

*The Christian ancients: Eusebius and the Fathers*

## (I)

The purpose of the next five chapters is to enquire into the narratives of Christian history in the era before Constantine which were available to Gibbon and offer a context for the narrative of his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters. We turn initially to his ancient sources, written before or soon after Constantine's accession and 'the establishment of the Christian religion', and we necessarily begin with the *Ecclesiastical History* by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, considered the founder of this branch of historiography – though he made use of historical statements written before his time – because he was obliged to determine and expound the lines on which such a history must proceed. The *Ecclesiastical History*, written between 311 and 324,<sup>1</sup> runs from the Ascension of Jesus Christ to the accession of Constantine; in civil history it is linked with Eusebius's life of Constantine, in sacred history with his *Praeparatio Evangelica* and *Demonstratio Evangelica*, which situate Christ in the actions performed by God in, or upon, human time. Eusebius here is less a source for the events, secular or sacred, of Constantine's reign than a shaper of the earlier narrative with which Gibbon necessarily interacted in writing the two chapters that conclude his volume of 1776; in particular the fifteenth, which dealt with the spread of Christianity. Gibbon attacked Eusebius's reliability and even veracity when writing of the persecutions and martyrdoms, but this issue does not yet concern us.

It was a central problem for Eusebius constructing the *Ecclesiastical History* that the canonical narrative broke off at Paul's journey to Rome, so that he was obliged to make decisions as to the narrative to be recounted from that time onwards. In his opening chapter he tells of several contexts

<sup>1</sup> Lake, 1926, pp. xix–xxiii; more generally, Momigliano, 1977, pp. 107–19; Barnes, 1981; Chestnut, 1986.

in which the history of the Church is to be recounted, and concludes by acknowledging the fragmentary nature of his sources:

οὐδ' ἄλλοθεν ἢ ἀπὸ πρώτης ἄρξομαι τῆς κατὰ τὸν σωτῆρα καὶ κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν τὸν Χριστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ οἰκονομίας. ἀλλὰ μοι συγγνώμη εὐγνωμόνων ἐντεῦθεν ὁ λόγος αἰτεῖ, μείζονα ἢ καθ' ἡμετέραν δύναμιν ὁμολογῶν εἶναι τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν ἐντελέῃ καὶ ἀπαράλειπτον ὑποσχεῖν, ἐπεὶ καὶ πρώτοι νῦν τῆς ὑποθέσεως ἐπιβάντες διὰ τινὰ ἐρήμην καὶ ἀτριβῆ ἰέναι ὁδὸν ἐγχειροῦμεν, θεὸν μὲν ὁδηγὸν καὶ τὴν τοῦ κυρίου συνεργὸν σχήσειν εὐχόμενοι δύναμιν, ἀνθρώπων γε μὴν οὐδαμῶς εὐρεῖν οἰοί τε ὄντες ἴχνη γυμνὰ τὴν αὐτὴν ἡμῖν προωδευκότων, μὴ ὅτι σμικρὰς οὐτὸ μόνον προφάσεις, δι' ὧν ἄλλως ὦν διηνύκασι χρόνων μερικὰς ἡμῖν καταλελοίπασι διηγήσεις, πόρρωθεν ὡσπερ εἰ πυρσοὺς τὰς ἑαυτῶν προανατείνοντες φωνὰς καὶ ἄνωθεν ποθεν ὡς ἐξ ἀπόπτου καὶ ἀπὸ σκοπῆς βοῶντες καὶ διακελευόμενοι, ἢ χρῆ βαδίζειν καὶ τὴν τοῦ λόγου πορείαν ἀπλανῶς καὶ ἀκινδύνως εὐθύνειν. ὅσα τοίνυν εἰς τὴν προκειμένην ὑπόθεσιν λυσιτελεῖν ἠγούμεθα τῶν αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις σποράδην μνημονευθέντων, ἀναλεξάμενοι καὶ ὡς ἂν ἐκ λογικῶν λειμώνων τὰς ἐπιτηδεῖους αὐτῶν τῶν πάλαι συγγραφέων ἀπανθισάμενοι φωνὰς, δι' ὑψηλῆς ἱστορικῆς πειρασόμεθα σωματοποιῆσαι, ἀγαπῶντες, εἰ καὶ μὴ ἀπάντων, τῶν δ' οὖν μάλιστα διαφανεστάτων τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν ἀποστόλων τὰς διαδοχὰς κατὰ τὰς διαπρεπούσας ἔτι καὶ νῦν μνημονευομένας ἐκκλησίας ἀνασσωσαίμεθα.<sup>2</sup>

[My starting point is therefore no other than the first dispensation of God touching our Saviour and Lord, Jesus the Christ. Even at that point the project at once demands the lenience of the kindly, for confessedly it is beyond our power to fulfil the promise, complete and perfect, since we are the first to enter on the undertaking, as travellers on some desolate and untrodden way. We pray God to give us his guidance, and that we may have the help of the power of the Lord, for nowhere can we find even the bare footsteps of men who have preceded us in the same path, unless it be those slight indications by which in diverse ways they have left to us partial accounts of the times through which they have passed, raising their voices as a man holds up a torch from afar, calling to us from on high as from a distant watch-tower, and telling us how we must walk, and how to guide the course of our work without error or danger. We have therefore collected from their scattered memoirs all that we think will be useful for the present subject, and have brought together the utterances of the ancient writers themselves that are appropriate to it, culling, as it were, the flowers of the intellectual fields. We shall endeavour to give them unity by historical treatment, rejoicing to rescue the successions, if not of all, at least of the most distinguished of the apostles of our Saviour throughout those churches of which the fame is still remembered.]<sup>3</sup>

Gibbon alludes to 'the scanty and suspicious materials' that obscure even the 'first' – presumably the post-canonical but apostolic – 'age of the

<sup>2</sup> Lake, 1926, p. 8.      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

church'.<sup>4</sup> Whatever may have been his intentions, Eusebius is saying that the history of the Church is fragmentary as soon as it is not canonical. His task is to collect and present a history post-canonical, but not quite the same as post-apostolic, since he is far from having all the acts of the Twelve; and we may now consider how he presents his organisation of that history.

Τὰς τῶν ἱερῶν ἀποστόλων διαδοχὰς σὺν καὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν καὶ εἰς ἡμᾶς διηγουσμένοις χρόνοις, ὅσα τε καὶ πηλίκαι πραλαματευθῆναι κατὰ τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν ἱστορίαν λέγεται, καὶ ὅσοι ταύτης διαπρεπῶς ἐν ταῖς μάλιστα ἐπισημοτάταις παροικίαις ἠγήσαντό τε καὶ προέστησαν, ὅσοι τε κατὰ γενεὰν ἐκάστην ἀγράφως ἢ καὶ διὰ συγγραμμάτων τὸν θεῖον ἐπρέβυσαν λόγον, τίνες τε καὶ ὅσοι καὶ ὀπηνίκα νεωτεροποιίας ἰμέρω πλάνης εἰς ἔσχατον ἐλάσαντες, ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως εἰσηγητὰς ἑαυτοὺς ἀνακεκηρύχασιν, ἀφειδῶς οἷα λύκοι βαρεῖς τὴν Χριστοῦ ποιμνὴν ἐπεντρίβοντες, πρὸς ἐπὶ τούτοις καὶ τὰ παραυτικά τῆς κατὰ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν ἐπιβουλής το παν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνος περιελθόντα, ὅσα τε αὐτὰ καὶ ὅποια καθ' οἴους τε χρόνους πρὸς τῶν ἔθνῶν ὁ θεῖος πεπολέμηται λόγος, καὶ πηλικοί κατὰ καιροὺς τὸν δι' αἵματος καὶ βασάνων ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦν διενῆλθον ἀγῶνα, τὰ ἔπι τούτοις καὶ καθ' ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς μαρτύρια καὶ τὴν ἐπὶ πάσιν ἴλεω καὶ εὐμενῇ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν ἀντίληψιν γραφῇ παραδοῦναι προηρημένος.

