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Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics

by W. H. C. FREND

Apologetics take their place beside miracles of healing and courage in the face of persecution as an important means of furthering the early Christian mission. In the first two centuries AD, when the popular perception was that Christianity was closely allied to Judaism, the argument from Old Testament prophecy was important. In the third century, however, as the Church gained ground among the educated classes in east and west, the emphasis changed to an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over its pagan rivals as a philosophy with a more convincing understanding of the role of providence. Apologists in the north African tradition, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Arnobius and Lactantius, all played their part in this process. The prophecies of the Old Testament had to be confirmed by other prophecies, notably the Sibylline oracles and the sayings of Hermes Trismegistus. Finally, in the fourth century, many north Africans who, like Augustine for ten years, adhered to Manichaean Christianity relied wholly on these authorities, rejecting the Old Testament altogether.

Apologetics, in the form of personal persuasion or writings, take their place beside miracles of healing and bravery in the face of martyrdom as an important means of furthering the early Christian mission. This article seeks to point to a significant change in the direction of Christian argument that seems to have taken place, particularly in north Africa, during the third century, and its results.

The earliest days after the crucifixion set the pattern of Christian apologetics during the first two centuries. Luke relates how two unnamed disciples were on their way back from Jerusalem to Galilee when they encountered a stranger near the village of Emmaus. The stranger, who revealed himself as Jesus, reproached his companions for not believing what 'the prophets had spoken about the Christ', and in particular 'that he should suffer before entering into his glory' (Luke xxiv.25–6). He followed this up by 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself' (Luke xxiv.27).

This article was being prepared for the press when the Editors learned with great regret of Professor Frend's death, in his ninety-first year. The Editors gratefully acknowledge Professor Frend's contribution to the *Journal*, as contributor and as member of its editorial board, from its earliest years.

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This was the genesis of the Christian 'argument from prophecy', but the method had a history behind it, extending to the sect of the Covenanters of Qumran. They claimed that the Teacher of Righteousness 'had been placed by God in the midst of the congregation to interpret the words of his servants, the prophets'.[1] The resulting pattern of biblical exegesis was transmitted both orally and in writing. The same combination seems to have existed among the first three generations of Christians in their struggle with the Jews for the right to be acknowledged as the 'true Israel' after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. In their view, orthodox Jews were 'false Jews' (Revelation ii.9; iii.9) while the latter expelled them from their synagogues (John ix.22).

In the early years of the second century Christians used an elaborate typology to interpret texts in the Old Testament in order to build up collections of *testimonia*. These aimed at demonstrating that sayings attributed to Moses or the prophets, or found in the Psalms, referred to Christ as Messiah, or foretold events recorded in the New Testament, and, in some cases, denounced the sins of Israel.[2] By the time the writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* composed his tract probably in Alexandria *c.* 130, regular collections of such testimonies were in existence. These included the Suffering Servant (Isaiah liii.1–12) and the identity of the stone that the builders rejected (Psalm cxviii.22–3) and other references to 'a stone' with Christ.[3] At the same time as Justin Martyr was debating with the Jew, Trypho, Oscar Skarsaune has shown in detail how elaborate the use of prophetic *testimonia* had become in the conflict between Christians and Jews in the first two centuries.[4]

This same weapon was now to be employed against pagan objectors to Christianity. The first evidence of this is Justin's description of his encounter with the old man on the seashore near Ephesus, about AD 130. Justin was a pagan from the Greco-Samaritan city of Neapolis (Nablous). He had adhered to a variety of philosophic schools before settling on Platonism and it was as a Platonist that the encounter took place. The old man, who had possibly been a Platonist himself (he appears to quote from Plato's *Timaeus*), demolished a key Platonist doctrine concerning the immortality of the soul and proposed instead that truth had been expressed through the Holy Spirit by the Hebrew prophets 'proclaiming the Christ sent by God'.[5] Justin was profoundly

[1] *Commentary on the Book of Habbakuk* 1.5, ed. T. Gaster, in *The Scriptures of the Dead Sea sect*, London 1957, 235.

[2] See L. W. Barnard, 'The use of testimonies in the early Church and in the Epistles of Barnabas', in *Studies in the apostolic Fathers and their background*, Oxford 1966. Another debate between a Hebrew Christian of Palestine and an Alexandrian Jew, *c.* 135, is recorded by Celsus: Origen, *Contra Celsum* iv.52.

[3] Barnard, 'Use of testimonies', 115–22.

[4] O. Scarsaune, *Proof from prophecy*, Leiden 1987, particularly ch. iii where the author discusses Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*.

[5] *Dialogue with Trypho*, ed. and trans. A. Lukyn Williams, London 1930, 2–8. For the *Dialogue* being aimed at pagans as well as Jews see H. Chadwick, 'Justin's defence of Christianity', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* lxvii (1965), 275–98.

