

EARLY CHRISTIAN THINKERS

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The lives and legacies of
twelve key figures

EDITED BY PAUL FOSTER



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Chapter 1 Paul Parvis, 'Justin Martyr', *Exp Times* 120.2 (November 2008), 53–61.

Chapter 2 Paul Foster, 'Tatian', *Exp Times* 120.3 (December 2008), 105–18.

Chapter 3 Denis Minns, 'Irenaeus', *Exp Times* 120.4 (January 2009), 157–66.

Chapter 4 Rick Rogers, 'Theophilus of Antioch', *Exp Times* 120.5 (February 2009), 214–24.

Chapter 5 Judith L. Kovacs, 'Clement (Titus Flavius Clemens) of Alexandria', *Exp Times* 120.6 (March 2009), 261–71.

Chapter 6 Everett Ferguson, 'Tertullian', *Exp Times* 120.7 (April 2009), 313–21.

Chapter 7 Sara Parvis, 'Perpetua', *Exp Times* 120.8 (May 2009), 365–72.

Chapter 8 Rebecca Lyman, 'Origen of Alexandria', *Exp Times* 120.9 (June 2009), 417–27.

Chapter 9 J. Patout Burns, 'Cyprian of Carthage', *Exp Times* 120.10 (July 2009), 469–77.

Chapter 10 Ulrich Volp, 'Hippolytus', *Exp Times* 120.11 (August 2009), 521–9.

Chapter 11 Michael Slusser, 'Saint Gregory Thaumaturgos', *Exp Times* 120.12 (November 2009), 573–85.

Chapter 12 Timothy D. Barnes, 'Eusebius of Caesarea', *Exp Times* 121.1 (December 2009), 1–14.

Introduction

PAUL FOSTER

The significance of early Christian ideas

The period from the mid second century, when Justin Martyr wrote his defence of the Christian faith, until the beginning of the fourth century, when Eusebius presented a somewhat triumphalistic account of church history, was a period of both theological creativity and challenge for this emergent religious movement. While group members shared a common devotion to the person of Jesus, the basis of such piety and worship required further definition. It was during this period that numerous thinkers wrestled to formulate an intellectual account of the faith. In part, this was motivated by a desire to understand better the nature and basis of the Christian belief system. However, at other times the motivations were more pragmatic. These included the very real challenge of adjudicating between competing perspectives and interpretations concerning matters of faith, the need for the regularization of leadership and ecclesial structures, as well as addressing pastoral concerns such as the rehabilitation of lapsed believers. As the early Christian movement developed from being a loose confederacy of scattered yet like-minded communities into a more coherent Empire-wide institution, albeit still officially proscribed until the beginning of the fourth century, there was a pressing need to bring consistency of practice to this growing faith-system. This involved both searching for a meaningful expression of core beliefs and negotiating a broad and workable consensus concerning the correct system of governance for the burgeoning movement. A number of its most prominent thinkers in the period covered by this book, AD 150–330, sought to resolve issues such as these.

Within the time span covered by this volume it is possible to identify significant developments of thought. These developments were often either built on previous insights or shaped by pressing new circumstances. Therefore, the writings and impact of each of the 12 figures discussed here reflect the way in which these early Christians, while being rooted in their own cultural contexts, made innovative contributions towards developing Christian thought, theology and piety. Consequently, while these figures must be understood within their own historical situations, they also left lasting legacies which have shaped the subsequent history of Christianity. Many of their ideas were formative for later expressions of Christian theology. Although it may be debated whether these enduring contributions were positive or negative, the discussions in this book seek to describe the life, theology and contribution of each of the figures within the broader stream of the development and evolution of Christianity.