[I have purposed to record in writing the successions of the sacred apostles, covering the period stretching from our Saviour to ourselves; the number and character of the transactions recorded in the history of the Church; the number of those who were distinguished in her government and leadership in the provinces of greatest fame; the number of those who in each generation were the ambassadors of the word of God either by speech or pen; the names, the number and the age of those who, driven by the desire of innovation to an extremity of error, have heralded themselves as the introducers of Knowledge, falsely so-called, ravaging the flock of Christ unsparingly, like grim wolves. To this I will add the fate which has beset the whole nation of the Jews from the moment of their plot against our Saviour; moreover, the number and nature and times of the wars waged by the heathen against the divine word and the character of those who, for its sake, passed from time to time through the contest of blood and torture; furthermore the martyrdoms of our own time, and the gracious and favouring help of our Saviour in them all.]<sup>5</sup>

Eusebius has been obliged to define ecclesiastical history by setting out a number of contexts in which the history of the Church proceeds: the continuity of office holders; the rise of heresies, already associated with a false *gnōsis*; the downfall of the Jews; the persecutions and the martyrdoms. These constitute an ecclesiastical more than a sacred history, though the latter comes into view as the continuity of Christ and his

<sup>4</sup> Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 446.

<sup>5</sup> Lake, 1926, pp. 7, 9. 'Knowledge' translates the Greek *gnōsis*.

mission, associated, as we shall see, in particular ways with the first and last of these four contexts. The downfall of the Jews, in the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent rebellion of Akiba and Bar Kochba, is also an event in sacred history: the apostasy and punishment of the first Israel and its supersession by the new, which is the Church. There is no Christian history of this catastrophe, and Eusebius must turn to Josephus, a Romanised Jew writing in another historical sequence. But the false *gnōseis*, of which there will be several, introduce a new theme, not much foretold by Jesus or the prophets before him and historically alien to the Old Testament and the Four Gospels: the theme of heresy, in opposition to which orthodoxy is defined, so that the latter becomes a true knowledge as against a false, while at the same time a statement of the Christian life as rising even above knowledge. Here may be said to appear the problem of theology as a central theme in Christian history, of overwhelming importance to Gibbon even as he labours to escape from it.

The structure of the *Ecclesiastical History*, then, is to be a series of narratives, variously connected with sacred history but not forming a canonical history of God's action in the world. Eusebius as historian is responsible for these narratives, but in recounting and authenticating them is in some cases hampered by the very human phenomenon of imperfectly recorded evidence. He is in no doubt, however, that his four narratives take place in a sacred and universal context, and the *History* begins with, and is intended to remain within, the divine nature of Christ as the incarnate Word. This is the Logos of St John's Gospel, which was with God and was God, was made Flesh and dwelt among us. Eusebius is giving what is to become orthodoxy – though his own will be doubted – an irreversibly Johannine cast; he is following Fathers of the second century, in particular Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, who with others are important shapers of his narrative. These opening chapters dwell upon the claim that the Lord who appeared in human form to Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Joshua was God the Son, the Word made visible though not yet incarnate.<sup>6</sup> Since the Word and Person are from eternity, their history cannot begin with the Incarnation, and Eusebius does not here tell the story recounted in the Gospels. His narrated history begins at the moment of Ascension,<sup>7</sup> when Christ departs from the Apostles with the promise that he is always with them. They are (Eusebius does not find it necessary to record) almost immediately visited by the Holy Spirit – not yet, perhaps, recognised as the third person of a Trinity – as a rushing wind and tongues of fire, endowing them with

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, I, ii, 7–14, in Lake, 1926, pp. 14–19.

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius, II, i, in Lake, 1926, pp. 102, 103.

miraculous powers which are both signs and instruments of their office. Eusebius is not in doubt of these powers, but does not emphasise them in the tones used by later authors, faced by the claim that they had ceased or had not existed. He is writing a history of the Church's divine mission, but has other ways of authenticating it.

The canonical narrative of Acts has begun, but will terminate at no very distant point, and the need to establish post-canonical narratives begins to affect the ways in which it is told. Eusebius does not seem to construct a narrative around the conversion of St Paul,<sup>8</sup> an Apostle of another order than the original eleven – they had known Christ on earth, Paul after his Ascension – nor does he make crucial the Council of Jerusalem and the decision to extend the Word to the Gentiles. His history, however, will from an early point situate the Jews in a context formed by other peoples, and then expel them from it. The Apostles and disciples (Stephen the first martyr) are exposed to persecution by the Jews, infuriated by the claim that Jesus was the Messiah but not the messiah they had expected. The Acts continue the story of the Gospels, in which accusations are brought by Jews before Roman magistrates reluctantly compelled to give them effect, and Eusebius is explicit in saying that the Jews as a nation are collectively guilty and collectively punished for their apostasy in refusing Christ.<sup>9</sup> However this originated in the formation of the Christian writings, these did not occasion the Jewish revolt of the late 60s or write Flavius Josephus's history of the Jewish War. Christians massively incorporated the last in their apostolic and post-apostolic histories, and employed its appalling and all too believable narrative of terrorism, suicide, cannibalism and enslavement as proof that a nation formed by covenant could not desert that covenant without disappearing under the most terrible of punishments. The surviving Jews of the Diaspora are known to exist but cease to act as a people in either Christian or Roman history; while Vespasian and Titus act in Josephus and sacred history, leaving their role in Roman history scarcely mentioned.

Josephus, the first 'historian' in the classical sense of the word to appear in the making of Christian history, helps by his *Antiquities* to situate Christ in Jewish history – that of the Herodian dynasty installed by the Romans – and therefore in the history of the Roman empire (*Romaiōn basileia*).<sup>10</sup> His *Jewish War* brings the history of Israel to its apocalyptic close, but until persecution by Romans replaces that by Jews there will be little need to

<sup>8</sup> Eusebius, II, i, 13, in Lake, 1926, pp. 110–11.

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius, II, v, 6, in Lake, 1926, pp. 120–1.

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, I, ii, 23, in Lake, 1926, pp. 24, 25.

situate Christian history in Roman, once it has been established that the incarnate Word was born under Augustus Caesar and suffered under Pontius Pilate. Eusebius is content with what proved to be apocryphal tales of the correspondence between Jesus and Abgar king of Edessa, and between Pilate and the emperor Tiberius;<sup>11</sup> these are significant in the construction of chronology, not the history of Rome. We next meet, however, with the transposition of Christian history into two keys of enormous future importance: that of the history of philosophy, and that of the history of heresy. As Josephus contributes to the supersession of Jewish history by his narrative of the fall of the Temple, Philo of Alexandria blends Jewish thought with the philosophy of Pythagoras and Plato, a move which will massively reinforce both Christian orthodoxy and heresy. Eusebius's treatment of Philo is extensive;<sup>12</sup> he was as he wrote at the point of involvement in an increasingly philosophical debate as to the exact meaning of 'Logos' in the cardinal formulae of the Fourth Gospel. Philo also leaves an account of the Therapeutae, a probably Jewish ascetic sect known to him; it is noteworthy that *philosophia* and its cognates are here used to denote a communal discipline and way of life, founded on the allegorical use of esoteric writings.<sup>13</sup> The many meanings of this word will play their part in the history beginning to develop.

