

ON THE FUNCTION OF THE DISPUTATIONS IN THE *KAISERCHRONIK*

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Abstract

The *Kaiserchronik* is generically puzzling. In essence it is a spiritual world chronicle, but it lacks the usual historiographical systematisations of its theological content. However it does have three disputations, an unusual feature in a chronicle which has to date not been adequately explained. This essay argues, on the basis of comparisons with works in other literary forms, that these passages function as key expressions of the controlling idea of the entire work, namely the progress of the Gospel from the heathen to the Christian Empire, and that they are strategically located within the chronicle at the turning points in the success of Christian mission.

The Middle High German *Kaiserchronik* is a twelfth-century verse chronicle of emperors, apparently written in Regensburg, possibly by a monk but for a secular readership, presumably in the 1140s or 50s. Generically it is a peculiar work. It runs from the beginning of the Roman Empire to the poet's own time, and is in effect structured as a series of imperial biographies. It is often described as a world chronicle, partly because it can so easily be seen as the beginning of a tradition which flowered in the great German verse world chronicles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, a world chronicle starts with the creation of the world, and hence the absence of Old Testament material has led scholars to speak of this as not being the 'full form of the genre'. That this lack was felt in the Middle Ages can be seen from the fact that in the Vorau manuscript it is combined with the *Vorau Books of Moses* and other works in such a way that together they present the whole history of the world from the creation to the last judgment,¹ while in a slightly different way the adaptation in the thirteenth-century *Prosa-Kaiserchronik* attempts a similar compensation. The genre question is therefore problematic (see Dunphy 2004).

An unusual feature of the *Kaiserchronik* is the insertion of three disputations in which the church fathers do intellectual battle with various kinds of error.² Two of these come almost together in the Faustinianus legend: the disputation with Simon Magus, the magician from the Book of Acts whom the apostle Peter defeats with the help of divine revelation (vv 2155-590), and the disputation with Faustinianus himself, the Greek philosopher with whom Peter's disciples debate astrology (vv 3029-930). Somewhat later in the chronicle, in the Constantine story, a third disputation is enacted, this time against the Jews, whom Silvester ultimately confounds by the miraculous resurrection of an ox (vv 8200-10380). These are formal debates according to the rules of rhetorical exchange, conducted before an assembled crowd so that a public within the text reacts on hearing the debate as the author hopes the public outwith the text will react on reading it or hearing it read. The debates against the necromancer and the Jews become very bitter, in places reminiscent of Jesus' clashes with the Pharisees in John's Gospel, but in the case of the *wilsælde* (astrology) disputation against Faustinianus, the honest doubting scholar, both sides conduct themselves with great dignity. In order to give a flavour of the formalised rhetorical conventions, we might cite the passage, where Peter's young disciple Niceta begins his part of the disputation:

Then he turned to the old man and said, 'Father, I hope you won't think it presumptuous that a foolish youth should argue such great things with an old gentleman. I can be no match for you. I do it not out of mischief, but like a son addressing his father. If you defeat me with your words, I will gladly learn from you.'

Then the old man spoke: 'Child, in whatever you excel, choose from the seven liberal arts the one in which you are strongest, I will be happy with it. But if you should get into difficulties, if you have any peers who wish to help you, they will find me prepared. I do not wish to oppose the truth, but rather to argue in all appropriate moderation; we should seek a consensus, so that our conclusions may be pleasing to both sides.'

Then Niceta said: 'Father, let me tell you that I was raised an Epicurean, as was one of my brothers here. The third was raised in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle. Now you choose which of us please you. In whichever direction your wisdom leads you, you will find us ready, and the people who are listening will judge whether we answer you well. And we will not be disgraced if a man of such experience can persuade us.' (3189-226)

What stands out here is the meticulous politeness and mutual respect, the modesty topos and the adherence to well-understood conventions of debate. As the disputation progresses, we observe careful listening, compliments for the skilful argumentation of the opponent, and a great discipline in the order and structure of the exchange. The result is a very dramatic spectacle, and the victory of the Christian world-view is an extravagant affirmation of the Gospel.