The impact of the Christian movement on subsequent Western culture is well known, and this alone justifies an investigation of the development of its intellectual origins and earliest institutional developments. However, what is sometimes overlooked is the way in which early Christianity itself drew upon, modified and transmitted already existing intellectual ideas. The role of tradition, the place of argumentation, the canonization of texts, the control of dissident voices and the management of a widespread voluntary association are all issues that find precedents in religious and political systems that were in existence before Christianity's spread. Yet the way in which these ideas are combined and developed in the first few centuries of the movement resulted in the structural and intellectual framework that would create the space in which the medieval notion of Christendom could come to fruition. While it would be too much to claim that all these later developments can be traced to trajectories initiated by figures in the second to fourth centuries, there is undoubtedly much continuity and many ideas can be identified *in nuce*. However, theological creativity did not cease at the beginning of the fourth century. Therefore, while many beliefs found more precise expression in later centuries many can still be recognized in embryonic form in the first few centuries of Christianity. Thus the 12 figures under study in this volume reflect the intellectual legacy and cultural heritage of a faith that transformed itself from being a messianic sect originating in the backwater of Galilee into a group that proclaimed a universal salvation and in the process shook the religious fabric of the Empire.

The 12 figures under discussion

Justin, apologist, philosopher and martyr, stands at a temporal and intellectual crossroads in the history of early Christianity. In reality historical eras do not open or close as perfectly discrete units. Like a number of the so-called Apostolic Fathers with whom he overlaps in temporal terms, Justin shares a primitive ecclesiology and an undeveloped scriptural canon. However, he represents one of the first major attempts to place Christian thinking on an equal footing with the élite philosophies that were part of the education of the intellectually privileged in the second-century Roman Empire. In his treatment of Justin, Paul Parvis notes the way in which Justin challenged the prevailing philosophical systems of his own day with a muscular and robust presentation of Christian thought. Moreover, Justin's life is seen as providing a snapshot of the international and multicultural nature of life in the Roman world. Parvis traces Justin's life from birth in Flavia Neapolis of Syria Palestina, via his intellectual growth in Ephesus, then on to the imperial capital where as leader of a 'school-church' he sought to articulate the intellectual credentials of what was originally a Jewish messianic movement. This agenda came to fullest fruition in Justin's apologetic writings. Controversially, but plausibly, Parvis argues that Justin's commonly titled *Second Apology* was in fact not a work independent of the *First Apology*. Rather he sees it as being the assemblage

of out-takes from an initially longer version of the *First Apology*. Thus, according to Parvis, the so-titled *Second Apology* may be viewed as a posthumous creation of Justin's disciples, who reassembled the out-takes into a separate document soon after the martyrdom of their teacher. Paradoxically, Parvis argues that the success of Justin's influence can be measured by the quick disappearance of his works. Justin's pioneering work as an apologist was taken up by successors in the replication and expansion of that literary genre. Perhaps it would not be too great a claim to suggest that the modern theological sub-discipline of apologetics ultimately finds its origin in the second-century figure of Justin who, without any sense of contradiction, both wore the philosopher's mantle and yet died the martyr's death.

The second figure to be discussed in this volume was himself a pupil and disciple of Justin. Like his teacher, Tatian was not a native of Rome, although he fell under the tutelage of Justin in the capital. Unlike his teacher, however, Tatian would not be remembered as a representative of orthodoxy by later church figures. This is probably due to his later association with the Encratite movement in the Eastern region of the Empire, and perhaps also because he did not undergo the legitimating fate of martyrdom. Nonetheless, his one complete surviving work, *Oratio ad Graecos*, which adopts the apologetic genre used so effectively by Justin, was distinct in not addressing members of the imperial household (like previous Christian apologies) but was addressed more broadly to 'the Greeks'. However, Tatian had in view a particular branch of Greek culture: its philosophical schools. With brash confidence and enthusiasm he ridiculed the self-perceived superiority of the philosophers. Both Plato and Aristotle are parodied and mocked. Moreover, Greek learning is claimed to be indebted to other cultures and consequently baseless in its critique of barbarian thinking, and the Christian conception of divinity is argued to be superior to that contained in philosophical accounts. While the *Oratio* is Tatian's only complete surviving work, he is perhaps more famous for a work that survives only partially in fragments and citations. His unified combination of the four Gospels, known as the *Diatessaron*, was an attempt to present a continuous and harmonized text of these accounts of the life and death of Jesus. The challenge which this text presented to the emergence of the fourfold Gospel canon should not be underestimated, especially in the Syrian Church. While Tatian may not have been the innovator of Gospel harmonies, his combination of the four Gospels into a unified narrative was undoubtedly the most influential of such harmonies. Tatian's legacy is difficult to assess. Setting aside the later assessment of him as a heretic, his association with both Justin and Encratite theology reveals much about the fluidity and diversity of early Christianity. His impact through the *Diatessaron* shaped Syriac Christianity for several centuries after his death, and in response it may have helped to crystallize the eventual decision to accept a fourfold Gospel canon rather than a single harmonized narrative.

