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JOHN ZONARAS ON THE DATE OF EASTER

Most of us think of John Zonaras as a Byzantine epitomator of Cassius Dio. This he certainly did, as part of composing his own history. Even in brief, that history was pretty long, running up to the reign of Alexius I Comnenus. We're still dependent on the old Bonn CSHB text for access to this work. A good chunk of it was translated recently into English by Thomas Banchich, covering the period from Alexander Severus up to Theodosius the Great. I also today found a bunch of earlier material translated on the *Sententiae Antiquae* blog [here](#).

But Zonaras also left us a work commenting on ecclesiastical canon law; and one part of that affects the life of millions, by way of the "Zonaras Proviso". I learned of this recently from a very interesting article on [Easter at the OrthodoxWiki site](#).

In the Orthodox world, there is a subtle difference in the calculation of Easter: that Easter or Pascha must always follow the Jewish Passover. This rule is unknown in the west, with the effect that Easter can sometimes precede Passover. For a lucid explanation of this, let me refer the interested reader to [an article at Roads of Emmaus blog](#).

But our interest is the text of Zonaras, *Commentary on Apostolic Canons*, canon 7, which appears in the PG 137, cols. 49-50, in the middle of a combined commentary by Theodore Balsamon, Zonaras and Aristenus. The canon reads "If any bishop, presbyter or deacon celebrates the holy day of Pascha before the spring equinox with the Jews, let him be deposed."

Here's Zonaras:

ZONAR. Ἐαρινὴν ἰσημερίαν τινὲς τὴν κε' φασὶ τοῦ Μαρτίου· τινὲς δὲ τὴν κε' τοῦ Ἀπριλλίου. Οἶμαι δὲ μήτ' ἐκείνην μήτε ταυτην τὸν κανόνα λέγειν· ὥς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ γὰρ τὸ Πάσχα πρὸ τῆς κε' τοῦ Ἀπριλλίου ἐορτάζεσθαι εἰώθεν· ἔστι δὲ ὅτε καὶ πρὸ τῆς κε' τοῦ Μαρτίου, ὥς συμβαίνειν (εἰ οὕτως νοοῖτο ἡ ἔαρινὴ ἰσημερία) παρὰ τὸν κανόνα τοῦτον τὸ Πάσχα ἐορτάζεσθαι. Ἔοικεν οὖν ἄλλο τι ἔαρινὴν ἰσημερίαν τοὺς συνετοὺς ἀποστόλους ὀνομάζειν. Ἡ δὲ πᾶσα τοῦ κανόνα, διαταγὴ τοῦτό ἐστι, τὸ μὴ μετὰ Ἰουδαίων (ἡγουν κατ' αὐτὴν τὴν ἡμέραν) ἐορτάζειν τὸ Πάσχα Χριστιανούς. Χρὴ γὰρ προηγεῖσθαι τὴν ανέορτον ἐκείνων ἐορτὴν, καὶ οὕτω τὸ καθ' ἡμᾶς τελεῖσθαι Πάσχα. Ὁ δὲ μὴ τοῦτο ποιῶν ἱερομένο, καθαιρεθήσεται. Τοῦτο δὲ καὶ ἡ ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ σύνοδος ἐν πρώτῳ κανόνι διετάξατο, λέγουσα τῆς ἐν Νικαίᾳ πρώτης συνόδου ὅρον εἶναι περὶ τῆς ἐορτῆς τοῦ Πάσχα· εἰ καὶ μὴ εὗρισκεται ἐν τοῖς κανόσι τῆς ἐν Νικαίᾳ συνόδου τοιοῦτος κανὼν.

Helpfully the OrthodoxWiki writer has translated it, humbly adding, "Please note, this text has been translated into English from the Latin parallel translation found in Migne, PG 137." I've amended it in places.

ZONAR. Some say the Spring equinox is the 25th day of March; others, the 25th day of April. I deem that the canon refers to neither the one nor the other. For Pascha is often celebrated before the 25th of April. There are even times when it is celebrated before the 25th of March; so that, (if "Spring equinox" were so understood) Pascha would happen in violation of this canon. Whence it appears that the wise apostles call something else the "Spring equinox." So the whole thrust of the canon is this, that Christians should not celebrate Pascha with the Jews (that is, on the same day). For it is fitting that their feast (which is no feast) is done first; and thus we do our Pascha. If one consecrated to God does this even once, he is removed from orders. The synod in Antioch also ordered this, in their first canon, where they stated that this was decreed concerning the feast of Pascha by the synod of Nicea, although no such canon is found in the canons of the Nicene synod.

I have never known anything about canon law. I find that there is a volume on Greek canon law which tells us about this side of Zonaras.^[1] From this we learn the following details:

The work of commentary was completed after 1159, and Zonaras also included brief legal treatises within his text. It is found in a "rich manuscript tradition", sometimes combined with Balsamon, and sometimes by itself. The work was translated into Old Slavonic.

The Zonaras material was edited by G. Beveregius, otherwise W. Beveridge, *Synodikon sive Pandectae Canonum*, Oxford 1672 in two volumes, and this was reprinted as we have seen in the PG, volumes 137 and 138. There is, however, a newer edition by Rhalles-Potles in 6 volumes,^[2] although, since this was printed in Athens, I imagine that few have access to it.

Apparently there are other works by Zonaras, which are theological, and remain largely unedited.

Clearly there is work to do on Zonaras.

1. ^[1]Wilfried Hartmann, Kenneth Pennington, *The History of Byzantine and Eastern Canon Law to 1500*, Catholic University of America (2012), p.176-7.↩

2. ^[2]Georgios A. Rhalles and Michael Potles, eds., *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων* (6 volumes; Athens 1852-59, reprint Athens 1966).↩