But what are these disputations doing in a chronicle? In itself, the disputation is familiar enough as set-piece in certain kinds of literature, or indeed as a communicative form in its own right. However their use in chronicles is very rare; there is nothing comparable anywhere else in the German chronicle tradition. While many chronicles reproduce important speeches verbatim and some enliven their narratives with various kinds of dialogue, disputations in the strict sense are harder to find. A passage in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* may be seen as analogous, and William of Rubruck reproduces *informal* theological discussions with Saracen theologians but in Western historiography such passages are few and far between.³

In his seminal study of the *Kaiserchronik*, Friedrich Ohly mentions parallels in Byzantine chronicles, but the Byzantine experts of the Medieval Chronicle Society suspect a confusion with works in other genres.⁴ Disputations are found in Byzantine apologetics and polemics, or for example in the Acts of the Synods of the Eastern Church, which of course is a kind of historical writing, but not in chronicles as such. The chronicle of Theophanes does at one point recount in dialogue form a clash of words between the two factions in the so-called Nika revolt, but without the intellectual aspirations of the disputations we are interested in here (*Chronicle of Theophanes*, pp. 276-78). There are of course many chronicles in both East and West which make mention in passing that a disputation took place, but clearly it is not a normal part of the generic thinking behind a chronicle to present these as entire dialogues in direct speech.

Kaiserchronik research to date, in so far as it has addressed this question at all, has concluded with a shrug of the shoulders that the chronicle is adapting material from other genres. We know the Latin sources for these disputations, and can observe that they were borrowed along with the surrounding narrative material; the sources are legends, and to a great extent the *Kaiserchronik* is made up, as

Ohly put it, of *Sage und Legende*. Besides, it is suspected that sections of the *Kaiserchronik*, including the Faustinianus legend, existed as short units in German before they were assembled into the work we know today. It could be, then, that these disputations simply found their way into a chronicle by accident. However, I would like to suggest that this may have been more carefully planned than this borrowing mechanism suggests, and that these exchanges may serve a more specific function in the structure of the final work. To test this, I should like to examine briefly some examples of disputations in other forms of writing to observe their structural rôle.

Obviously, the texts from which the *Kaiserchronik* borrowed this material provide a useful point of reference. The two disputations in the Faustinianus legend come directly from the fourth-century Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*, but adapted, as I have shown elsewhere, to meet the theological needs of twelfth-century Germany.⁵ This prose work – it has been described, perhaps anachronistically, as a novel – is conceived as the story of Faustinianus and his family, but the actual narrative is kept short and may be regarded merely as a framework into which the extensive dialogues are built. There can be no doubt that the author's main purpose in writing was to communicate the theological content of the disputations. Here arguments for the Christian world view are laboriously constructed and systematically defended against carefully reasoned opposition.

The Pseudo-Clementine work itself stands at the point where two older traditions flow together. On the one hand it clearly shows the influence of the intellectual, rhetorical tradition of classical Greece. A work like Plato's *Symposium* has a somewhat similar structure, and the same honest quest for truth, but of course without any missionary zeal in its rhetorical meanderings. Plato has members of learned circles of Athenian society meet to discuss philosophy over dinner, and the bulk of the work is taken up with their monologues. Like the *Recognitiones*, the *Symposium* is a philosophical work contextualised in a fairly superficial narrative. On the other hand, the *Recognitiones* have a generic model in the Bible, namely the book of Job, which for Christian Europe is the archetype of all disputations between truth and error. This is particularly relevant here since there is evidence that the Pseudo-Clementine authors drew directly on Job for the structuring of their plot and also for the theology of suffering, and that the *Kaiserchronik* poet drew on it independently when he reworked the

material.⁶ Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that the Faustinianus legend is less rational and more emotional in the *Kaiserchronik* than in the fourth-century works, and this is possibly to be explained at least in part by the different Jobs on which they drew – the Septuagint as opposed to the Hebraica.⁷ In the Christian tradition, the sequence of speeches in which Job and his adversaries wrestle with the problem of suffering is possibly the profoundest and certainly the most influential example of writing in this form.

All of these pre-mediaeval works place the principle focus on the disputations themselves, which fill the bulk of the text. Job's *disputatio* – if we count his final dialogue with God – fills 39½ of the 42 chapters of the biblical book, and the *Symposium* and the *Recognitiones* have comparable proportions. One might say that these works are structured as disputations with a narrative frame, and the centrality of the intellectual battle is beyond question. As we move into the Middle Ages, we find works which contain dialogues much in the same tradition, but with the weighting reversed: they are primarily narrative works adorned with disputations. Nevertheless, although the bulk of the text is now narrative, the disputations still appear to contain the key ideas which the author wishes to communicate. Most obviously we are thinking here of legends, the mediaeval biographies of saints which arguably evolved out of works such as the *Recognitiones*.

