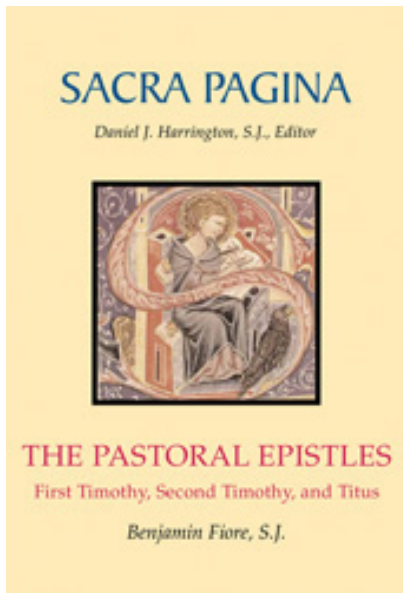


RBL 10/2008



Fiore, Benjamin

The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus

Sacra Pagina

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007. Pp. xxi + 253, Hardcover, \$39.95, ISBN 0814658148.

Korinna Zamfir
Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj, Romania

Benjamin Fiore's commentary on the Pastoral Epistles is one of the latest volumes of the Sacra Pagina series, aiming at offering solid exegesis by prestigious Catholic scholars in the spirit of post-Vatican II biblical interpretation. The features of the series mark this volume as well. First, the series addresses not only biblical scholars but clergy, students, and religious educators as well. Second, the current commentary, just as the other volumes in the series, is less extensive compared to, for example, that of Marshall or Towner or the Continental commentaries of Oberlinner or Roloff (even when the smaller print makes it more condensed). Third, the volume also has some practical orientation, attempting to bring to surface conclusions that are still actual in the church of our days, even when, as the author admits, some of the material in the Pastoral Epistles "no longer corresponds to realities in the church today" (3). These details are meant to explain that the work reviewed here is serious, critical, most useful, yet those who work on the Pastoral Epistles will not find responses to all their questions on various details and debates, but a clear assessment of the most important issues and an excellent starting point for further studies.

As to the structure, each chapter is introduced by the text to be analyzed, where Fiore generally uses his own translation; the notes follow, where textual and interpretation

problems are discussed (actually, this is the most consistent part of the commentary); the interpretation itself is less detailed but includes fundamentals of *Wirkungsgeschichte* and sometimes elements of actualization. The latter never occur at the cost of scholarly seriousness.

Fiore, a student of Abraham Malherbe, has been working on the Pastoral Epistles already since his Yale doctoral dissertation, published in 1986, on *The Function of Personal Example in the Socratic and Pastoral Epistles*. His interest in the Hellenistic influence on these writings is also obvious in the present commentary. Actually, Fiore's most original contribution to the topic is the ample use of parallels from Greco-Roman moralists and rhetoricians that provide a perspective often omitted from other commentaries.

Due to the well-known differences in theological emphases and language, as well as to the more developed ecclesial organization, the dissimilar image of Paul compared to the undisputed epistles and to the particular relationship with society at large, Fiore regards the Pastoral Epistles as pseudonymous (even when he does so somewhat cautiously, e.g., 21: "most likely after his death"). The discussion is short (obviously due to the limitations imposed by the series), yet clear and consistent. Fiore circumspectly presumes that the addressees themselves are also fictitious. Thus, he reads the Pastoral Epistles within the context of a "real situation of conflict over the valid representation of Pauline tradition and its authentic development" (36). The author accurately notes that the "transfer of authority" from Paul to Timothy (as presented by 2 Timothy), "provides an authoritative link for current church leaders with their predecessor Paul" (8). Fiore situates the Pastoral Epistles around 80–90, mainly because the hierarchical structure of the church is less developed as in Ignatius (the issue of secondary expansions to the Ignatian corpus and thus the possibility of an even later dating is not addressed). However, throughout the commentary Fiore is concerned with showing bridges that secure continuity with the Pauline tradition. On the other hand, in spite of suggesting the double pseudonymity of author and recipients, Fiore regards the epistles as reflecting the actual historical conditions in Ephesus and Crete, at times with too much optimism concerning our possibility to discern the concrete situation in these particular churches (37, 89, 97–98, *passim*).

As to the opponents confronted by the Pastoral Epistles, the introductory chapter places the emphasis on the Jewish/Jewish-Christian, Pharisaic-like character of their teaching (14–15). Here one has the impression that the brief discussion does not do full justice to the complexity of the problem, especially when it comes to the background of the asceticism they promote. Yet further on, commenting on various texts, Fiore admits other possible interpretations. Thus, at 1 Tim 1:4 he notes that the tales and genealogies could also refer to "births of founders" and "lines of traditions of teachers," while the criticism

of myths is a device used already by Plato (41), so it does not necessarily imply Jewish myths. Discussing the sexual asceticism promoted by the opponents, at 1 Tim 4:3 Fiore gives more space to other explanations (more likely than a Jewish background), including proto-Gnostic tendencies, or certain women's attempt to escape patriarchal household structure (90–91). At any rate, Fiore is right to state that the identity of the opponents remains an open question (15).