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moved but appears to have been converted finally to Christianity as a result of observing the bravery of Christian martyrs.[6]

Down to the last decade of the second century proof from prophecy remained the chief weapon used by Christian apologists in their debate with pagan objectors. One must mention, however, two second-century tracts, the *Letter to Diognetus* and the *Apology of Aristides* which rely on the merits of Christianity itself as the means for promoting conversion.[7] None the less, we know not only of Justin, but of Autolycus and Marcianus as pagan recipients of treatises from Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, and Irenaeus' *Demonstration of apostolic teaching* respectively, who were presented with the prophetic utterances of the Spirit prophesying Christ, as a means of mission. Their contemporary, Tatian, the Assyrian outsider, who came to hate Greco-Roman civilisation, says that he was converted to Christianity by contact with 'certain barbarian (Jewish) writings too old to be compared with the writings of the Greeks'.[8] The truth of Old Testament prophecies regarding Christ and the antiquity of those prophecies were effective weapons of debate in a period when antiquity itself was a guarantee of truth. 'Plato plagiarised Moses' was a telling argument.[9]

This was also a period when the perception of many observers was that Christians and Jews were still different sides of the same coin. For Celsus (*c.* 178) 'Jews and Christians' came naturally to mind, the latter being apostates from the former.[10] They might be a prey to warring sects, but they had turned their backs on the Greco-Roman gods, and deserved punishment as 'atheists' or worse.

Justin had not ceased to be a philosopher when he became a Christian.[11] He believed, however, that all truths were the property of Christianity and that the great philosophers of the past, such as Heraclitus or Socrates, were 'Christians before Christ'.[12] The argument that Christianity was the true philosophy was gradually to displace the argument from prophecy.

[6] Justin, 2 *Apologia* 12.

[7] The writers stress the positive merits of Christianity in ethic and morality and their universality. The letter to Diognetus claims that the Christians 'sustained the world': Diognetus, *ep.* vi.7. The same claim was made on behalf of the Christians by Aristides, *Apologia* 16.

[8] Tatian, *Oration against the Greeks* 29. The Hebrew prophets 'gave an easily intelligible account of the creation of the world and foreknowledge of the future': Emily J. Hunt, *Christianity in the second century: the case of Tatian*, London 2003, 56–8.

[9] Thus Justin, 1 *Apologia* 44, 54, 59–60. Plato 'borrowed from our teachers': Tertullian, *Apologia* 19 (though this passage occurs in one manuscript only). The argument from antiquity was being turned against the Christians, *c.* 290: Arnobius, *Adversus gentes* 1. 57.

[10] Celsus, cited by Origen, *Contra Celsum* iv.23; ii.1, 4, ed. and trans. H. Chadwick, Cambridge 1953.

[11] Justin, 2 *Apologia* 13. The teachings of Plato did not differ from those of Christ, but they were incomplete, lacking a doctrine of the Word.

[12] Idem, 1 *Apologia* 46.

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This development accompanied profound changes in the composition and outlook of the Church.

These changes were evident in different parts of the empire. In Rome Christians were beginning to own land for the construction of their cemeteries.[13] In Gaul and Athens slave-owners were numbered among the Christian congregation.[14] In Alexandria, *c.* 190, Clement was appealing directly to the Greek literate classes to abandon the customs of their ancestors and embrace Christianity.[15] In a well-known passage of *c.* 200 the physician Galen praised the Christians for their example of frugal ways of life and concluded that 'they had attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers'.[16] Clement claimed that the Christians were the genuine philosophers and they alone interpreted truly the music of the minstrels Amphion of Thebes and Arion of Methymna.[17] Prophets, the Psalmists and their message play their part in Clement's *Exhortation to the Greeks*,[18] but it is a message supporting that already proclaimed by other authorities, notably the (Jewish) Sibylline oracles.[19] In Alexandria Clement accepted the Word as his trainer and teacher.[20] Proof from prophecy was already falling into the background.

The change was timely. It was becoming evident that in the latter half of the second century, the argument from prophecy was being treated with scepticism as well as acceptance. If the Hebrew prophets were so ancient why should their prophecies regarding the Messiah refer to Jesus rather than someone nearer their time?: 'Why should you (Jesus) be the subject of these prophecies rather than the thousands of others who lived after the prophecies were uttered?' (*Contra Celsum* i.50). Origen had some difficulty in replying. Meantime, however, the new direction of apologetic was being taken up by members of the new, vigorous and Latin-speaking Church of north Africa.

The last time Jews and Christians were bracketed together in official circles as members of a similar faith was in Septimius Severus' alleged rescript dating to *c.* 202, preserved by Spartian,[21] which forbade conversion

[13] Hippolytus, *Refutation of all heresies* ix.12.14.

[14] Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* (LCL) v.1.14 (Gaul); Athenagoras, *Plea* 35.

[15] Clement, *Protrepticus* x.89, xi.14, ed. G. W. Butterworth, London–Cambridge, Mass. 1960.

[16] Galen, fragment from a lost summary of Plato's *Republic*, cited from J. Stevenson and W. H. C. Frend, *A New Eusebius*, London 1987, 116–17.

[17] Clement, *Protrepticus* i.1.

[18] Ibid. iv.54–5, preceded by a quotation from the Sibylline oracles at iv.24, 27–30.

[19] Ibid. iv.44: sibyl predicts the ruin of temples. Sibyl had been quoted twice by Justin (1 *Apologia* 20, 44) and once by Athenagoras (*Plea* 30.1). See n. 84 below.

[20] Clement, *Paedogogus* i.11; cf. *Protrepticus* i.7.