Although perhaps as little as a decade or two separates Justin and Tatian from Irenaeus, the differences in their respective theological outlooks and

responses to internal dissensions within the Christian movement is fully apparent. Fully cognisant of this shift in mindset, Denis Minns presents Irenaeus as a crucial figure in the early history of the development of Christian doctrine. This remarkable development in Christianity between the early 150s and Irenaeus' own time is highlighted through investigation of six key theological themes in his writings. These are Irenaeus' discussions concerning: (1) the nature of 'heresies' and the way he formulates responses to deviant teaching; (2) the role of 'tradition', with a rebuttal of claims of preservation of strands of secret traditions in other branches of Christianity; (3) the development of the concept of 'the measuring rod of truth' – in effect this was a claim that those who knew the central tenets of faith could correctly gauge the truth claims of others; (4) the plan of salvation, which functions to affirm the unity of the Old and New Testaments; (5) the idea of 'recapitulation', viewed as a salvific summing-up of the cohesive divine plan of salvation primarily in the person of Christ; and (6) Trinitarian and Christological thought, which in embryonic ways anticipate later creedal statements. In essence Irenaeus' contribution was to attempt to articulate a coherent theological structure for Christianity. Minns also notes that the different ways in which Irenaeus articulates theological concepts such as the 'sin of Adam' or the 'economy of salvation' means that he has much that is fresh and invigorating to offer to contemporary theology.

Theophilus of Antioch was a contemporary of Irenaeus, and like Irenaeus he was a bishop, Christian writer and defender of the faith. While his surviving writings, three documents collectively known as *To Autolycus*, are generally seen as belonging to the genre of the apology, Rick Rogers argues that they do far more than offer a robust defence of the faith. He suggests that they should be examined as protreptic literature going well beyond merely defending the faith to promoting a world and life view. In essence the writings are seen as an invitation to participate in Christian life and the way of salvation. Theophilus offers his readers what is in some ways an idiosyncratic form of 'logos-Christology'. Thus, he portrays the logos 'as a literary personification of God, who provides salvific *nomos*' (p. 66). Because of Theophilus' apparently anomalous theology, he is often seen as being somewhat of a misfit in the stream of emergent orthodoxy, yet this does not mean his perspectives should be adjudged heretical. Rather, as Rogers suggests, 'it might be better to say that Theophilus was a heterodox theologian, who upheld the conservative Christianity of Antioch' (p. 66).

With Clement of Alexandria, the focus of the volume shifts not only centuries but also continents. While these differences need to be acknowledged they should not be overplayed, since in many ways they are artificial boundaries. The city of Alexandria was certainly not a provincial backwater but, as Kovacs notes in her study, it was perhaps the most lively and stimulating city in the Roman Empire. While little is known of Clement's life, Kovacs observes that the reference to Clement as 'blessed presbyter' (p. 69) suggests that he held an official position within the church. This is an important observation,

for it provides some insight into the relationship between the intellectual branch of Christianity in a catechetical school in Alexandria and its wider worshipping community. Discussing Clement's writings, Kovacs concentrates on his primary trilogy of the *Exhortation*, an invitation to Christian life, the *Instruction*, a treatise addressed to new believers on the Christian way of life, and the seven books of his *Miscellanies*, which is his most advanced work of theological reflection. As Kovacs presents it, Clement's legacy is multifaceted. He combined advanced philosophical learning with the Christian message to produce a more rationalistic understanding of faith. Moreover, he provides readers with the first written records of Christian theology from the intellectual powerhouse of Alexandria. Thus Clement opens up new vistas on both the intellectual and geographical landscape of the early Church at the beginning of the third century.