In Acts viii it is related how the Apostle Philip took refuge from Jewish persecution in Samaria and preached Christ to that people whom the Jews hated. He here encountered a sorcerer named Simon, whose wonders made some believe that he was himself a power of God. Simon was baptised by Philip, but offered money to him, Peter and John for the authority to confer the Holy Ghost; for this they rebuked him and he repented.<sup>14</sup> No more is said about Simon in the canonical narrative, though there was a tradition that he subsequently appeared at Rome and was cast down by Peter and Paul after a display of levitation. In Eusebius, however, he plays a far more momentous role: that of Simon Magus, the originator of all heresies.<sup>15</sup> These, furthermore, take the form known as gnosticism: an altogether alien theology, or rather theosophy, incompatible with either creation or incarnation. Simon's only competitors are the false teachers propounding a *gnōsis*, met with by Paul at Corinth and Colossae.<sup>16</sup> Whether these were Jews or Greeks will be a problem for historians. The history of heresy and orthodoxy has begun, in a form far removed from that in which Gibbon chose to tell it.

<sup>11</sup> Eusebius, I, xiii, 5–22 (in Lake, 1926, pp. 86–97); II, II, 1–3 (in Lake, 1926, pp. 110–12).

<sup>12</sup> Eusebius, II, V, xvii, xviii. <sup>13</sup> Lake, 1926, pp. 146–57. <sup>14</sup> Acts viii, 9–24.

<sup>15</sup> Eusebius, II, xiii–xv (in Lake, 1926, pp. 136–43). <sup>16</sup> Chadwick, 1967, pp. 33–4.

## (II)

We are concerned here with the accounts of heresy that Gibbon derived, or could have derived, from his ancient and recent sources. Eusebius took his accounts of the gnostic heresies (as he termed them) from writers of the late second century, a hundred years or more before his time, who supplied yet another narrative to the history of Christianity that took shape. He relied particularly on Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons, on Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus, and to a lesser degree on the Latin Tertullian's invective against the heresiarch Marcion. Justin supplied an account of Simon Magus which enlarged him into the originator of gnostic heresy: he performed

διὰ τῆς τῶν ἐνεργούντων δαιμονῶν τέχνης δυναμεις πόησας μαγικας . . . θεος ἐνομισθη . . . καὶ σχεδὸν πάντες μὲν Σαμαρεῖς, ὀλιγοὶ δὲ καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις ἔθνεσιν, ὡς πρῶτον θεὸν ἐκέινον ὁμολογοῦντες, προσκυνοῦσι. Καὶ Ἐλένην τινα, τὴν συμπερινοστήσασαν αὐτῷ κατ' ἐκεῖνο του καιροῦ, προτερον ἐπι τεγους σταθεισαν, τὴν ἀπ' αὐτου ἐννοϊαν πρωτην γενομένην λεγουσι.<sup>17</sup>

[mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him . . . He was considered a god . . . and almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him, and acknowledge him as the first god; and a woman called Helena, who went about with him at that time, and had formerly been a prostitute, they say is the first idea generated by him.]<sup>18</sup>

Justin was himself born in Samaria, if not of native birth, and wrote that Simon had had a successor named Menander, who with others had taught many

καὶ ἀρνεῖσθαι τὸν ποιητὴν τοῦδε τοῦ πάντος θεοῦ. ἄλλον δὲ τινα, ὡς ὄντα μείζονα τὰ μείζονα παρα τοῦ ὄν ὁμολογεῖν πεποιηκέναι. Παντες οἱ ἀπο τοῦτων ὁμωμενοι, ὡς ἔρημεν, Χριστιανοὶ καλοῦνται, οὐ πρόπον καὶ οἱ οὐ κοινωνοῦντες τῶν αὐτῶν δογματῶν τοῖς φιλοσοφοῖς, τὸ ἐπικατηγορούμενον ὄνομα τῆς φιλοσοφίας κοινον ἔχουσιν.<sup>19</sup>

[to deny that God is the maker of this universe and to assert that some other, being greater than he, has done greater works. All who take their opinions from these men are called Christians; just as those who do not agree with the philosophers in their doctrines, have yet in common with them the name of philosophers given to them.]<sup>20</sup>

He was describing the invasion of both Christian belief and 'philosophy' – it has yet to be established what he meant by this term – by

<sup>17</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 26, in Migne, 1857–94, VI, pp. 367–8.

<sup>18</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, 1867, p. 29. Cf. Lake, 2001, pp. 138–9, for Eusebius following Justin.

<sup>19</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, in Migne, 1857–94, VI, p. 368. <sup>20</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, 1867, p. 30.

a belief system alien to both, yet confounded with them. Eusebius took from Irenaeus a detailed account of many heresies current in the second Christian century; including the several kinds of gnosticism named for Basilides, Valentinus and Marcion, all supposed to be followers of the original Samaritans.<sup>21</sup> They are said to have had in common the belief that creation was an imperfect activity, the work of beings inferior to a God, who, being perfect and self-sufficient, had no need to create anything beyond himself. There arose a degenerative theogony recounting how these lesser deities had emerged by emanation from the absolute godhead – Gibbon had mentioned this in his account of Zoroaster<sup>22</sup> – as a hierarchy of aeons or *aiones*, whose names as reported by Irenaeus have an unmistakably synthetic sound;<sup>23</sup> we have before us a theosophy rather than a religion, an ancient Order of the Golden Dawn. Some of these beings struggled against the involvement of others in the imperfections of creation; Simon, working magic as ‘the great power of God’, might redeem others from the evils of matter, and Helena – a distant shadow of the Egyptian Isis – took the name of Sophia, a tragic figure polluted by those she had created in search of love. The crucial step was to make redemption the reversal of creation, and it was at this point that the figure of Jesus Christ became an actor in the cosmic struggle. Irenaeus, expanding the system of Basilides, depicted a society of lesser creator gods and a war arising among them:

Esse autem principem ipsorum eum, qui Judaeorum putatur esse Deus. Et quoniam hic suis hominibus, id est Judaeis, voluit subjicere reliquas gentes, reliquos omnes principes contra stetisse ei et contra egisse. Quapropter et reliquae resilerunt gentes eius genti. Innatum autem et innominatum Patrem videntem perditionem ipsorum, misisse primogenitum Nun suum (et hunc esse qui dicitur Christus), in libertatem credentium ei, a potestate eorum qui mundum fabricaverunt . . .

Et liberatos igitur eos, qui haec sciant, a mundi fabricatoribus principibus: et non oportere confiteri eum qui sit crucifixus, sed eum qui in hominis forma venerit, et putatus sit crucifixus, et vocatus sit Jesus, et missus a Patre, uti per dispositionem hanc opera mundi fabricatorum dissolveret. Si quis igitur, ait, confitetur crucifixum, adhuc hic servus est, et sub potestate eorum qui corpora fecerunt: qui autem negaverit, liberatus est quidem ab iis, cognoscit autem dispositionem innati Patris.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Eusebius, iv, vii, xi. For Irenaeus's account, Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 85–112.

<sup>22</sup> Womersley, 1994, i, p. 216. <sup>23</sup> Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 4–6.

<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus, i, xxxiv, in Migne, 1857–94, vii, pp. 676–7. The text of Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, is extant wholly in a Latin translation, fragmentarily in the original Greek.



[The chief of them is he who is thought to be the God of the Jews; and inasmuch as he desired to render the other nations subject to his own people, that is the Jews, all the other princes resisted and opposed him. Wherefore all other nations were at enmity with his nation.]

If orthodox Christianity made the Jews a guilty and outcast people, the Basilideans are remote begetters of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

[But the father without birth and without name, perceiving that they would be destroyed, sent his own first begotten Nous (he it is who is called Christ) to bestow deliverance on them that believe in him, from the power of those that made the world. . . Those, then, who know these things have been freed from the principalities who formed the world; so that it is not incumbent on us to confess him who was crucified, but him who came in the form of a man, and was thought to be crucified, and was called Jesus, and was sent by the father, that by this disposition he might destroy the works of the makers of the world. If anyone, therefore, he [Basilides] declares, confess the crucified, that man is still a slave, and under the powers of those who formed our bodies; but he who denies him has been freed from these beings, and is acquainted with the dispensation of the unborn father.]<sup>25</sup>

We are redeemed from created matter and the imperfect gods who made it by knowledge of the true story of the universe. This knowledge is called *gnōsis*; it might be the self-abolishing contemplation of a Buddhist, but seems to bring power (perhaps magical) and to enjoin esoteric behaviour.