[21] Spartian, *Septimius Severus* 17.1. I regard this fragment as genuine. For the contrary view see T. D. Barnes, 'Legislation against the Christians', *Journal of Roman Studies* lviii (1968), 40–1. Severus, however, is regarded by Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* viii.1, as one who stirred up persecutions against the Christians; and Perpetua and Felicitas in Carthage were converts, Perpetua's family being pagan (*Passio* vi). They were arrested late in 202 and martyred on 7 March 203. Clement of Alexandria, writing *c.* 200–3, refers to persecutions in Alexandria

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to either; this coincides with the last reference to persecution of the Christians by Jews, denounced by Hippolytus, possibly connected with events and eschatological prophecies in Asia Minor around this time.[22]

The third century, as Adolph von Harnack long ago pointed out, was an age of continuous individual conversions.[23] A great many of these took place among the literate classes. Origen, writing *Contra Celsum c.* 248, refuting the argument put forward by Celsus (and probably true when he wrote, *c.* 178) 'that if all men wanted to become Christians, the Christians would no longer want them' (*Contra Celsum* iii.9), claimed that 'on account of the multitude of people coming into the faith', rich men, persons of high honour and 'ladies of refinement and high birth' regarded the faith favourably. Some became leaders of the Church 'for the sake of a little prestige'.[24] In the same section Origen urges his readers not to despise the sacred books of Moses and the prophets 'because of the sects among the Jews'. Utterances of the prophets needed to be 'carefully explained by those who are able to understand them intelligently'. They could not be taken literally. Even ideas of judgement had to be supported from rational probability as well as from the Bible.[25] Christians were moving in a world where literal argument from prophecy was no longer decisive for their cause.

Origen was not alone. Nearly all the evidence, however, for apologetics in the third century, comes from western sources and is mainly north-African inspired. Here too, one appreciates how Christianity was penetrating the lettered classes. The argument raged as to whether Christianity was the true philosophy before an audience to whom the Hebrew prophets had only slight relevance. Tertullian claimed that the prophets were 'steeped in the Holy Spirit',[26] that 'supreme antiquity claims for their books the highest authority' and that Moses wrote 'a thousand years before Priam's calamity'.[27] But he also conceded in the *Apology*, and writing against Marcion, that Moses was not a familiar figure to his audience: 'it was not the pen of Moses that initiated knowledge of the Creator, most of mankind had never heard of the name of Moses, let alone his works (*instrumentum*)'.[28] As a Stoic Tertullian had been familiar with the concept of natural religion. Now he saw Christianity as the 'natural religion of mankind',[29] superior in every way to the religion of

and the justification for flight: *Stromata* iv.10.76. Evidence accumulates for persecution *c.* 200–3 in Carthage and Alexandria and possibly in Rome too. As the bishops of these cities were not molested, the case for Spartian's accuracy would seem to be strengthened.

[22] Hippolytus, *De antichristo* 30. The AntiChrist was associated with the Jewish people. See J. A. Cerrado, *Hippolytus between east and west*, Oxford 2002, 244, 255–8.

[23] Adolph von Harnack, *Mission and expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries*, trans. James Moffat, London 1905, iv, ch. ii. [24] Origen, *Contra Celsum* iii.9.

[25] Ibid. iii.16. [26] Tertullian, *Apologeticus* (LCL), 18.2. [27] Ibid. 19.1

[28] Idem, *Adversus Marcionem* 1.10, ed. and trans. E. Evans, Oxford 1972; cf. *Apologeticus* 19.3.

[29] Idem, *Apologeticus* 7; cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* (LCL), 18.11.

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his pagan contemporaries which was based on the frivolous and salacious myths surrounding the gods.

Minucius Felix's *Octavius* takes this development further. The dating is difficult, but it is probably best to follow Jerome's statement that Minucius himself was an eminent advocate in Rome,[30] and to date his tract later than Tertullian. That would be in the first half of the third century at a time when the Christians were not under serious pressure, in the reign of Alexander Severus (222–35). Though the discussion between the pagan, Caecilius, and the Christian, Octavius, is placed near the baths at Ostia, there is a distinct north African flavour to it. The name Caecilius Natalis appears on six Numidian inscriptions from Cirta[31] and Octavius Januarius and Minucius Felix himself are also recorded on north African inscriptions;[32] the work was originally added to Arnobius' *Adversus gentes* as book viii.

The debate between Caecilius and Octavius is a legal battle with speeches for the prosecution and the defence. 'Apologies' have been left behind as now the Christians were on the attack. The pagan case, however, was still strong. The Christians behaved like a sect, 'profane conspirators' worshipping with vile rites in secret, the same charge as Celsus levelled against the Christians half a century earlier.[33] Their threat that the whole world and the universe itself would be destroyed by fire was insane.[34] Rome, moreover, had grown great through the protection of the gods. Why worship the Christian God?[35] The Christian philosophy finally was false. Octavius himself could best be described as 'the prince of bakers and last and least of philosophers'.[36]

Octavius countered. The poverty of most Christians was not a disgrace. All beings, without distinction of age, sex or rank, were created with the power of reasoning and were able to think of celestial things.[37] It was impossible to think that the universe was not the product of divine reason.[38] Philosophers and poets had tried in vain to understand that truth, but though they might have glimmerings of reality, without an overarching concept of Providence revealed by Christian teaching (Christ is not mentioned in Octavius' speech),

[30] Jerome mentions Minucius five times and places him after Tertullian: *Minucius Felix Octavius*, ed. Bernard Kytzler, Munich 1965, 23.