A set-piece in many legends is a scene where the saint, having lived a life of spectacular holiness, is called upon to give account of himself before a tyrant's throne, acquits himself well and goes to his martyr's death. Catherine of Alexandria is good example. The legends tell how she chastises the Emperor Maximinus II for his cruelty to the Christians. Maximinus calls scholars to debate with her, but her superior intellect combined with the superiority of Christian truth lead to the conversion of the Emperor's sages, who are promptly executed. Only the stubborn despot cannot be touched by Catherine's testimony, and he condemns her to torture and death. In legends, disputations come at the climax, creating suspense as we wait for the violent ending, and demonstrating that the tyrant may have earthly power but is already defeated before he wields it. The theological content of the disputation puts the drama of martyrdom in the context of the specific Christian doctrines at stake. The disputation may be relatively short compared to those in Job, Plato or the *Recognitiones*, but it defines the

central scene around which the entire work revolves. It is the lens through which the legend is to be understood, and for this reason it stands precisely at the most critical juncture in the narrative.

It is possible that the model of the legend had some influence on Bede when around 731 he built a disputation into the account of the Synod of Whitby (664) in his *Ecclesiastical History*. At any rate, the pattern appears here for the first time in a historical work. Usually a sober narrative text, the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* takes on the same dramatic tone as Job or the Catherine legend, as on this one occasion only it not only describes a disputation but recounts it complete in dialogue form. The central conflict running throughout Bede's work is the dispute between Celtic and Roman Christianity which for him was epitomised by the divergent dates of Easter. At Whitby, a decisive turning point was reached. The leading theologians of each side gathered before the royal throne to thrash the matter out once and for all, and the King judged the Roman side had argued most convincingly. The schism was not yet healed, but Northumbria had declared itself for Rome. For England at least the matter was settled, and the independence of the Celtic Church was in decline. This theological victory is celebrated with a solemn disputation, which Bede uses as a mechanism to place key theological ideas at the most significant point in the narrative. As in the legends, this strategically placed *disputatio* helps the reader to locate both the issues and the episode within an implicit metanarrative.

Turning back, now, to the *Kaiserchronik*, it seems legitimate to ask whether the disputations might have a comparable function in the narrative strategy of this work too. It certainly is undeniable that these passages contain important doctrinal statements which in this chronicle are otherwise oddly lacking. One of the problems which scholarship has had with the *Kaiserchronik* is the absence of the theological structuring principles we expect to find in a Christian world chronicle. The *sex aetates mundi*, which traditionally are used to align the structure of a world chronicle with the grand design of God in history, are completely absent, as are both Augustine's two-cities idea, which was used so effectively by Otto of Freising, and the competing three-worlds pattern from Johannes Scotus Eriugena, which is the structural key to the *Annolied*. The pattern of four empires from Daniel's dream, though mentioned, is not operable as a controlling motif.⁸ Biblical narrative, as we have seen, is not included, nor is any systematic

account of the *Heilsgeschichte*, even though the birth of Jesus falls within the period the chronicle attempts to cover. Some world chronicles open with a lengthy theological prologue – the later German *Christherre-Chronik* is a very striking example with over a thousand lines of introductory discourse – or end with an eschatological epilogue, thus framing the whole historical account with the greater history of the almighty. The *Kaiserchronik* opens with a short proforma prologue (vv 1-42), and ends abruptly without reflection.

And yet, this is in no sense a secularising chronicle as we find them from the thirteenth century onwards (Jans der Enikel etc.); its overall tone is pious. It is packed with theologically significant cameos, legends, conversions, moral stories and episodes from the history of the Church, and it is obviously the desire of the poet to communicate sacred truth. The biographies of the emperors are exempla, epitomising either right or wrong conduct on the road to Heaven or Hell, almost like a spiritual *Fürstenspiegel*. What is absent is not a kerygmatic intention but the systematic expression of this intention. All in all, this is generically a very peculiar chronicle. But it does have these three disputations in which the Christian world view is expounded at length and defended against all comers, the only passages in the chronicle in which complex ideas are worked out in detail. It is therefore perhaps not implausible to suggest that the poet who shaped the work into its final form may have intended these to serve precisely the purpose that the more familiar narrative control systems usually do. Their absence becomes explicable if the disputations take over their rôle.