Igitur qui didicerit, et Angelos omnes cognoverit, et causa eorum, invisibilem et incomprehensibilem eum Angelis et Potestatibus universes fieri, quemadmodum et Caulacau fuisse. Et sicut Filium incognitum omnibus esse, sic et ipsos a nemine oportere cognosci; sed cum sciant ipsi omnes et per omnes transeant, ipsos omnibus invisibiles et incognitos esse. Tu enim, aiunt, omne cognosce, te autem nemo cognoscat. Quapropter et parati sunt ad negationem, qui sunt tales, imo magis ne pati quidem propter nomen possunt, cum sint omnibus similes. Non autem multos scire posse haec, sed unum a mille, et duo a myriadibus. Et Judaeos quidem jam non esse dicunt. Christianos autem nondum: et non oportere omnino ipsorum mysteria effari, sed in abscondito continere per silentium.<sup>26</sup>

[He, then, who has learned these things, and known all the angels and their causes, is rendered invisible and incomprehensible to the angels and all the powers, even as [Jesus]<sup>27</sup> was. And as the son was unknown to all, so must they also be known by no one; but while they know all, and pass through all, they themselves remain invisible and unknown to all; for ‘Do thou’, they say, ‘know all, but let nobody know thee.’ For this reason, persons of such a persuasion are also ready to recant

<sup>25</sup> Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 91–2.      <sup>26</sup> Irenaeus, 1, xxiv, in Migne, 1857–94, VII, p. 679.

<sup>27</sup> The name of Jesus is at this point rendered as ‘Caulacau’, for reasons which need not detain us.

their opinions, yea rather, it is impossible that they should suffer on account of a mere name, since they are like to all. The multitude, however, cannot understand these matters, but only one out of a thousand, or two out of ten thousand. They declare that they are no longer Jews, and that they are not yet Christians; and that it is not at all fitting to speak openly of their mysteries, but right to keep them secret by preserving silence.]<sup>28</sup>

This self-perfecting arrogance is the consequence of worshipping a God whose perfection reduces itself and him to self-knowledge. Justin, Irenaeus and Eusebius opposed the *gnōsis* with the Logos, that is to say with a God eternally active, knowing and known in relation to himself. God was a creator, making the world and human beings in his own image; there had never been a time when he was not active as the Logos, so that action and mutual knowledge were inherent in his own being. As the Logos had been made Flesh, and since the Logos was the Word, Jesus Christ had been both the person in whom the divine word had spoken and the Word speaking itself in the world and human history. Primarily, this was a doctrine of God's being, as unlike the unmoved perfection the Fathers attributed to the gnostics as they could make it; it was also a doctrine of the Church's being, its authority and history.

The Gospels themselves, it was now claimed, had in two cases been reduced to writing as a means of opposition to the *gnōsis*. That according to Mark was the work of a member of the entourage of the Apostle Peter, engaged at Rome in his climactic struggle against Simon Magus; Peter had preached the Word with such power and clarity as to create a demand for it in written form.<sup>29</sup> That according to John was the subject of another narrative. The statements concerning the Logos with which it opens – of cardinal importance to the entire orthodox position – were said to be the work of the Apostle John the Evangelist at an advanced age, perhaps one hundred years, which set him apart from his fellows and made his death the effective end of the apostolic era. He had written his Gospel, after preaching it orally for many years, perhaps at Ephesus, in response to the heresies of a certain Cerinthus,<sup>30</sup> a possibly fictitious figure concerning whom many tales were told. Here the narrative of heresy became more complex. There was said – it is necessary to simplify – to have existed a sect called the Ebionites, possibly originating among Jewish converts to Christianity, who held that though Jesus had been the Messiah sent by God, he had been no more than a man, begotten by Joseph in the ordinary

<sup>28</sup> Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 92–3.      <sup>29</sup> Eusebius, II, xv, in Lake, 1926, pp. 142–5.

<sup>30</sup> Eusebius, III, xxvii, in Lake, 1926, pp. 262–6.

way.<sup>31</sup> It had been possible, however, to move from the Ebionite position towards the contention that Christ was the name of a divine power or being, that had descended upon Jesus and left him at his crucifixion; and toward the gnostic contention that this Christ was an aeonic being, sent to liberate mankind from the creator Jehovah. At this point there would seem to occur a breach with any theology compatible with the Jewish past, and in the debatable ground between Ebionites and gnostics many positions and confusions were possible. There is consequently a diversity of heresies and syntheses of heresy attributed to the heresiarch Cerinthus, but a consensus of traditions grew up according to which the last of the Apostles was his principal adversary and had committed the Word to writing in order to confute him. Irenaeus summed it up.

Hanc fidem annuntians Joannes Domini discipulus, volens per Evangelii annuntiationem auferre eum, qui a Cerintho insemnatus erat hominibus, errorem, et multo prius ab his qui dicuntur Nicolaitae, qui sunt vulsio ejus, quae falso cognominatur scientia, ut confunderet eos, et suaderet quoniam unus Deus qui omnia fecit per Verbum suum; et non, quemadmodum illi dicunt, alterum quidem fabricatorem, alium autem Patrem Domini; et alium quidem fabricatoris filium, alterum vero de superioribus, Christum quem et impassibilem perseverasse, descendentem in Jesum filium fabricatoris, et iterum, revolasse in suum Pleroma: et initium quidem esse Monogenem, Logon autem verum filium Unigeniti: et eam conditionem quae est secundum nos, non a primo Deo factam, sed a virtute aliqua valde deorsum subjecta, et abscissa ab eorum communicatione, quae sunt invisibilia et innominabilia. Omnia igitur talia circumscribere volens discipulus Domini, et regulam veritatis constituere in Ecclesia, quia est unus Deus omnipotens, qui per Verbum suum omnia fecit, et visibilia, et invisibilia; significans quoque, quoniam per Verbum, per quod deus perfecit conditionem, in hoc et salutem his qui in conditione sunt, praestitit hominibus; sic inchoavit in ea, quae est secundum Evangelium, doctrina: 'In principio erat Verbum'.<sup>32</sup>

[John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith, and seeks, by the proclamation of the gospel, to remove that error which by Cerinthus had been disseminated among men, and a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans, who are an offset of that 'knowledge' falsely so called, that he might confound them and persuade them that there is but one God, who made all things by his Word; and not, as they allege, that the Creator was one, but the Father of the Lord another; and that the Son of the Creator was, forsooth, one, but the Christ from above another, who also continued impassible,<sup>33</sup> descending upon Jesus, the Son of the Creator, and flew back again into his Pleroma; and that Monogenes was the beginning, but Logos was the true son of Monogenes;<sup>34</sup> and that this creation to

<sup>31</sup> Eusebius, III, xxvii, in Lake, 1926, pp. 260–3. For Irenaeus, see Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, p. 97.

<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus, III, xi, in Migne, 1857–94, VII, p. 879.      <sup>33</sup> I.e. incapable of suffering.