[31] *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum*, viii.6996, 7094–98, dated to 210–17.

[32] Ibid. viii (1964), 12499 (Minucius Felix), 8962 (Octavius Januarius). See also *Minucius Felix Octavius* (ed. Kytzler), l.35.

[33] *Minucius Felix* 8.4; 10.1 (LCL); cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum* i.1. See Georg Schöllgen, 'De ultima plebs', in M. Hutter, V. Klein and U. Volkner (eds), *Haeresis: Festschrift für Karl Hoheisel zum 65. Geburtstag: Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband* xxxiv (2002), 159–71.

[34] *Minucius Felix* 11.1–5.

[35] Ibid. 7.5

[36] 'ut pistorum praeciduus ita postremus philosophorum': ibid. 14.1.

[37] Ibid. 16.5.

[38] Ibid. 17.3ff. On the role of providence see ibid. 20.2. See also Vincenz Buchl, 'Göttlicher Heilsplan in der lateinischen Apologetik', in *Alvarium: Festschrift für Christian Gnilka: Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband* xxxiii (2002), 109–18.

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they wandered in error, deceived by demons and pseudo-deities with their degrading rites.[39] It was, as Octavius' hearers acknowledged, the 'disarming of ill-will by the very weapons which philosophers use in their attack and set forth the truth in a guise at once so easy and so attractive'.[40] Defence of Christianity was no longer a matter of biblical prophecy but looking forward to Lactantius' philosophic truth. Octavius was speaking to an audience that had left Judaism behind.

There was one aspect of the past from which Octavius could not shake himself free. Third-century Christianity remained profoundly opposed to the Roman empire, its traditions and achievements.[41] The Romans, Octavius insisted, had gained their empire by force and bloodshed: 'All that they possessed was the spoil of outrage'; 'Their temples are all of loot drawn from the ruin of cities, the plunder of gods and the slaughter of priests.' Moreover, at the end of his oration he lets the mask drop and says what he really thinks. Socrates becomes the 'buffoon of Athens' and philosophers not searchers after truth but 'corrupters of youth, adulterers and tyrants'; and the final flourish, which might confirm some of the worse fears among his contemporaries: 'We do not preach great things, We live them.'[42]

Not surprisingly, in both east[43] and west the Christians were being blamed for perceived disasters of the times. In north Africa in 251 the Proconsul Demetrian claimed that their abandoning of the traditional gods was the cause of major disasters of the time.[44] Cyprian, in his *Ad Demetrianum* (*c.* 251), meets this objection. He admitted that as the world was growing old and hence there were failures of every kind, from nature to human duties, all were in decline, but that these ills were due to pagans not worshipping the true God[45] and, what was worse, persecuting his adherents. God was angry and avenging these wrongs, and the Hebrew prophets are quoted to show that the heathen would be burnt up and smitten like the Egyptians or Israelite backsliders of old.[46] But arguments from prophecy play a limited role in Cyprian's apologetic. He simply assumes that the Christian God is the true God, that he is angry as illustrated in the Old Testament, but that Christ through his grace opens the way to immortality.[47]

Nearly half a century later Arnobius encountered the same accusation against the Christians but answered it differently. His contemporaries evidently did not see the restoration of the material welfare of the Roman

[39] *Minucius Felix* 27 (unclean spirits).
[40] Ibid. 39.
[41] Ibid. 25.5. Arnobius is equally hostile to the empire: *Adversus gentes* vii.52.
[42] *Minucius Felix* 38.5–6.
[43] Origen, *Contra Celsum* iii.15: Christians held responsible for 'the rebellion which is so strong at this moment' (perhaps that of Iotapian in Syria).
[44] Cyprian, *Adversus Demetrianum*, ed. W. Hartel, CSEL iii.1, Vienna 1868, 2–3.
[45] Ibid. 4, 5.
[46] Ibid. 6ff.
[47] Ibid. 23ff.

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provinces, from public buildings to sound currency, as outweighing what they perceived as the disasters of the time.

The rhetor of Sicca (western Tunisia) had been an ardent and superstitious pagan, worshipping elephant bones and ribbons attached to trees[48] (I saw similar examples myself when in Algeria in 1939). What changed his views is not known. Jerome suggests that it was due to dreams.[49] This, however, probably means that long and perplexing consideration had convinced him that the opponents whom he had ridiculed were right after all. It was now time to turn a savage ire on his erstwhile friends.

Arnobius probably wrote between 297 and 304,[50] a time when Christianity, though advancing rapidly, was becoming increasingly unpopular and, in February 303, the subject of outright persecution. Arnobius states, however, that among educated north Africans, 'men endowed with so great abilities, orators, lawyers, physicians and philosophers' were all turning to the new religion.[51] Temples, on the other hand, were becoming deserted.[52] Bishoprics were increasing in number, but a sharp distinction was emerging between a biblically-oriented faith adopted by *coloni* in the countryside abandoning the worship of the great territorial god, Saturn, and urban converts such as Arnobius. They were likely to be put off from the Scriptures, and especially the Old Testament, because of the crude style of the writers (cf. Arnobius, *Adversus gentes* i.58), but had been convinced by Christianity as a superior philosophy, underpinned by the life and works of Christ. Arnobius asserted the existence of a Supreme Creator, God,[53] but under Him, Christ had been created a second God, 'sent to us' as the great teacher and healer, the bringer of salvation to humanity.[54] Arnobius had read parts of the New Testament and probably some apocryphal works,[55] but he knows nothing of Israel, its prophets and its history. He rejects Christianity's Jewish heritage without compromise. Thus, in book iii of the *Adversus gentes*, he writes against his opponents, 'And let no one bring up against us Jewish fables and those of the sect of the Sadducees as though we too, attribute to the Deity forms, for this is supposed to be taught in their writings and asserted as if with assurance and authority.'[56] Sadducees may have been confused with Pharisees, but the reference to what was taught from Jewish writings suggests prophecies, and these Arnobius rejects as fables. They had, he adds, 'nothing to do with us,

