (1.15):

[...] τούτο σημαίνει ὅτι ἕως νῦν παρατηροῦνται καὶ περιεργάζονται τὰ ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρᾶττόμενα ὅτε ἐξ ἔθνῶν καὶ οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς Ἰουδαῖοι, βουλόμενοι ψευδεῖς μαρτυρίας καταφέρειν καθ’ ἡμῶν,

[...] that shows until now that they closely watch and unnecessarily worry about what is done in the Church, those of the nations and the Jews of the circumcision, in order to bring false witness about us.

Further passages contribute to the author’s attempt to conceptualize the fluctuating situations with the help of the ancient text, if not read by us on a hermeneutical basis of pre-defined and exclusive identities. Thus the temporary alliance of those attributing importance to circumcision and pagans in the surrounding of Hippolytus’ audience is interpreted in the interpretation of the separation and renunciation of the two elders in 1.16:

[...] τούτο σημαίνει, ὅτι ἐν μὲν τοῖς βρώμασιν τοῖς ἐπιγείοις οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι μετὰ τῶν ἔθνῶν οὐ συμφωνοῦσιν, ἐν δὲ ταῖς θεωρίαις καὶ παντὶ πράγματι κοσμητικῶ τούτοις συνερχόμενοι κοινωνοῦσιν.

[...] that shows that the Jews are not in concordance with the nations regarding earthly food, but in philosophizing and all worldly things they are together.

Again, the text would be misread, if we interpret “Jews” by inferring a polar distinction between “Jews” and “Christians”, as is illustrated in 1.18:

ὡς νῦν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ νόμος καὶ λόγος ὡς δύο ξύλα πεφυτευμένα δείκνυνται.  
as now are the Law and the Logos in the Church shown to grow as two trees.

In sum, the author develops what has been called a unitarian theology, which tries to map inclusivity and identifies problems *within* the group of “believers” (1.18):

τί οὖν ἐστὶν ἐκκλησία; σύστημα ἁγίων ἐν ἀληθείᾳ πολιτευομένων.

But what is the Church? It is the coming together of the holy humans and those being citizens in the truth.

And in a similar vein in 1,25:

ἐὰν δὲ λέγηται μὲν πιστός, ἀπιστου δὲ ἔργα ποιῇ, ὁ τοιοῦτος λήψεται παρὰ θεοῦ δισσοὺν τὸ κρῖμα,

Whenever somebody names himself believer, but does deeds of inbelief, he will be doubly punished by God.

Again, it is not the conflicts at any outside boundaries, but the lack of boundaries within an imagined group into which a pervasive identity is to be inculcated, that is the central problem identified by the author.

## 6. Historical Context

We are facing a contradiction. On the one hand the text is presupposing and interpreting a situation in which religious boundaries are not clear-cut, even if accentuated in certain situations or permanently radicalized by some like the followers of Marcion.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, persecution is a topic of some importance for the audience. How could that be reconciled? If the text stems from early third-century Rome – perhaps the best hypothesis, even if not proven beyond doubt –, Jews (and Christ-followers among them) could look back on a period of enormous institutional development as illustrated by letters by episcopos or synagogue organisations attested in third and fourth century inscriptions.<sup>37</sup> The ongoing shift to Latin, attested in a growing number of translations or original text throughout the third century, attests to a massive inculturation.

Jews had been an age-old minority *within* Hellenistic and Roman societies, a situation they must have been fully aware of.<sup>38</sup> Immense social success was possible for individuals as for self-organization as a group.<sup>39</sup> In institutional terms, peace was characteristic for at least a generation. This did not prevent individuals to be endangered. Protestants in Early Modern France, Catholics in England of the same period, Jews in XVIIIth and XIXth century Germany, Sinti and Roma in today's Europe, white farmers in post-colonial Zimbabwe, Indians in early XXth century South Africa – in different shades these constellations might help to understand the situation of early third century Rome with its record of perhaps one execution of somebody accused as Jew or “Christian” every ten years – a scale taken from Carthage, which was denounced by Tertullian as stronghold of anti-Christian persecutions and shown to have seen hardly more persecuted on the basis of all available extant sources. Attacks are potential rather than actual.

We have to imagine attempts to build leadership, to form a group against such a background. Hippolytus is not the wealthy patron, the powerful in a local society due to agrarian wealth and mercantile networks. Instead, he has to gain authority in literary enterprises.<sup>40</sup> To cultivate difference and thus create an in-group-feeling sounds like a good strategy, even if built on a “Gedankenexperiment”, an imagined clash, only. Reflect on your heritage, think about test cases, keep the ranks closed, remain faithful to the group, to yourself, to your god, this is the type of boundary work instigated by intellectuals like the author of the Commentary *in Danielelem*. The text might have been successful – and perhaps translated – in the persecution of Decius, but there are no attested persecutions from the period of the composition, which might be related to the text, nor are there sufficiently specific historic references in the text on which otherwise unattested persecutions could be postulated.<sup>41</sup>

36 On Marcion see Vinzent 2014b and Vinzent 2014a.

37 See Rüpke 2008, *passim*, for the city of Rome; more generally: Noy 1995.

38 In general Schwartz 2001; Satlow 2006; Schenk 2010; Schwartz 2012.

39 Schwartz 2010.

40 For the long-standing opposition of these types see Ullucci 2012.

41 For the problematics of such circular arguments see the renewed discussion on the date of John's *Apocalypsis* in Witulski 2007 (I am grateful to Markus Vinzent for this reference).

It is however possible to find other references to contemporary history in the text. In 4.9.2 the strategy of the present empire, to “call everybody Roman” is compared with the formation of a people believing in and bearing the name of Christia-*noi*. Immediately preceding, the text is even more explicit (4.8.7):

The animal now in power is not one people, but it brings itself together from all languages and every kind of men and prepares its force into a battle order, calling all Romans (οἱ πάντες μὲν Ῥωμαῖοι καλούμενοι) despite the fact that they are not from one country.

This is best interpreted as a reference to the granting of citizenship to all free inhabitants of the Roman empire by the emperor Caracalla in 212. This would offer a *terminus post quem* for the book about a decade later than the usual dating. This would also enable us to hypothetically – and I have to admit, much more hypothetically – situate the text in the context of a widely discussed killing of a presumably innocent young female – not at all from a Jewish background. I am referring to the prosecution and execution of a Vestal virgin, described by the contemporary Greek observer, historian and Roman senator Cassius Dio according to later excerpts (77.16.1–2):

While claiming to be the most pious of all mankind, he indulged to an extravagant decree in bloodshed, putting to death four of the Vestal Virgins, one of whom he had himself outraged – when he had still been able to do so; for later all his sexual power had disappeared. [...] (2) This girl, of whom I was just speaking, was named Clodia Laeta; and she was buried alive, though protesting in a loud voice, “Antoninus himself knows that I am a virgin; he himself knows that I am pure”.

Of course, I am operating in a hermeneutical circle myself. By shifting perspective, by shifting the point of view, the Greek-speaking intellectual Hippolytus takes sides with the Greek-speaking intellectual Dio, sharing an interest in historical narrative, but writing for very different purposes and against the background of divergent literary traditions. Both were as integrated into contemporary Roman society as to integrate the story in a narrative of Roman history in the one case. In the other case the contemporary event might have triggered the re-narrating and reworking of the biblical text of Susannah. On that hypothesis, it is an event of what might be called full pagan history that triggered the composition of what has been classified as the first Christian biblical commentary.

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