Like his near contemporary Clement, Tertullian provides a North African perspective on early third-century Christianity in North Africa. However, in many ways, it is here that the similarities stop. Everett Ferguson recognizes Tertullian as being the principal propagator, if not creator, of theological Latin. Moreover, he was a strident critic of Roman Christianity, an outspoken opponent of heresy, yet also himself suspected of being a schismatic. Ferguson presents a potted version of Tertullian's life, which notes the recent scholarly tendency to question whether his association with Montanism did indeed indicate that he went into schism from mainstream Christianity. Tertullian's prolific literary output, spanning the period 193–217, reflects his skill as a forensic orator. Ferguson groups the generally accepted corpus of 31 surviving works into three categories: (1) apologetic writings – mostly against paganism; (2) anti-heretical and doctrinal writings; and (3) moral and disciplinary writings – both orthodox and those influenced by Montanism. It is noted that Tertullian's writings proceed along rationalistic lines, and that he is influenced by Irenaeus in his portrayal of Christ's work as recapitulation. His impact touched later ancient authors as well as providing resources for modern theologians. In relation to the former, his high evaluation of martyrdom not only shaped the ethos of the North African church, but also became part of later controversies which required resolution. For modern theologians, his stance against Christian participation in warfare has been seen as a resource for pacifist theologies. According to Ferguson, however, the best way to understand Tertullian is as a rhetorician of his own age, who wrote employing varying techniques to win those arguments in which he was involved.

Perpetua is indeed the 'odd woman out' in this male-dominated list of 12 figures, yet this is not solely due to her gender. She is the only figure among the 12 who did not leave extensive theological writings. However, fragments of her prison diary survive in a composite document. Her inclusion among other figures is not due to an attempt to embrace the feminist agenda for its own sake, or to feign some other type of 'trendiness'. Rather, Perpetua represents a 'lived-out' theological commitment, which resulted in the ultimate

demonstration of commitment to her religious beliefs. Therefore, as Sara Parvis notes in her discussion, while Perpetua may not have been the greatest theologian of the early Church, she does nevertheless provide a rare insight into the genuine and characteristic theology of the more general Christian population. Parvis seeks to rescue Perpetua from what she characterizes as 'pop-Freudian psychological analysis' (p. 106), which labels Perpetua as a neurotic and wilful suicide. Instead Perpetua is seen as having a simple, but not simplistic, theology that finds its centre in the experience of a relationship with the divine. Perpetua's spirituality stems from a sense of belonging to a charismatic church, enriched with visions, miracles and prophecies. Consequently, the recovery of her voice reminds modern readers of the vibrancy and spiritual immediacy that attracted many to faith in the early Church.

The contrast between Perpetua and the next figure discussed in this book, Origen, perhaps exemplifies the diversity and breadth of the early Christian movement in antiquity. In her introduction to Origen, Lyman emphasizes the range and volume of his literary output. Origen's life reflects a Christian ancestry coupled with a consistent and deepening commitment to God. His father was arrested and eventually martyred around 203, and the adolescent Origen was zealous to join his father, but was thwarted by his mother hiding his clothes. Whether the description of his self-castration is a later slander or reflects an ascetic practice, there is little doubt that Origen was attracted by ascetic disciplines. However, it is the prolific range and sophisticated nature of his writings that created his lasting legacy for the Christian movement. Lyman groups Origen's writings into three categories. First, scriptural writings including commentaries and homilies, as well as his mammoth work of textual criticism, the *Hexapla*, a six-column edition of the Old Testament text with columns for the original Hebrew, a transliteration into Greek characters, and recensions of the Greek translation due to Aquila, Symmachus, an unattributed recension and that of Theodotian. The second category utilized by Lyman deals with Origen's philosophical theology as outlined in his work *On First Principles*. Here it is noted that Origen's aim was to expound apostolic teaching in philosophical terms with reference to cosmology, anthropology and eschatology. In the third category, Lyman groups together Origen's *Contra Celsum* which in many ways represents the pinnacle of the genre of the apology, along with his treatises *On Prayer* and *On Martyrdom*, both of which are addressed to those inside the community of faith. In terms of his legacy, now as in the centuries following his death, Origen is an elusive figure to categorize. Therefore, Lyman notes that 'he breaks rather than fits our categories in his adventurous orthodoxy and spiritual intellectualism' (p. 124). Yet, perhaps it is this very elusiveness which is Origen's legacy, coupled with the reminder that the Church impoverishes itself when it stigmatizes those it fails to fully understand.