The author appropriately assesses that the references to the content of the opponents' teaching are too vague to allow definite conclusions. He also shows that the use of vice lists (such as that in 1 Tim 1) should be seen as a rhetorical device meant to denigrate the opponents (46). Yet, reading through the discussion of various texts attacking the "false teachers" and their adepts in the community, one wonders whether Fiore does not take the accusations of immorality and wrong teaching at face value. Thus at page 57 we read: "the extreme behavior encouraged (e.g., asceticism, 1 Tim 4:3) or tolerated (emancipation of slaves, 1 Tim 6:1–2, and of women, 1 Tim 2:11–15; 5:8, 11–13), the disturbance caused within the community by heterodox teaching (see 1 Tim 1:4–7; 6:3–5; 2 Tim 2:16–18; 3:1–9; 4:3–4; Titus 3:9), and the danger to the moral fabric of the community (e.g., 1 Tim 1:9–10; 6:3–5, 9–10; 2 Tim 3:2–5; Titus 1:15–16) could be a cause for the low esteem for and even prejudice against the church." One cannot help asking whether one can label the emancipatory tendencies as "extreme behavior," even when Fiore obviously addresses the issue from the perspective of the ancient society from which the Pastoral Epistles expect acceptance. Second, the attacks concerning the opponents' alleged immorality throughout the three epistles are so obviously polemical and use such stock accusations, widespread in Greco-Roman writings, that one strongly doubts their objectivity. Third, when one situates the Pastoral Epistles within the debate over the authentic representation of the Pauline tradition, one cannot help suspecting that the image we get of the opponents' teaching is strongly biased; therefore, we need a great degree of caution when accepting the label of false or heterodox teaching. The discussion of the widows' failure in faith and morality (1 Tim 5:13), paralleled with that of the false teachers (2 Tim 3:6–7), just as the analysis of the exhortation to slaves (1 Tim 6:1–2), gives the similar impression of an insufficiently critical reading (106, 116, 167–68).

At any rate, Fiore rightly notes that, notwithstanding the basically hortatory purpose of these epistles, they do not lack doctrinal elements. The commentator pertinently elaborates, for instance, on the particular character of the doctrine of salvation. He appropriately notes the intellectual dimension of salvation, which is based on the knowledge of truth (7, 13–14: the saving role of education; 59: salvation from ignorance). Acquaintance with and appropriation of true doctrine is a prerequisite of piety and good works. This special understanding of salvation is illuminated from its Hellenistic background.

In his discussion of church order and ministries, Fiore shows that the *episkopos* cannot be taken for the later monarchic bishop, nor can one assume a threefold, hierarchically structured ministry (11–12, 19–20, 74). He appears to agree to some extent with the generic use of the singular *episkopos* and its interchangeability with the elder(s), as suggested by Titus. The ministries he distinguishes are thus those of overseer(s) and/or elders, male and female assistants (deacons) and widows. The moral exhortations to members of the community, to women, the lists of qualifications required from leaders are largely and very instructively illuminated from Greco-Roman sources.

The prohibition against women teaching (1 Tim 2:12), just as the restrictions imposed on widows, are understood with good reason as excluding women from public ministries under the influence of common cultural biases and of the contemporary views on social and household order. The prohibition is seen as an indirect proof for women being involved in teaching and fulfilling responsible functions in the Pauline communities, as indicated by the genuine Pauline letters as well.

It is perplexing, however, that the provision for older women to instruct younger women (Tit 2:3–4) is introduced in the line of teachers “that extends from Paul, to Timothy and Titus, to the authorized overseers and elders, older women, and finally to the teachers of future generations” (143). It is obvious that between “authorized overseers and elders” and older women teaching, the difference is incommensurate: the former are to teach doctrinal contents, publicly instructing the community at large. Conversely, women are excluded from such a task, and the “curriculum” that older women are to teach their younger sisters comprises only moral exhortations that make them not only more compliant with their domestic role but also more submissive members of the household and of the church.

The pertinent discussion of the specific character of 2 Timothy is another aspect of the commentary that needs to be mentioned. Fiore regards it with good reason as belonging to the genre of testamentary letter (widespread in the Greco-Roman world and in Hellenistic Judaism), very similar on the one hand with the fictitious epistles of Socrates and the Socratic disciples and, on the other, with Paul’s farewell speech in Acts 20. Both types of writings were aimed at preserving and handing over tradition and at offering examples of moral attitudes to be followed by later generations. This perspective on the epistle illuminates its special character and is most useful in the debate with scholarship that regards 1 Timothy and Titus as pseudonymous but 2 Timothy as authentic, given the personal details and the references to Paul’s approaching death.

To conclude, Fiore’s commentary is an important contribution to the discussion of the Pastoral Epistles, an excellent introduction for those who wish to become acquainted with

these epistles. The volume makes the reader aware of the manifold issues connected to the formation of tradition and the shaping of ministries and structures in the early church, as well as of the debates that preoccupied and divided Christians at the beginning of their history. Even when Fiore might not agree with his following lines being regarded as a summary of the discussion, this reviewer finds that they express well the main line of these letters: “the aim of finding respectability in the larger society was to be achieved through the sacrifice of a fuller life for women and slaves” (214). Of course, there is more to the Pastoral Epistles in what concerns lasting issues such as those of universal salvation, Christology, and the irreproachable lifestyle demanded from Christians. But when it comes to actualization, as a Catholic woman also interested in the ecumenical dialogue, the present reviewer considers that more could be said about the conclusions to be drawn from the culturally determined exclusion of women from ministry (71–72) and from the development of ordained ministries (74–79) with respect to the threefold ministry. However, these are only contingent issues in the case of a biblical commentary, which do not question the importance of this volume.