<sup>34</sup> These are aeonic names.

which we belong was not made by the primary God, but by some power lying far below him, and shut off from communion with the things invisible and ineffable. The disciple of the Lord, therefore, desiring to put an end to all such doctrines, and to establish the rule of truth in the Church, that there is one almighty God who made all things by his Word, both visible and invisible; showing at the same time that by the Word, through whom God made the Creation, he also bestowed salvation on the men included in the Creation; thus commenced his teaching in the gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word'.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to realise that here we have the bedrock of the sacred history Gibbon was attacked for not giving – whatever the terms in which eighteenth-century divines demanded that it be given. The universe is the continued activity of the creating and salvific Word of God; Jesus Christ was that Word made Flesh and speaking. At his departure he left the Word to speak itself and the Church as a body of men and women to speak it. The Word was not a body of doctrine to be believed or disbelieved, but an active and performative speech, to be heard and then to be spoken; it authorised the Church and the Church spoke by its authority. The Epistle to the Corinthians declared how the simple act of hearing, believing and speaking the Word set itself above the wisdom of either Jews or Greeks.<sup>36</sup> Acts depicted Paul addressing Athenian philosophers who desired only 'to hear some new thing'.<sup>37</sup> Justin Martyr recalled how, being worn out by the competitive disputes of philosophers, he encountered an aged man who made the liberating suggestions that the Word had spoken itself in human form and time and that to hear and to receive it was more than to dispute it – an experience closer to conversion than to conviction. From this moment the life of the Church became the continuous speaking of the Word and the continuous authority of those authorised to speak it. Irenaeus once more:

Γνώσις ἀληθης, ἡ τῶν ἀποστολων διδαχῆ, καὶ τὸ ἀρχαῖον τῆς Ἐκκλησίας σύστημα κατὰ παντὸς τοῦ κοσμου.

Agnitio vera est apostolorum doctrina, et antiquus Ecclesiae status in universo mundo, et character corporis Christi secundum successiones episcoporum, quibus illi eam, quae in unoquoque loco est, Ecclesiam tradiderunt: quae pervenit usque ad nos custoditione sine fictione Scripturarum tractatio plenissima, neque ablationem recipiens: et lectio sine falsatione, et secundum Scripturas expositio legitima et diligens, et sine periculo, et sine blasphemia; et praecipuum dilectionis munus, quod est pretiosus quam agnitio, gloriosius autem quam prophetia, omnibus autem reliquis charismatibus supereminens.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, pp. 287–8.      <sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians i, 17–31, ii, 13–16.

<sup>37</sup> Acts xvii, 21.      <sup>38</sup> Irenaeus, iv, xxxiii, in Migne, 1857–94, vii, pp. 1077–8.

[True knowledge [*gnōsis*] is the doctrine of the Apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the succession of the bishops, by which they have handed down that church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor curtailment; reading without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the scriptures, without danger and without blasphemy; and the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and excels all the other gifts.]<sup>39</sup>

This again Gibbon could never have said. He perceived only that the Word conferred authority, and supposed that it was spoken in order to confer it on human actors, in this case significantly the bishops. He had never much to say about the *gnōsis*, but might have joined a modern liberal in supposing that its privacy and indeterminacy rendered it less dangerous to liberty. On the other hand, its secrecy and esotericism meant that it could never be spoken in public, whereas the Logos claimed authority but as Logos might be questioned. The great debates came after the establishment of the Christian religion.

In recent scholarship – which has followed new and exciting paths since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi scrolls – a point has been reached where Irenaeus is credited with establishing the canon of four Gospels culminating in John's. He is an originator of both orthodoxy and priestcraft; the former the more unforgivable, since orthodoxy is held to blame for all the problems which follow its establishment. The Gospel ascribed to John is seen as affirming a coldly intellectual religion, in which access to the divine (a person) is mediated through priests and interpreted by theologians; the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas affirms a deeply evangelical (and American) religion, in which all men and women are equal before God and entitled to participation in a universal love so far diffused that Christ comes close to absorption into his own congregation.<sup>40</sup> In this version of the narrative, the term 'gnosticism' is critically examined and tends to disappear. We cease to hear of its supposed tenets: the imperfect creator and creation, Christ as the bringer of *gnōsis* which frees humans from both; and gnosticism and Manichaeism are acknowledged only as alternative forms of Christianity, never as partly alien alternatives to it. The present writer is without authority in these matters. This volume, however, presents a history of Christian historiography as that of a complex and passionate debate, in which the Basilidean and Valentinian schools described by Irenaeus, and

<sup>39</sup> Roberts and Rambaud, 1868, p. 11.      <sup>40</sup> For this see especially Pagels, 2004.

the Manichaeian movement that followed them, were accepted as realities and their character intensively debated; with what consequences we have yet to see.

We have reached the identity of truth and authority. The Word authorises the bishop to speak it, but it is the uninterrupted succession of bishops which authorises the belief that it is the Word that is being spoken. Eusebius must constantly be documenting this succession, as far as his information permits, but this narrative is linked with another. Together with the enumeration of successive heresies, the *Ecclesiastical History* is increasingly concerned with the persecutions of the Church and the consequent martyrology. The persecutions begin sporadically under Nero and Domitian, become a regulated police procedure under Trajan and the Antonines, and swell into a state-directed campaign first under Decius and then under Diocletian. Gibbon had left this story untold in his first fourteen chapters, but the last phase became of such overmastering importance to Eusebius that he changed the character, and perhaps the intention,<sup>41</sup> of his history. In the wars of the tetrarchs after Diocletian, it became reason of state either to enforce or to suspend prosecution of the Christians, and the climax of the narrative was Constantine's move from tolerating their religion to establishing it. Here civil history came close to sacred; the identification of empire with religion might be the prelude to its final triumph on earth. To indicate as much was one of the purposes with which Eusebius wrote his history; but there were others. The record of the martyrs was a triumph of faith over suffering, and the horrible details of their sufferings – especially when they were women – descended at times towards a pornography of holiness. It is to be stressed, however, that this is still the history of the Word, persisting after its incarnation and ascension. Christian martyrs were witnesses, as the name signified; they testified to the continuity of the Word, and by their deaths as well as their confessions continued to speak it. The Word was its own power, and the martyrs came in the course of history to join the long ranks of authority-bearers – angels, prophets, apostles, fathers, saints – whose figures line the great churches of baroque Europe and make the journey to the altar a procession of the Church in its majesty. When Gibbon sought to reduce their numbers, and to reduce persecution from a display of satanic depravity to a problem in the history of toleration – we shall see how he went about this – he was perceived, very probably with justice, as intending to diminish the Church and deny sacred history.

<sup>41</sup> Lake, 1926, pp. xxi–ii; Barnes, 1981, pp. 148–50.

## (III)

With Justin we encounter – this is not to say that he originated – the opposition, and complex relation, between the utterance of the Word and the pursuit of philosophy, which is to supply new themes in the narrative of Christian history. He is described, and describes himself, as a ‘philosopher’: one of a social type recognisable in later classical culture – a period sometimes known as ‘the Second Sophistic’ – by their dress and their behaviour, while practising diverse activities. A philosopher was known by the cut of his beard and cloak; Justin did not abandon this dress when he became a Christian.<sup>42</sup> Christianity might be considered a ‘philosophy’, and this term is occasionally used by Christians of themselves. This is the point, however, at which we need to recognise that *philosophos* and *philosophia* were words used with a variety of meanings. *Philosophia* could denote the discipline and way of life of any withdrawn or ascetic sect; Eusebius, following Philo, uses it of the Egyptian Therapeutae, whom he is prepared to think possibly Christian or proto-Christian,<sup>43</sup> and at a later point Gibbon was to encounter – with an incredulous horror to which only capitals could give expression – a description of monasticism as a DIVINE PHILOSOPHY.<sup>44</sup> The words could be extended to cover Christian belief and behaviour; but the case of Justin once more reminds us that something happened when he became a Christian without ceasing to be a philosopher. His encounter with the aged man (who was by some considered an angel) has begun telling us what this something was, but to understand the setting in which it happened we must continue exploring the meanings of ‘philosophy’.

