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## A Confession without Pretence Text and Context of Pelagius' Defence of 417 AD

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## SUMMARY

### ***“A Confession Without Pretence” Text and Context of Pelagius’ Defence of 417 AD***

For an evaluation of the opinions of those in the early church who were accused of heresy, we often have to depend on the picture drawn by their opponents. In the case of Pelagius, however, things are different. At least three of his own writings have been preserved in full, though mostly under the names of other authors. In one of these, the *Libellus fidei*, Pelagius responds to the issue of his condemnation as a heretic by bishop Innocent of Rome in 417 AD. In an elaborate confession of faith he defends himself against his accusers. The *Libellus fidei* gives us a direct view on the way Pelagius, at a critical juncture, perceived the controversy surrounding his person.

Despite the potential relevance of this source, relatively little attention has been paid to it, especially in more recent research. So far, its occasion and immediate cause, its sources, and its context have not been mapped. Augustine’s judgement that the *Libellus fidei* is a misleading document, however, has met with much consent. Further, there is no reliable edition of the text. The existing editions offer versions that differ at the level of words and even sentences.

The present study aims to make a start with filling these gaps. First of all by offering a new edition that is based on a comprehensive study of the manuscript tradition (Chapter 2). Since Pelagius’ text was transmitted under the name of Jerome and sometimes even Augustine, the *Libellus fidei* acquired significant prestige during the Middle Ages, also at the Court of Charlemagne and during the Scholastic age. Partly because of this, the confession was transmitted in an impressive manuscript tradition, both from a qualitative and a quantitative perspective. It comprises over 300 manuscripts which may be divided into seven families and a few independent witnesses. As it turns out, the existing editions are based on a limited part of the manuscript tradition. In addition to the new edition, this chapter offers some more editions or reconstructions of writings somehow related to the *Libellus fidei*: Pelagius’ letter to Innocent, Caelestius’ *Libellus fidei*, and two confessions ultimately based on that of Pelagius (one of them is ascribed to Julian of Aeclanum by some).

Chapter 3 offers an exploration of the prehistory of and immediate cause for writing the *Libellus fidei*. Here, it is argued that Pelagius’ condemnation came about on the basis of deficient information from Palestine and contradictory reports from Latin Africa. Pelagius had been acquitted at the synod of Diospolis in Palestine (415 AD), but for a long time the Latin West was pretty much in the dark on what exactly had happened there. Despite of that, two African councils warned Rome by writing him that Pelagius (among other things) denied the necessity of God’s grace. A third letter, signed by five African bishops including Augustine, shows that in the meantime new information had become available, as the letter reports that Pelagius in fact had *confessed* the necessity of grace, but emphasizes that he should be questioned on what he means by that. The three letters illustrate how gradually new information got through and how awareness emerged that the term grace is ambiguous and needs further qualification. In light of that, it is striking that bishop Innocent of Rome for his condemnation mainly draws on the problematic council letters and condemns Pelagius solely on their authority.

In Chapter 4 attention is drawn to the sources of the *Libellus fidei*. When accused of heresy, it was common use to defend oneself by writing a creed demonstrating one's own orthodox position. That is the strategy Pelagius resorted to as well, turning to the Oriental, Nicene symbola for inspiration, especially Epiphanius' 'second creed' of 374 AD. In accordance with common practice, Pelagius adapted his sources to make the text fit his own purposes, but also added statements related to the controversy that had led to his condemnation. Using Epiphanius may seem remarkable, because he was an old friend of Pelagius' enemy Jerome and an old enemy of his protector, bishop John of Jerusalem. At the same time, however, it may be interpreted as a comprehensible, that is, strategical manoeuvre.

This brings us to Chapter 5, which is devoted to the question of the context in which the *Libellus fidei* was written. The classical perception of the controversy is that Pelagius was head to head with Augustine. It is striking that the *Libellus fidei* hardly fits such a representation of the facts. At least as far as Pelagius was concerned, in this phase, his main opponent was Jerome. He repeatedly aligns his response to the latter's criticisms, sometimes criticizing him sharply, sometimes taking his words as point of departure. Clear references to Augustine are wanting.

When Augustine claims that the *Libellus fidei* was deliberately ambiguous and misleading, his main argument is that Pelagius does not clearly answer his questions. But Pelagius was not trying to answer Augustine: he was answering Jerome. The latter's role in the controversy, seeking the confrontation with Pelagius, is well known, but because of the strong rhetorical and at points implausible character of his criticism, his contribution to the Pelagian controversy usually receives less attention and recognition than that of Augustine. As it turns out, Pelagius, at least at this juncture, saw Jerome as the most imminent danger, not Augustine.

The present study aims, as far as possible, to give the floor to Pelagius' own words and let him speak for himself. This is first of all by offering a new edition of a key text, and then by exploring some fundamental questions related to the text, so that future scholarship may further build upon this. As a result, we get a more authentic view of his theology and his own perception of the force field he was in.