The fifth character with a North African connection is Cyprian of Carthage. He was a contemporary of Origen, and an episcopal leader who negotiated

difficult theological and social problems in the aftermath of the Decian persecution. In his chapter, J. Patout Burns notes that Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, had to deal with a church split over the process necessary for reintegrating those who had committed apostasy in the face of persecution, as well as simultaneously reining-in the confessors who claimed the right to pronounce forgiveness for such apostates. It is noted that Cyprian was a surprise but popular choice as bishop of Carthage. This wealthy aristocratic rhetorician had been a Christian only for two years when the laity overrode objections of the majority of presbyters and chose him as bishop. Within two years Cyprian found himself confronted with one of the most intense periods of persecution, instigated by Emperor Decius in December 249. Cyprian wrote a number of treatises, of which perhaps the most pastorally pressing and structurally significant for the Church was entitled *On the Lapsed*. In addition, a corpus of 82 surviving letters associated with his term in office reflect detailed information on the practice of Christianity in North Africa in the mid third century. Burns notes that the range of theological issues addressed by Cyprian is indeed narrow compared to that of his predecessor Tertullian. However, this is due to the fact that 'his theology developed in response to conflicts over practice within the church' (p. 131). The ongoing contribution of Cyprian revolves around his development of a theology of the unity of the Church as a universal communion. He also emphasized the episcopal college's role in maintaining the unity and holiness of the Church. Although the Donatist controversy of subsequent centuries served to emphasize the problems inherent in Cyprian's conceptions, his ecclesiological theory provided the basis for the institutional episcopal structure of the Western Church.

With Hippolytus of Rome the focus shifts from North Africa back to the imperial capital. While he overlapped in time span with Origen, his death occurred perhaps two decades prior to those of Origen and Cyprian. Ulrich Volp assembles some of the fascinating details of the life of Hippolytus. He was a presbyter in Rome at the turn of the third century. However, his poor relations with a succession of bishops of Rome may well illustrate the unstable and somewhat insignificant nature of that office in the early part of the third century. Hippolytus' apparent leadership role in the church in Rome, while simultaneously being a fierce opponent of Calixtus who was elected bishop in 217, has led to Hippolytus sometimes being labelled as the first 'antipope'. Historical anachronism aside, Volp notes that if this were true then he would be the 'only ever canonized antipope' (p. 141)! One of the many strengths of Volp's study is his up-to-date survey of the so-called 'Hippolytan question', which tries to sift the genuine works from the spurious ones attributed to his Roman presbyter. In response to this question of authentic authorship, three ancient catalogues of his writings are surveyed. One is contained in the writings of Eusebius, another preserved by Jerome and, intriguingly, a third in the form of an inscription discovered in 1551 'on an ancient statue of a figure, probably female, which the Roman community somehow

connected with Hippolytus after his death' (p. 143). The document known as the *Apostolic Tradition*, which is attributed to Hippolytus, is a liturgical text which gives detailed instructions concerning the orders for Eucharist, baptism and ordination. Volp notes that the prayer texts which it preserves have experienced something of a resurgence in usage in the twentieth century both in Roman Catholic and some Protestant churches.