If this word could denote the practices and disciplines of a sect of disciples, it might follow that they were disciples of a ‘philosopher’. The word might be applied to Simon Magus, unless he had been too diabolic a deceiver to be termed other than a sorcerer or magician. It might – or might it? – be applied to one preaching the incarnate Word, except that as early as the Epistles there was language suggesting that the Word was more than philosophy and philosophy not quite equal to it. Justin declares as much, yet by remaining a philosopher suggests that philosophy may be informed by the Word and assimilated to it; but when philosophy propounds the

<sup>42</sup> Barnard, 1967, p. 11. For a description drawn from St Jerome and a work by William Cave, see Le Clerc, BUH, 1968, II, pp. 13–14. It was a cloak worn over the naked body, without an under-tunic. Hypatia who was murdered at Alexandria is said to have worn it over her dress. This must have made the sight of her beardless female face, uttering philosophy, even more challenging.

<sup>43</sup> N. 13, above.      <sup>44</sup> DF, III, ch. 37; Womersley, 1994, II, p. 412.

Word it brings its own discourse with it. We cannot pursue this problem, however, without considering the ways in which Justin used the term 'philosophy'; and here we encounter the history of philosophy, which to our own day is written differently by historians and by philosophers.

A 'philosopher' in the second century AD might be almost any kind of wandering teacher, impressing princes or citizens with his apparent power or wisdom; and it has been suggested that there had occurred a revival of the Cynic persuasion, so that 'philosopher' might denote an ancient equivalent of the beatnik, who had rejected respectable society. Such a figure may propound a doctrine of the universe, a metaphysics and ethics, which makes him a 'philosopher' as we are prepared to use the term; but if his doctrine proclaims a power or force – indeed a *logos* – active in the universe, to speak it may be a source of power in himself, even of his power over it. He begins to work wonders as well as to speak them; the philosopher becomes a thaumaturge or magician, as Simon Magus did, or according to Gibbon the neo-Platonists. (Here Hobbes had developed his account of philosophers as a plague of impostors infesting the ancient world.) In mentioning Simon we return to the point at which magic is linked with the false philosophy, or theosophy, of the gnostics; but though Justin Martyr took a leading part in establishing this equation, it is not central to his account of his experience at the point where philosophy became Christian. Here he is using the term in a different sense.

Justin as a cloaked and bearded philosopher had been frequenting the schools originating at Athens, where a diversity of *sectae* or *haereseis* were systematically taught by successive accredited teachers in competition or dialogue with one another, and graduates of these schools might be met travelling the roads of the empire. Here philosophy was institutionalised in oral and written rhetorics, and we meet with histories of philosophy written in the form with which we are familiar: histories of disputes between intellectual systems, intelligible and valuable to practitioners of a systematic discourse and occasionally written by them. Such histories appear in the third century, but are not part of the story which Justin tells of himself. He says that he had moved from one to another of the recognised schools, Stoic, Pythagorean and finally Platonist, but though deeply attracted by the last was dissatisfied by them all, for the reason that the disputes between them appeared open-ended, inconclusive and incapable of being brought to finality or closure. Platonism especially made him believe that knowledge of God was possible, but did not bring him to the point of attaining it.<sup>45</sup> At this point he encountered the aged mentor or heavenly messenger, who

<sup>45</sup> See his *Dialogue with Trypho*: Barnard, 1967, pp. 6–11.



suggested to him that the Word had been spoken, had been incarnated as a being active in time, and that what was available and necessary was not a continued logomachy but the reorientation of personality by the Logos himself.

We are here at the point crucial to both ancient and modern thinking, where the philosophic intellect challenges or is challenged by the language of the Fourth Gospel. The Word is, or is not, more than can be said about it; from which it follows that discourse about the Word should or should not, must or may not, be inconclusive. Justin presents himself as exhausted and dissatisfied by the inconclusiveness of philosophy; but by Gibbon's time it was possible – and in our own time is almost inescapable – to prefer philosophy precisely because it is inconclusive, and so open-ended. Justin is about to prefer a revealed Word, spoken for all time because it is spoken from beyond time, bringing conversion and rebirth rather than a conviction which may or may not be final after all. Our culture prefers the non-finality of speech and the certainty of doubt;<sup>46</sup> and in Gibbon's time there were many who insisted that the Logos could not be stated with finality, whether their conclusions were devotional – Christ was more than could ever be said of him – or sceptical: he was no more than could be said about him. There was also the question of authority; the incarnate Word must act through human transmitters; and once we began asking (as we must) about the moment in human time when the Word had become incarnate, the context might determine the moment, new sceptical questions might be asked, and the divinity of Jesus itself might come to be questioned. Most Enlightened and some Protestant criticism of Christian theology was based on rejection of its Platonist foundations. The laying of those foundations may be seen as beginning with Justin Martyr, and first it must be noted that his account of 'philosophy' has little to do with gnosticism. We know him as an early narrator of the descent of gnosticism from Simon Magus the sorcerer; but though the term 'philosopher' could be extended to cover wandering mystagogues and magicians, these were unwelcome in the Grove, the Garden and the Porch. Justin is interested in the relation of the philosophic intellect to the Word that supersedes it, but is prepared to regard the former as preparing the way for the latter. This way was to be tangled and treacherous in the highest degree, but took its departure from Athens before Alexandria. It became a question, for ancients and early moderns alike, whether the gnostics Valentinus and Basilides were primarily Christian heretics who had mistaken the nature of the Johannine Logos, or whether their rejection of creation as the work of

<sup>46</sup> For this phrase I am indebted to the late Peter Munz (Fairburn and Oliver, 1996, and Munz, 2004).

God had deeper and culturally alien roots. Justin did not think this was part of the problem of what Athens had to do with Jerusalem – or rather with Bethlehem. He was embarked on the enterprise first of criticising Greek philosophy, then of reconciling it with the Christian message: a central enterprise for both philosophy and humanism thereafter.

There opened up what was almost, if never quite, a new dimension of sacred history, in which the Logos has a history before its incarnation, in the form of philosophy among the Greeks as well as in the prophecies of Israel. The Greeks share this history with others, but it is noteworthy that they provide much of the vocabulary in which it is stated. It is neither Greek, biblical nor gnostic, however, that Justin's history of philosophy starts unequivocally from a Christian assertion that the pagan gods were demons, in the malignant sense of devils. These beings appeared to men in such terrifying forms that they were worshipped as gods.

ὅτε δὲ Σωκράτης λόγῳ ἀληθεῖ καὶ ἐξεκαστικῶς ταῦτα εἰς φανερόν ἐπειράτο φέρειν, καὶ ἀπάγειν τῶν δαιμόνων τούς ἀνθρώπους, καὶ αὐτοὶ οἱ δαιμόνες διὰ τῶν χαιρόντων τῆς κακίας ἀνθρώπων ἐνήργησαν ὡς ἄθεον καὶ ἀσεβῆ ἀποκτείνειν, λεγοντες καινὰ εἰσφέρειν αὐτον δαιμονια. Καὶ ὁμοίως ἐφ' ἡμῶν το αὐτὸ ἐνεργουσιν. Ὅυ γάρ μόνον Ἑλλησι διὰ Σωκράτους ὑπο Λόγου ἤλεγθη ταῦτα, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν Βαρβαροῖς ὑπ' αὐτου του Λογου μορφωθέντος καὶ ἀνθρώπου γενομένου, καὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ κληθέντος. Ὡ πεισθεντες ἡμεις, τους ταῦτα πράξαντας δαίμονας ὅυ μόνον μὴ ὀρθοῦς εἶναι φαμέν, ἀλλὰ κακους καὶ ἀνοσίους δαίμονας, οἱ οὐδὲ τοῖς ἀρετῆν ποθοῦσιν ἀνθρώποις τὰς πράξεις ὁμοίας ἐχουσι.<sup>47</sup>

[And when Socrates endeavoured, by true reason and examination, to bring those things to light, and deliver men from the demons, then the demons themselves, by means of men who rejoiced in iniquity, compassed his death, as an atheist and as a profane person, on the charge that he was introducing new divinities; and in our case [Justin is addressing the Antonine emperors on behalf of the Christians] they display a similar activity. For not only among the Greeks did the Logos proceed to condemn those things through Socrates, but also among the Barbarians were they condemned by the Logos Himself, who took shape and became man, and was called Jesus Christ; and in obedience to Him, we not only deny that they who did such things as these are gods (*daimones*), but assert that they are wicked and impious demons (*daimones*), whose actions will not bear comparison with those even of men desirous of virtue.]<sup>48</sup>

This is not Enlightened history; it takes place not in the workings of human minds, but in a universe of contesting spiritual beings, the Logos and the demons. Here the gnostic heresies briefly appear; Simon, Helena

<sup>47</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, 5, in Migne, 1857–94, VIII, p. 335.