[48] Arnobius, *Adversus gentes*, ed. A. Reifferscheid, CSEL iv, 1875, 1.39.

[49] Jerome, *Chronicon* ad. ann. 2342, ed. R. Helm, GCS, Eusebius vii, Leipzig, 1913.

[50] The early books were written in a time of increasing tension, but the eighth book during persecution. See Pierre Courcelle, 'Anti-Christian arguments and Christian Platonism: from Arnobius to St. Ambrose', in A. Momigliano (ed.), *The conflict between paganism and Christianity in the fourth century*, Oxford 1963, 151–91.

[51] Arnobius, *Adversus gentes* ii.5.

[52] Ibid. vi.2–3; see also i.24; iii.24.

[53] Ibid. i.31.

[54] Ibid. i.43, 46. For his superiority over Aesculapius see i.49; ii.65.

[55] He had read, for instance, the *Acts of Peter* where Peter brings Simon Magus down to earth in a contest of magic in Rome: ibid. ii.12.

[56] Arnobius, *Adversus gentes* iii.12.

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and in any case needed professional teachers to overcome the dark and recondite sayings of these prophecies'.[57] Arnobius' defence of his new faith was based partly on what he had read as evidence of the superior power of Christ whose works for the benefit of all humanity were performed without the need of magic or incantations,[58] partly on a sustained attack and ridicule of the pagan religion he had abandoned. Disasters of every sort had happened in past generations and could not be attributed to Christians.

Christianity, however, required a more reasoned and informed statement than Arnobius could give. The 'little peace', that is the forty-three years separating the end of the persecution by Valerian in 260 and the outbreak of the Great Persecution in 303, had brought great gains to Christianity. It was accompanied by a change of attitude among some influential pagan thinkers. The new religion could no longer be dismissed as 'an extravagant superstition'[59] as in Pliny's day or as a Judaistic sect as portrayed by Celsus. Christ was worthy of a more serious appraisal. This was given by Porphyry of Tyre (*c.* 232–*c.* 304) and his neo-Platonist followers. In his *Philosophy from oracles*, written *c.* 270, Porphyry sought to provide a defence of the traditional pagan gods and also a place for Jesus of Nazareth.[60] God spoke through oracles and oracles defined his relationship to God. According to these Jesus could not be regarded as God who was Spirit and could only be worshipped in silence with a pure soul. He could, however, be considered a sage, a wise man, who like Heracles or Orpheus had been raised to (subordinate) divinity on his death.[61] In the Latin translation of the *Oracles* cited by Augustine in the *De civitate dei* Porphyry is quoted as citing an oracle of Hecate to the effect that Jesus was a most devout man ('piussimum') who worshipped God, and 'was granted immortality after his death. Christians in ignorance worshipped this soul'.[62] That was to say, Christians were not worshipping God and by their contempt for their fellow provincials who understood the nature of the traditional gods, deserved punishment, even death.

This was the challenge that confronted Arnobius' pupil, Lactantius (*c.* 260–*c.* 320). Lactantius, however, left north Africa at some date before the Great Persecution to take up the post of professor of rhetoric at the court of Diocletian at Nicomedia. His seven books of *Divine institutes* were written, he says, as an answer to a tract by Hierocles, governor of Bithynia, and to a

[57] Ibid. [58] Ibid. iii.43.

[59] 'nihil aliud inveni quam superstitionem pravam': Pliny, *Letter to Trajan*, ed. A. N. Sherwin White, Oxford 1965, *ep.* x.96.8

[60] See R. L. Wilken's excellent study of Porphyry in *The Christians as the Romans saw them*, New Haven 1984, 126–63, esp. pp. 148–56. [61] Ibid. 154.

[62] Augustine, *De civitate dei* xix.23; cf. *De consensu evangelistarum* 1.7, 11: 'Christ was the wisest of men, but they (the pagans) deny that he is to be worshipped as God.'

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philosopher for whom he had little time.[63] The preliminary question therefore arises, how far Lactantius' *Divine institutes* can be regarded as reflecting a north Africa viewpoint.[64] The internal evidence suggests that from start to finish it is the work of a north African continuing a now established tradition of north African apologetics. His audience, whether at Diocletian's court or back in north Africa, was Latin-speaking people for whom the name of the god Pluto had to be given a Latin equivalent.[65] The Christian writers whom he quotes are in a succession of north African apologists: Minucius Felix whose defence of Christianity as a philosophy impressed him particularly,[66] together with the less effective Tertullian and Cyprian.[67] The Greek apologists on the other hand, do not feature in his work. The Sibylline oracles, however, quoted forty-seven times, and the sayings of Hermes Trismegistus, quoted eighteen times, though often cited in Greek are treated as ancient Roman authorities.[68] Regarding Hermes he explains that he came from a town, 'now called in Greek, Hermopolis', and there is no evidence that he had become acquainted with Hermetism elsewhere than in north Africa.[69] The *Divine institutes* as *On the deaths of the persecutors*, reflect purely Latin surroundings with an intellectual background that places Lactantius firmly in the succession of third-century north African Christian apologists.