As Michael Slusser makes clear, Gregory Thaumaturgos suffers from an identity crisis, due to often being misidentified as one of his more famous Cappadocian namesakes. The Gregory in question, the so-named 'wonder-worker', was bishop of Neocaesarea on the border of Cappadocia and Pontus during the 250s and 260s. The sources for his life, as described by Slusser, are references in Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Rufinus' expansions to that history, and in the writings of Jerome. Other references appear to be at least partially dependent on these earlier sources. Slusser discusses more recent revisionist and minimalistic readings of these sources in relation to reconstructing Gregory's life. After careful evaluation he rejects this sceptical approach. Assessing Gregory's theological contribution, it is noted that he had a deep grounding in Scripture. His *Metaphrase on Ecclesiastes* argues for 'conversion from the world to the philosophical life' (p. 166). In terms of Christological outlook, Gregory is presented as understanding Christ 'more as the divine Logos than as the human Jesus' (p. 168). However, the categorization of his Christology as docetic is resisted. Instead Slusser argues that Gregory can be more correctly understood as anticipating kenotic conceptions. Furthermore, Gregory is seen as urging a type of piety which is its own reward, and finds its realized paradisiacal vision in leading the life of philosophy in unity with the divine. Noting the elusive nature of the figure of Gregory and the fragmentary evidence concerning him, Slusser asks a question that reminds readers of the paucity of ancient sources: 'How many like him have vanished completely from our ken?' (p. 172).

It is due to the last figure treated in this volume that even more like Gregory have not disappeared from our sight. Eusebius of Caesarea rightly deserves the title of 'the Church's first historian'. In his magisterial study of Eusebius, Timothy Barnes not only treats Eusebius as a collector of Christian traditions but also more fundamentally sees him as an influential figure who shaped the ecclesiastical politics of his own day. Barnes divides his study into five sections: (1) Eusebius' life before he became a subject of Constantine; (2) what is known about his participation in ecclesiastical politics after Constantine's conquest of the East in 324; (3) a discussion of the date, context and contents of Eusebius' extant writings, usually with a brief bibliography of modern scholarship relevant to each work; (4) Eusebius' theological views and his interpretation of human history; (5) an extensive bibliography. Each of these discussions not only challenges consensus positions but often shows that the evidence points more compellingly to alternative answers. Barnes rails against the tendency in twentieth-century scholarship to neglect Eusebius' biblical commentaries, which he argues provide the deepest insights

into the thought and habits of mind of Eusebius. The dominant classification of Eusebius' writings into six categories is seen as being intrinsically flawed. Consequently, Barnes offers a new classification of the Eusebian writings with extensive supporting discussion. The discussion of 'Eusebius on God in History' reveals the idiosyncratic nature of his reading of the origins of the Christian religion. Without doubt this is a challenging and provocative discussion of Eusebius and the issues surrounding the reconstruction of his life, the interpretation of his writings and the description of his theology. Barnes presents many compelling lines of evidence to support his arguments and there is little doubt that this provocative reading will generate many fresh discussions and responses in Eusebian studies.

The ongoing value of studying early Christian history

The cast of characters assembled in this volume is indeed a motley crew. It is highly debatable whether they would have seen eye-to-eye on a number of issues, or whether they would have felt comfortable in each other's company. Yet in many ways that is what makes this selection of early Christian figures so fascinating, because in a very real sense their diversity represents much of the complex dynamic of early Christianity from the mid second century to the beginning of the fourth century. In no way can early church history be represented as either irenic or unproblematic. In fact, quite the opposite is true. One must remember those who were deemed by either contemporaries or later authorities to be suspect of heresy (figures such as Tatian or Origen included in this volume) contributed in a real way to the development of Christian thinking. Thus, the 12 figures discussed are of value for contemporary study not only because of the historical lessons they teach but also perhaps more importantly because they provide ongoing insights into the manner in which robust doctrinal, ecclesiological and ideational differences can be negotiated.

What these 12 do not provide, however, is a template or exact pattern by which modern church disputes can be resolved. Their culture is not ours, their modes of thinking cannot be simplistically transported to the modern era, and their pre-scientific world-view is no panacea for people living in a post-Enlightenment age. Yet, notwithstanding these obvious differences, these figures do provide resources and options that can be brought to the table of modern ecclesiological debates and disputes. Both failed options and successful solutions from antiquity can direct and shape modern responses to contemporary issues. Any simplistic attempt to impose old solutions onto new situations is actually a failure to take seriously the energy and creativity of the 12 figures discussed in this book. They themselves were not happy with stock answers. Rather, they challenged their own contemporary conventions, they pressed theological boundaries and they were willing to integrate the best insights of the wider philosophical, cultural and political ideas into the formation of a robust Christian faith. Their belief system was not a hermetically