<sup>48</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, 1868, pp. 10–11. The translation might be improved by eliminating the distinction between gods and demons.

and their fellow Samaritan Menander are sent by the demons to deceive. Justin accepts the Greek description of all non-Greeks as ‘barbarians’, but it is among the barbarians (i.e. the Jews) that the Logos is made Flesh and becomes man. What then was the status of the Logos working through Socrates? The mind of man or a spiritual power? His own *daimon* is not mentioned in this passage, but can have been neither God himself nor one of his angels. To us Socrates is a martyr, a witness to the duty or necessity of pursuing philosophy wherever it may lead; but Justin has something else in mind.

Σωκράτει μὲν γὰρ οὐδεὶς ἐπιστεύθη, ὑπὲρ τούτου του δόγματος ἀποθνήσκειν. Χριστῷ δὲ τῷ καὶ ὑπὸ Σωκράτους ἀπὸ μέρους, γνωσθέντι (Λόγος γὰρ ἦν καὶ ἔστιν ὁ ἐν παντὶ ὄν, καὶ διὰ τῶν προφητῶν προειπῶν τὰ μελλοντα γίνεσθαι, καὶ δι’ ἑαυτοῦ ὁμοιοπαθοῦς γενομένου καὶ διδάξαντος ταῦτα), οὐ φιλοσόφοι οὐδὲ φιλόλογοι μόνον ἐπίεσθησαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ χειροτέχναι, καὶ παντελῶς ἰδιώται, καὶ δόξης καὶ φόδου καὶ θανάτου καταφρονήσαντες. ἐπειδὴ δὴ δύναμις ἔστι τοῦ ἀβήρητου Πατρὸς, καὶ οὐχὶ ἀνθρωπίου λογου τὰ σκεύη.<sup>49</sup>

[For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for his doctrine, but in Christ (for He was and is the Word who is in every man, and who foretold the things that were to come to pass, both through the prophets and in His own person when he was made of like passions and taught those things) not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death; since He is a power of the ineffable Father, and not the mere instrument of human reason.]<sup>50</sup>

The martyrs are illiterate for the same reason as the Apostles; the Word speaks through both and is not a *gnōsis* of the learned. But there is now a new history and almost a second chosen people. The Word is made known before its incarnation, to the Greeks through philosophy as to the Jews through prophecy. The Greeks are in no danger of apostasy, since they have been party to no covenant; but they are in danger of heresy, since philosophy may mistake the nature of the Logos, already a word in its vocabulary. The knowledge of the schools of Athens must be rewritten so as to show how close it comes to the true Logos, and why it can come no closer. This history, and philosophy, were taken up after Justin’s time by Clement of Alexandria, who set out to prove that Greek ideas of the universe were derived in fragmentary form from the forgotten knowledge originally revealed to Moses, and then – paralleling the history put together by Diogenes Laertius – to show how the history of Athenian philosophy might be reassembled eclectically and made into a semblance of the Christian

<sup>49</sup> Justin, *Second Apology*, 10, in Migne, 1857–94, vi, p. 462.

<sup>50</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, 1868, p. 80.

truth. Here we enter on the history of philosophy, as constructed by the Christians and reconstructed in the early Enlightenment.

Clement's position is that there is now a new evangel: the Logos has been made Flesh and has dwelt among us. This he calls a 'new song', perhaps in allusion to the Canticle of the Virgin in St Luke.<sup>51</sup> To explicate his meaning, he needs a history of the term Logos, which is a Greek word though manifestations of the Logos have been made to the Hebrews, and this history is necessarily a history of philosophy. The earliest Greek philosophy, he says, was barbaric in origin, meaning by that word that it was not Greek and was in fact Jewish. Pythagoras and Plato derived their knowledge of God from Moses, by which Clement hopes to convey that they knew of a God who had made all things by his Word or Logos.<sup>52</sup> He opposes this knowledge to the false idea of a God who is not a creator. That God vouchsafed philosophy to the Greeks made them in a secondary sense a chosen people, knowing the Logos before it came to earth; his gift will be called, by later translators of Clement, an '*alliance*' in French and even a 'covenant' in English,<sup>53</sup> though a covenant in the Old Testament sense it cannot be. Like the Jews, however, the Greeks are capable of backsliding, in their case into heresies, and Clement has a long invective against those philosophers, from the Ionians to the Stoics, who wrongly seek for impersonal principles, instead of God, at the origin of the universe.<sup>54</sup> This error opens the door to magian dualisms of Persian origin – not merely 'barbaric' but Gentile – and of course to the false teachings of the gnostics. Clement's aim is to retain Platonic philosophy, as far as possible, as a system capable of recognising a Father who creates and a Son through whom he both creates and redeems. The debate for some centuries was to be one on how far this could be done. He embarks on a history of Greek philosophy,<sup>55</sup> close to that constructed on 'eclectic' lines by Diogenes Laertius, and says there is a Christian<sup>56</sup> eclecticism which selects not only that philosophy which satisfies philosophers, but that which is compatible with the New Song and foresees it.

(iv)

A third agency had now entered the interplay of barbarism and religion – the former term here used in its original sense of 'other than Greek'. This agency was philosophical: a cultural phenomenon occurring in the Greek

<sup>51</sup> Wilson, 1867–74, 1, p. 22.      <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 395–400.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366; [Le Clerc], 1701, pp. 20–2.      <sup>54</sup> Wilson, 1867–74, 1, pp. 67–8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 391–4.      <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 358, 374.

world in forms inclusive of its central meaning, the successive schools that had taken shape at Athens. Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria were embarking on the enterprise of annexing 'philosophy' to the Christian Word and including it in the latter's sacred history: a major step in the Mission to the Gentiles that had been begun by the Apostles. It was a step dangerous to the extent that philosophy, in one form or another, might succeed in annexing the Word rather than being annexed to it, and there already existed 'heresies', alternative to the Johannine Logos, with which 'philosophy' might have to deal. Justin had severed 'gnosticism' from 'philosophy' by deriving it from Samaritan magicians, and its origins, other than diabolical, remained unclear; the link between the two concepts appears later. Meanwhile, there was the more general question whether the human intellect could be annexed to Christianity and made supportive of it, or whether no link with the enterprise of Greek philosophy could be found. What was to become of the Mission to the Gentiles?

The central assertions of what was to become orthodox Christianity may be summarised – at whatever risk – as follows. There is one God the Father, maker of heaven and earth. The person in whom he acts among humans is the Word or Logos, which has been with God and is God. This Word has been made Flesh and has dwelt among men. The purpose of this sojourn has been the redemption of men from their sins and it will be crucially necessary that the Creator and the Redeemer be one in substance; but we shall find redemption little discussed in Gibbon's sources as he read them, and hardly at all in the *Decline and Fall*. The debate between the orthodox – Justin, Irenaeus, Eusebius – and those whom they opposed turned overwhelmingly on the question of creation, and on the perceived inability of the latter to conceive that God had created the world, in particular the material world, *ex nihilo* or out of nothing. This stumbling block had emerged most dramatically in the systems of the gnostics, for whom the Creation was imperfect, matter necessarily the abode of death and sin, and creation therefore unworthy of God. The material world nevertheless existed, and what Gibbon elsewhere called the 'bold and injudicious attempt of eastern philosophy'<sup>57</sup> was to suppose an unmoved and absolute God who had no need to create, and two or more lesser gods who engaged in this activity or endeavoured to rectify its imperfections. There might be a dark god of matter, and a bright god of light, so far inherent in one another that their contest could have no end; there might be the Jewish god who had made the world and the

<sup>57</sup> DF, I, ch. 8; Womersley, 1994, I, p. 216.