This thesis becomes particularly attractive when we note that – as with Bede's Whitby disputation – the content of the *Kaiserchronik's* oratorical dramas can be interpreted as the key concerns of the author in the context of the overall thrust of the work. As we have seen, the internal structure of the chronicle is simply a succession of imperial biographies, and most commentators have been content to leave it at that. More precisely, however, it is a succession of imperial biographies leading from the heathen ancient empire to the Holy Christian one. The narrative opens with a cry of revulsion at the *abgot diu unrainen*, the impure idols, which were worshipped in Rome before its conversion (vv 43-48 – the first words after the prologue), and the entire subsequent momentum of the chronicle is the triumph of the Gospel. It is this which defines the big picture into which all the

narrative episodes are incorporated, and significantly it is this which is thematised in the disputations. On its path to victory the Church had to overcome three obstacles: the seduction of the devil, the cynicism of the heathen world, and the recalcitrance of the Jews. In the eyes of the twelfth-century Regensburg monk there was no need for a greater complexity. And so we have a disputation which tackles necromancy and the allure of the demonic, a second which provides a rebuttal of astronomy and pagan deities, and a third in which the Jews are exposed and routed. Here in the disputations we find the fundamental religious conflicts which underlie the whole progression of the work. And in each case the Christian truth defeats all error.

If this is correct, we may go one further step and conjecture that the positioning of the disputations within the chronicle is not coincidental. In so far as the sequence of imperial biographies permits a subdivision of the text into a small number of main sections, it is possible to argue that the *Kaiserchronik* divides neatly into three parts. First there is the history of the heathen empire, ignorant of God's greatness but mostly honest and honourable in its ignorance. Then there is the period of mission to the Empire, as the first disciples bring the Christian message, and a series of Emperors respond to it in a variety of ways, some open, some rejecting, some converting, some persecuting the faithful. This is a slow process, with partial successes but also setbacks, until eventually the faith becomes the state religion. Thirdly there is the history of the Christian Empire after the Church has become established. If we now look at the disputations in the light of this pattern, it emerges that they lie precisely at the turning points. The Faustinianus legend with its two disputations is associated with Peter, the very beginning of Christian mission, while Sylvester's disputation with the Jews is instrumental in Constantine's establishment of the Church in Rome. The dramas of these great doctrinal battles serve as the hinges which join the triptych of the chronicle, forming it into an exposition of the progress of the Church triumphant. This, I would suggest, is the organising principle which has evaded scholars for so long.

Notes

¹ Vorau, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 276; see Gärtner (1999).

² These are discussed in Fromm (1995); Dunphy (2005).

³ The passage in question, the account of the Synod of Whitby, will be discussed shortly (*Historia ecclesiastica* III, 25). For examples of theological discussions in Rubruck, see, e.g., Jackson's edition, pp. 155, 232-35.

⁴ Ohly (1940). I am particularly grateful to Dion Smythe (Belfast) for his advice here, and also to Jan van Ginkel (Leiden).

⁵ See Dunphy (2005: note 3). There are in fact two Pseudo-Clementine versions of this work, the Latin *Recognitiones* and the Greek *Homilies*. The relationship between these is not entirely clear: possibly they are both based on an earlier Greek source. The text claims Pope Clement I as its author, and the Latin version is ascribed to Rufinus of Aquileja. On the disputations in the *Recognitiones*, see Voss (1970).

⁶ The narrative similarities between the Job and Faustianus stories are striking. In both, the eponymous disputant has suffered a series of blows which lead to a state of depressed resignation. Both are kings reduced to beggar's rags, both have lost their sons. Each then encounters a series of three disputants, then later a more competent fourth, with whom they debate – among other things – God's justice. Ultimately they are persuaded only by an act of God. That the Pseudo-Clementine books use Job as a model seems beyond question. The suspicion that the *Kaiserchronik* poet is independently influenced by Job is raised by the way in which the theodicy question is woven into this version of the story.

⁷ On the shift from rationality to emotionality when the material from the *Recognitiones* was reworked in the *Kaiserchronik*, see Dunphy (2005: note 3). Different Job traditions will not be the sole reason for this, but may have contributed. The Job in the Septuagint is quite a different work from that in the Hebrew Bible. The Septuagint's Job is more a Greek than an oriental figure, is more philosophical and less rebellious. The motif of the patience of Job comes from this Hellenic incarnation. The Job who informed the *Homilies* and the *Recognitiones* was Septuagint, whereas the Vulgate, and hence the *Kaiserchronik*, knew the plaintiff, emotional Job of the Hebraica.

⁸ See Fiebig (1995: 48): 'Die vier Tiere sind nur ein Bild und stellen keine grundlegende schematische Einteilung dar.'

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