

Isidore de Péluse. Lettres, III: Lettres, 1701–2000. By Pierre Évieux and Nicolas Vinel. (Sources Chrétiennes, 586.) Pp. 499. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2013. €50 (paper). 978 2 204 12329 7; 0750 1978
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This is the last of three volumes which present a critical edition of around eight hundred letters of Isidore of Pelusium with a French translation facing the Greek text and published in the series *Sources Chrétiennes*. After the death of Pierre Évieux, the editor and translator of the first two volumes (letters 1,214–413 and 1,414–700), this third volume was completed by Nicolas Vinel on the basis of the materials already prepared by Évieux for the remaining three hundred letters (nos 1,701–2,000).¹ The three volumes provide the first modern critical edition since Morel's of 1638 (reprinted by Migne in *PG* lxxxvii) and make accessible to the larger public the latter part of this enormous epistolary corpus of 2,000 letters preserved by the manuscript tradition. I will comment here

¹ Isidore de Péluse, *Lettres, I: Lettres 1214–1413*, ed. and trans. Pierre Évieux, *SC* cdxlii, Paris 1997; *Lettres, II: Lettres 1414–1700*, ed. and trans. Pierre Évieux, *SC* xdliv, Paris 2000.

on the third volume; readers interested in the life of Isidore and the transmission of his epistolary corpus are referred to the extensive introduction to the first volume of the edition and to Éviéux's seminal study on Isidore.²

As in the previous volumes, the letters range from terse aphoristic pronouncements to short treatises, covering issues of monastic spirituality, the interpretation of Scripture or the relationship between pagan and Christian education. Many letters also address or refer to the open confrontation between Isidore and Eusebius, the bishop of Pelusium, over the accusation of simony which was dividing the local Church. And so this third volume, like the previous two, offers a valuable collection of sources for the ecclesiastical and monastic life of Pelusium between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century and will be much appreciated by scholars of late antiquity and of early Christianity in particular. Because of this wide range of subjects, the reader will be grateful to find a schematic overview at the end of the volume in the form of a table of contents (*table de lettres*), which presents a compact, one-sentence summary of each letter.

The reader will find Isidore in his different roles as teacher, exegete, monk, spiritual adviser and religious opponent, and thus employing a variety of rhetorical registers. The conflict between Isidore and Eusebius, 'the foeman of virtue' (letter 1,810) and 'tyrant' (letter 1,987), is most vividly expressed in Isidore's letters to Zosimus, a minister to whom the bishop sold the office of priesthood, Zosimus acting from a 'lust of power', Eusebius from a 'lust of money' (letter 1,945). On the other hand, those ministers 'adorned by virtue', such as Eutonium, have to suffer the machinations of every priest, with the complicity of no less a figure than the bishop himself (letter 1,987).³ The letters dealing with the practical matters of ascetic life occupy another important block in the volume.⁴ A certain reverence bound Isidore to some of the monks in particular, such as the priest Theodosius (letter 1,853) or Eliseus (letter 1,900). His letters abound in practical advice and parenetic appeals to a life of virtue and moderation. They also touch upon sophisticated questions of a philosophical or theological nature, such as the question of the fall of the souls (letter 1,999). Nor does Isidore fail to offer insight into his own spiritual life, confessing for example his weakness when it comes to praying and to being thankful towards those from whom one suffers injustices (letter 1,768). As several letters show, Scripture maintains a central role in the monastic practice which Isidore desires to promote: it should be integrated into the daily prayer of every Christian (letter 1,793) but must also be read with discrimination, the reader knowing at which stage of his spiritual journey he can engage with a given biblical book (letter 1,834). Several letters deal with the interpretation of particular passages which present exegetical or dogmatic problems. In one case we see him indulge in a lengthy excursus on the necessity of textual criticism for the correct understanding of several biblical

² Pierre Éviéux, *Isidore de Péluse*, Paris 1995. See also Johann Leemans, 'Die Briefe des Isidor von Pelusium: Bildung, Glaube, Kommunikation', in P. Gemeinhardt and others (eds), *Von Rom nach Bagdad: Bildung und Religion von der römischen Kaiserzeit bis zum klassischen Islam*, Tübingen 2013, 29–50, and, most recently, Lillian I. Larsen, 'The letter collection of Isidore of Pelusium', in C. Sogno and others (eds), *Late antique letter collections: a critical introduction and reference guide*, Oakland, CA 2017, 286–308.

³ See also Éviéux, *Isidore de Péluse*, 206–40.

⁴ Ibid. 276–90.

passages (letter 1,868).⁵ Last but not least, Isidore still engages with the legacy of classical education, exchanging letters with the sophists Harpocras (letter 1,743) and Asclepios (letter 1,854) or confronting the physician Prosechios with Galen's teaching on the soul (letter 1,791).

The translation is accurate but not slavish – elegant and approachable even for non-native French-speakers; only in some minor instances does this give rise to a very slight imprecision in how the Greek wording is rendered, and in such cases the interpretation is not unfair. The critical apparatus does not present particular problems. In certain cases the editors have chosen to follow one or another group of manuscripts. They also include the edition of Migne or personal conjectures for the sake of grammatical soundness or coherence of content. They have thus chosen, for example, to conjecture 'ἐν παιδοτρίβου' ('in [the school] of the gymnastic master') where the variants testified by the manuscripts are all problematic (letter 1,853); while the editor supports his conjecture with a reference to another of Isidore's letters, a further reference to Aristophanes (*Equites* 1,238) would have strengthened the case for this particular decision.

In the footnotes to the translation, the editor offers useful references to both the Hellenic and Christian writers whom Isidore quotes throughout his epistolary *corpus*; they are also listed in an index of quotations and an index of names. The remaining footnotes mostly limit themselves to references to Évieux's seminal study on Isidore. This means that some more recent bibliography goes unmentioned; while this is unfortunate, this edition itself will stand as a gateway to further contributions and studies of Isidore's thought and activity and his laudable commitment to becoming a master of epistolography.

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⁵ Ibid. 330–7.