Greek god (or Christ) who set us free of it by *gnōsis*. Enough was known of Zoroaster and his dualisms to permit the Christian writers to impute a Persian origin to the gnostic systems, especially when in a later chapter of Eusebius these reappear in a new form as Manichaeism;<sup>58</sup> it was hard to find within Greek or Christian thought alone a simple thread leading from a denial or distortion of the Incarnation to a denial of the Creation and the Creator. Gnostics might be Christian heretics, and it was assumed that most of them were; but their thought seemed to have been pervaded by elements Iranian and therefore 'barbarian' and 'oriental'. Indeed, a dualism that could not comprehend the Word made Flesh came to be part of the image of 'orientalism'. The synthetic deities known to Irenaeus as *aiones* belonged less to religions practised on the Euphrates or the Nile than to Hellenistic literary speculation on what these might be like.

But there was no need to venture into eastern dualism to find a similar series of unorthodoxies in Greek philosophy itself. If there could be no creation *ex nihilo*, matter could not have been created and God could not be a creator; at best a Demiurge like that in Plato's *Timaeus*, who had not created matter but had given form and intelligibility to its chaotic darkness. But creation *ex nihilo* was absolutely necessary if the Word by which all things were made, and which had been made Flesh for human redemption, was to have been with God and to have been God from the beginning. Here it became a question whether Athenian philosophy had been capable of such a view of creation, or whether the Christian Word could be added to it without distortion. It was well enough for Justin or Clement to tell the philosophers that the Logos had been made Man; if the Logos of the philosophers contained no way of saying this, how could it be a knowledge of the Word before incarnation?

The Logos of the Fourth Gospel (written in Greek) might be the reason which humans shared with God and by which philosophers had attained a knowledge of him not directly revealed. But to be capable of incarnation as a person, it must be – as the author of the Gospel had perhaps intended – something in the nature of the primal Platonic Idea, if it could be accepted that this Logos had created matter as well as merely shaping and forming it. In the setting of Jewish thought that lay beyond the Greek the Logos might be the 'Word of the Lord' that came to the prophets of Israel, or even the unutterable Tetragrammaton itself; there must be an agreed relationship between the foreknowledge of Christ offered to the Jews and that attained by the philosophers. The second-century Fathers had opened

<sup>58</sup> Eusebius, VII, xxix.

up the question of how these knowledges were related in a sequence of both sacred and Gentile (or barbarian) history; an immediate consequence was that, of the schools of Athens and Alexandria, it was the Platonic which had the most to say about the Logos, and was most challengingly confronted by John. The Word that had been made Flesh and dwelt among us was the Word by which all things had been made; a doctrine of incarnation entailed and demanded a doctrine of creation. The Platonic Logos, however, might be the word not of God but of a Demiurge who had shaped matter but not created it, and whose capacities were limited by this fact. From here it was possible to work back to a gnostic thesis, according to which Christ was the Word of one seeking to remedy the error of creation; Plato became one of the Gentile sages who could not fully accept the *ex nihilo*. There arose a succession of Platonising Fathers – among whom Origen became the most famous – aiming to restate the ancient wisdom so that it did not only anticipate, but actually contained, all that followed from the Johannine Incarnation. These probably created the text of the Three Witnesses;<sup>59</sup> certainly they confronted what seemed to be a Platonic Trinity, composed of God's being, his power and his wisdom, and tried to decide whether this could be made compatible with the Incarnation and the Trinity emerging from Johannine theology.

The problem was one of sacred history. If the Logos was both eternal and active, it must have been active before its incarnation, made known to Israel through prophecy and to Greeks – it was increasingly insisted – through philosophy. This was what Athens had to do with Jerusalem, if any equality could be admitted between a revelation made to barbarians and the philosophy established among the Greeks (the cultural chauvinists of the ancient world). Yet something astonishing and unexpected had occurred at Bethlehem and on Calvary, a stumbling block and foolishness to which neither prophecy nor philosophy was equal. The Jews had failed the test and had vanished terrifyingly from history; the Greeks (even if their philosophy was ultimately Jewish) were still confronting it, and claimed to furnish the language in which the astonishing could be defined and made intelligible. Yet this was to permit the wise to explain the foolishness by which they had been confounded; Paul on the Areopagus had been succeeded by the (apocryphal) Dionysius. It would be possible to describe the history of theology as the successful re-annexation of the Logos by the philosophers.

Confronted by the claim that the Word had been made Flesh, Christian philosophers did not deny it, but offered to supply the language, the

<sup>59</sup> For the history of this text and its critics down to Gibbon, see Levine, 1999, pp. 157–240.

discourse and the categories of thought in which it was to be asserted, defended and interpreted. While this was going on in Christian circles, there occurred, either marginally or anterior to them, two crucial developments. In regions including and transgressing the eastern borders of the empire, what seemed to be the older gnostic dualism recurred in the form of Manichaeism, a system which had enough to say about the person of Christ to be accounted a Christian heresy, and enough apparent debt to Zoroastrian dualism to be considered a Persian intrusion. Within the Greek-speaking world and particularly at Alexandria, there occurred a massive revival of Platonic and other doctrines, not Christian at all and in some cases a rearguard action of paganism, seeking to present the many cultic gods as manifestations of an ultimate deity who was neither creator nor Jehovah. The most intellectually powerful movement of this kind was what Gibbon had identified as neo-Platonism before his history of the Church began; and Eusebius followed an account of Origen,<sup>60</sup> chief among the Platonising Fathers, with one of Ammonius Sacca, founder of this school, himself perhaps to be considered Christian, but succeeded by Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus, who were not.<sup>61</sup>

As we move to Alexandria from Athens, where the schools continue an increasingly shadowy existence, there occurs or recurs a historiographical crux. We part company with both Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* and the fifteenth chapter of the *Decline and Fall*, to the extent that neither continues the history of theology and philosophy into the great debate of the early and middle fourth century, in which Eusebius himself was involved and with which Gibbon resumed, or began, his history of the Church in the chapters he did not publish until 1781. This was the debate between Arius and his opponents, including Athanasius, carried on through the Council of Nicaea into the ecclesiastical politics – themselves the phenomenon of a new kind of history – of the reigns between Constantine's and that of Julian the Apostate. It was a debate between theologians claiming to be orthodox Christians in the terms laid down by the Fourth Gospel, concerning the status in the godhead of the Logos that had been made Flesh in Jesus Christ; a Platonic debate as to the meaning of the Apostle John. It was also a debate to which the emperors were obliged to pay attention, in consequence of their establishment of Christianity, with its theological disputes, as the religion of the empire; and in terms of the problems explored in Gibbon's sixteenth chapter, it marked the beginnings of the persecution of Christians

<sup>60</sup> The sixth book of Eusebius's *History* is largely devoted to Origen.

<sup>61</sup> Eusebius, vi, xix, in Oulton, 1932/2000, II, pp. 59–61.



by Christians. Neither Eusebius in his *History* nor Gibbon in 1776 arrived at this episode, to which the latter might have been expected to proceed direct from the end of his fourteenth chapter. It is the question asked in this volume how far the fifteenth and sixteenth were necessary to prepare the way for it, or how effectively they had done so by the time Gibbon returned to it in 1781.