Lactantius' work was a magisterial piece of philosophical writing, which owed much to Cicero's *De natura deorum* but drew on a vast range of classical writers in a way which anticipates Augustine's *De civitate dei*. Indignant apologetic is mingled with fine passages arguing for a lasting doctrine of providence and the principles of the Christian religion. While Minucius Felix had written his tract for a relatively closed circle of Roman *litterati*, Lactantius wrote 'for all without exception, without distinction of age or sex'.[70] It was universal propaganda designed to convert the population of the empire to the

[63] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae*, ed. S. Brandt, CSEL xix, Vienna 1890, v.2. I have used the Ante-Nicene Christian Library translation, ed. W. Fletcher, Edinburgh 1871, for citations in English.

[64] See P. Monceaux, 'Lactance', in *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, iii, Paris 1905, ch. ii. The only problem that can arise is how Lactantius dealt with those of his opponents who were in Bithynia or at Diocletian's court. What language did they write in, and did they reflect a Bithynian standpoint? Personally, I think not.

[65] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* i.14.5.

[66] Ibid. v.1.22; i.11.55. Lactantius shows high regard for the *Octavius* and regrets that Minucius Felix did not devote himself completely to the defence of Christianity.

[67] Ibid. v.1.23–7, and 4.3, both of whom he considers as having weaknesses, Tertullian for being 'obscure', and Cyprian as open to ridicule. He called 'Coprianus' a silly man with a salacious slant (v.1.27).

[68] Lactantius quotes Varro's list of ten Sibylline oracles: ibid. i.6.7–15.

[69] There is no evidence for an extensive cult of Hermes Trismegistus in Bithynia which could have influenced Lactantius more than its established veneration in north Africa. See the detailed study of 'L'Hermétisme africain' by Jérome Carcopino in *Aspects mystiques de la Rome païene*, Paris 1952.

[70] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* i.1.19.

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new Christian way by expounding and justifying the entire doctrine of the Church.

Lactantius argued that the universe was governed by a single Being, God, and that mankind's affairs are ruled by his Providence and attacks the polytheism still accepted by most of his contemporaries.[71] As the alternative he affirms that true wisdom and piety could only be attained through acceptance of Christ as saviour and the Christian religion as his interpreter.[72] One must open one's eyes and look at God who is the only home of truth. In this way one attained wisdom, and by wisdom immortality itself. As Minucius Felix, he criticised the poets and philosophers including Plato, 'judged the wisest of all',[73] for their inconsistencies, lack of completeness in their proofs for the existence of God and inconsequential disputes. 'Here, here', Lactantius claims, 'is that which all philosophers have sought throughout their whole life and yet have not been able to investigate.'[74] Christ was the only teacher of true religion and Christianity the new and perfect philosophy based on justice.

After devoting the first three books of the *Divine institutes* to attacking the authority of philosophers and of 'men excelling in every kind of praise',[75] who maintained their hold over society, Lactantius turns to what he believed were the decisive arguments against current paganism, namely those based on the power of divine oracles. At this period, as R. L. Wilken points out in connection with the *Philosophy from oracles*, Porphyry sought to establish a link through oracles between the religious beliefs of philosophers and the beliefs of men and women in the street who did not philosophise about the gods but worshipped them at home and participated in public rites.[76] Lactantius' reply was to devote almost the whole of book iv of the *Institutes* to the 'oracles' of the Old Testament and the 'utterances' ('vocibus') of the prophets from Moses onwards,[77] to prove that Christ was indeed divine, a ray from the sun or god,[78] 'the ambassador and messenger and priest of the Most High Father'.[79] The orthodox Church alone possessed that truth and the heresies, whether Valentinian, Marcionite or Novatian, were false.[80]

Old Testament Scripture was, however, only one of Lactantius' weapons. At the beginning of the first book he lists from Varro the ten Sibylline oracles,

[71] Ibid. i.2, 3. That the universe was governed by a single God would have been accepted by most of Lactantius' contemporaries. The issues in question were whether the divinities of the Greco-Roman pantheon had a part to play, and the divinity of Christ.

[72] Ibid. iv.11ff.

[73] Ibid. i.5.23; criticised at iii.21.

[74] Ibid. iii.30.4.

[75] Ibid. ii.19.3.

[76] Wilken, *The Christians*, 150. See also R. P. C. Hanson, *Studies in Christian antiquity*, Edinburgh 1983, 190–1.

[77] See Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* ii.10.6 and iv.5, 'The oracles of the prophets' ('vaticinio prophetarum').

[78] Ibid. iv.29.4; cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 21.12, for use of the 'ray from the sun' simile.

[79] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* iv.29.15.

[80] Ibid. iv.30.10.

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regarding them not as Jewish and early Christian compositions but as oracles predating the writings of the philosophers. He rejects pagan charges that the Sibyls were Christian concoctions.[81] In the same way he claims higher authority for the writings of Hermes Trismegistus though a man 'fully imbued with every kind of learning'.[82] Both these authorities were superior to those of philosophers who were liable to err and poets who invented fictions, and in Lactantius' view of equal standing with Scripture.

He needs the Sibyllines, because, as he states, 'it was the Jew who made use of the Old Testament, we of the New'.[83] Thus the Sibyl was invoked to foretell the events of the passion as they unfolded, including the scourging of Jesus, the offering of vinegar and gall on the cross and the rending of the veil of the temple.[84] Miracles, such as the stilling of the sea, healing the sick and feeding the five thousand were all foretold by the same authority.[85]

The Sibyls had been quoted by Christian apologists in the second century[86] and notably by Clement of Alexandria, but not with such persistence as a means of supporting the utterances of Old Testament prophets. The real novelty, however, of Lactantius' defence of Christianity lies in his use of Hermes Trismegistus, to whom he attributes almost divine authority. While the Sibyls prophesy the facts of Jesus' ministry, passion and death, Hermes is invoked to proclaim theological truths against Lactantius' opponents. Thus, early in book i, Hermes is quoted as proclaiming that 'God is one and He is one only and does not need a name because He is alone.'[87] Hence, all named gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon were either false or superfluous. Furthermore, as Lactantius asserts in book iv of the *Institutes*, he spoke truthfully of God the Son, a second visible God approachable through human senses,[88] and earlier as the antagonist of the devil who ruled over the demons, the destroyer of men.[89] On the contrary, as described in the Hermetic tract translated into Latin as the

[81] 'a nostris ficta': ibid. iv.15.26. See Hanson, *Christian antiquity*, 191, but it would not seem that he believed the oracle had lost inspiration. Diocletian believed in the veracity of the oracle of the Milesian Apollo which he consulted before launching the 'Great Persecution': Lactantius, *De morte* 10.

[82] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* i.6.

[83] Ibid. iv.20.5, though they were not contradictory: the Jews, however, were 'disinherited'.

[84] Ibid. iv.18, 19.

[85] Ibid. iv.15. Hermes Trismegistus is invoked as having foretold the nature of the birth of Christ (iv.8.5), and the sibyl's prophecy is recorded (iv.6.5).

[86] See n. 19 above. For the early use of the Sibyllines by the Greek Christian Apologists see J. M. Bartelink 'Die Oracula Sibyllina in der frühchristlichen greichischen Schriften von Justin bis Origenes (150–250) nach Christi' (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* xxii (1993), 23–33.

[87] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* i.6.4.

[88] Ibid. iv.6.4, followed by two quotations from the sibyl. See also iv.27.20.

[89] Ibid. ii.15.8, 6: 'those who have known God are not only safe from attacks by demons, but that they are not even bound by fate'.

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Asclepius, he is the saviour of humanity.[90] Lactantius uses this treatise to show that human nature was dual, partly mortal and partly immortal and destined to salvation,[91] a view for which he calls on the Sibyllines (not Scripture) for support.[92] In addition, when he writes of the end of time, he quotes Hermes to show that the final cleansing of the world would be preceded by floods, outbreaks of fire, wars and pestilences. These would precede the final restoration of the world to its ancient (perfect) state.[93] Again, he follows this up, not with a reference to Revelation, but to Sibylline prophecies foretelling 'judgement to come from the Immortal to men'.[94] The impression left on any reader would be that while the Hebrew prophecies were true, they were rejected by the Jewish people. They had to be supplemented and at times superseded by the prophetic wisdom of the Sibylline oracles and sayings of the thrice-great Hermes. On major theological questions his was the guiding voice.

How did the sayings of the Egyptian seer come to play so great a part in north African apologetics in the late third century? His influence seems to have spread slowly. Tertullian knew of his works,[95] but, as Jérome Carcopino has pointed out, he did not become prominent until well into the third century.[96] A notable inscription on a funerary mosaic from Lambridi in central Numidia suggests a growing influence among the landed classes. His power was stated to have saved the deceased, Cornelia Urbanilla, *c.* 260, 'from the great danger',[97] presumably the total destruction of her soul. Twenty years later Lactantius' tutor, Arnobius, may also have been a follower of Hermes before he became a Christian. His belief in the existence of a 'second God' namely Jesus as revealer of the Supreme God, and his rejection of any form of temple as a place of worship, point to Hermetic influence,[98] though as a Christian he associated Hermes (disguised under the name of Mercury) with Pythagoras and Plato as an opponent of Christianity.[99]

Hermes and the Sibyls were to have a long history in the fourth century as authorities destined to draw pagans to Christianity, but in a way which Lactantius would not have recognised. Lactantius has always been reckoned at heart a dualist.[100] It is not only his idea of cosmic conflict between light and

[90] Carcopino, *L'Hermétisme*, 255. For Lactantius' knowledge of a treatise by Asclepius see *Institutiones divinae* ii.15.7–8. Asclepius was believed to be the son of Hermes.

[91] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* vii.13.3.

[92] 'What do the Sibyllines say?', ibid.

[93] Ibid. vii.18.4.

[94] Ibid. vii.19.

[95] Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* 1.15, and *De anima* 2.1; 33.2. See also Justin Martyr, 1 *Apologia* 54.

[96] Carcopino, *L'Hermétisme*, 291.

[97] This is discussed in detail ibid. 208–53.

[98] 'En fait, Arnobe a purement et simplement transféré au Christ le pouvoir d'assurer aux hommes le salut de la gnose d'Asclepios et d'Hermes': ibid. 294.

[99] Arnobius, *Adversus gentes* ii.13.

[100] As shown in Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* ii.9. See Monceaux, 'Lactance', 327–8.

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darkness and life and death, and his view of the dual nature of the human soul: dualism lay at the heart of his understanding of God. God, he says, after creating the Son, created a third spirit. This, however, was not the Holy Spirit, but one who, for some cause or other, lost whatever godlike perfection he originally possessed and passed from good to evil. He became the eternal contrary to God, complete both in judgement, knowledge and power.[101]

Though this spirit was originally a creation by God, one can readily understand that contemporaries would regard it as the source of eternal evil, opposed to the good in every way. Lactantius was not 'the father of North African Manichaeism', but its forerunner. Not surprisingly, those dualists, the educated African Manichaeans of Numidia and their disciples – who for ten years included Augustine – rejected the Old Testament and the prophets in favour of Hermes and the prophecies of the Sibyl on their way from paganism to their accepted form of Christianity. Thus, Augustine's older contemporary, Faustus of Milevis, asserted that the prophecies of the Sibyls, Hermes and Orpheus concerning Christ were more credible than those of the Hebrew prophets which he rejected.[102] All represented the power of Christ, and all, including Orpheus, had been invoked by Lactantius seventy-five years before.[103] Augustine, too, during his years as a Manichee confesses that he found the Old Testament absurd (*Confessiones* vi.4.6.) and, as is well known, he was converted to orthodox Christianity through reading 'books of the Platonists' and hearing the Old Testament explained (or explained away) allegorically when he listened to the sermons of Ambrose of Milan.[104] For whatever reason, however, he had a copy of the *Asclepius* to hand when he wrote the *De civitate dei* in the 420s, nearly forty years later.[105]

That Hermes's *Perfect word* (*Asclepius*) also retained credibility among Catholics of the time is shown by its explicit use by the anonymous author of the pseudo-Augustinian tract directed 'Against the five heresies', to the effect that while God created all gods, he also made a second Lord[106] – an Arian view but one asserted by both Arnobius and Lactantius to prove the divinity of Christ. There can be little doubt that religious thought in the late third century in north Africa and in much of the Greco-Roman world included wide varieties of mystic belief. This cannot be categorised neatly into orthodox Christianity, heresies and paganism. Less would seem to divide the hopes and beliefs of Cornelia Urbanilla of Lambiridi from those of

[101] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* ii.8.4.

[102] Augustine, *Contra Faustum* xiii.1, *PL* xlii.281.

[103] Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae* i.5.4 regarded Orpheus as 'the most ancient of poets' [and hence worthy of credence].

[104] Augustine, *Confessions* vi.4.6; vii.9.13 (Platonists). See W. H. C. Frend, 'Pythagoreanism and Hermetism in Augustine's "hidden years"', in *Orthodoxy, paganism and dissent in the early Christian centuries*, Aldershot 2002, 251–60.

[105] Augustine, *De civitate dei* viii.23, 24, 27.

[106] 'Dominus, inquit, et omnium factor deorum, secundum fecit dominum': Ps- Augustinus, *Tractatus adversus quinque haereses* iii.4, *PL* xlii.1102.

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Lactantius. Both aspired to deliverance with the aid of Hermes Trismegistus from 'the great danger' whether personal or cosmic. Egypt, the land of potent magic had been the home of Hermes, and in a period when humanity, whether pagan or Christian, believed itself to be in the daily thrall to malign demonic powers his influence permeated many forms of religious identity. He was to continue to exercise his power on the ideas of members of the literate class in north Africa who would find certainty in another eastern theology, namely Manichaeism, in preference either to orthodox Catholicism or the biblical Christianity of the Donatists.

In the fourth century the pagan inquirer approaching Christianity did not have to accept the ill-written Old Testament and its Jewish prophecies. Christian apologetic now tried to show that the classical poets and philosophers had, even unwittingly, prophesied the coming of Christ. For Constantine an interpretation of Virgil's *Fourth eclogue*, together with the Sibyl, provided a proof that he expounded in his Good Friday sermon 'to the saints'.[107] His contemporary, the Spanish aristocrat Juvencus, trod the same path.[108] But here the evidence leads one to believe that the decisive change from proof from prophecy to an understanding of the true light of Christ from the wisdom of the past came from other sources. Among these were the (Jewish) Sibylline prophecies and the teaching of Hermes Trismegistus. Their decisive entry into the realm of Latin Christian apologetics at the end of the third century, was largely the work of the north African writers Arnobius and Lactantius.

[107] Constantine, *Oratio ad sanctos*, in *Constantine and Christendom: The oration to the saints; The Greek and Latin accounts of the discovery of the cross; Edict of Constantine to Pope Silvester*, Liverpool 2003, 20–2. Constantine also quoted extensively from the sibyls (which he thought the Erythrean sibyl) to prophesy the descent of Christ from God: ibid. 18. For Constantine's indebtedness to Lactantius, including his use of the Sibyllines, see T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, Cambridge, MA 1981, 74.

[108] See Wilfrid Röttger, 'Studien zur Lichtmotivik bei Juvencus', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband* xxiv (1996).

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