CHAPTER TWO

THE BELIEF IN MANY WORLDS BEFORE THE CREATION OF ADAM

He maintains a fantastic theory of reincarnation and of many worlds before the time of Adam

The accusation considered in this chapter is that Clement of Alexandria believed in the existence of a number of worlds before the creation of Adam (πολλοὺς πρὸ τοῦ Ἀδὰμ κόσμους). Careful reading of the phrase suggests that Photios joined together in one sentence two of Clement’s erroneous beliefs, one in the theory of reincarnation and the second in existence of numbers of worlds (πολλοὺς κόσμους) before the present one. Although Photios connected the idea of pre-existent worlds with the belief in reincarnation, this study treats them separately. The first part of the charge is analysed in this chapter, under metaphysics, while the second part will be examined in the context of anthropology (Chapter 6).

Photos used the Scriptural figure of ‘Adam’, maybe referring to a particular passage from Clement’s Hypotyposeis, as the chronological mark to indicate that Clement of Alexandria wrongly taught that, prior to the creation of the first human being (πρὸ τοῦ Ἀδὰμ), there were already some ‘worlds’ where people or human souls had existed. This opinion, also attributed to Origen, made Clement an exponent

1 For instance, Origen was charged with teaching about an innumerable series of worlds coming after the end of the present one (Jerome, Ep. Av. 124.5 [PG 22; 1071–72]). Similarly, Theophilus of Alexandria, in his Paschal Epistle charges Origen with the doctrine of cyclic worlds as also recorded by Jerome (Ep. 96). Origen’s concept of time is discussed in detail by Tzamalikos, The Concept of Time in Origen, and more recently in his Origen, 130–44.

2 It is interesting that Photios paid attention to Clement’s deliberation on the number of universes in the Hypotyposeis listing his opinion as ‘blasphemous fantasies’ (αἱ βλάσφεμοι αὕται τερατολογίαι), but omits to note in his record of Origen’s errors (Cod. 8) the very fact that Origen left open the possibility of existence of the another world before the present one (Princ. 2.3.1–5). This omission is even more surprising as Photios noted a belief in the doctrine of reincarnation in both authors. This selective observation suggests that while Photios intended a critical approach to their doctrines, he lacked coherence in the formulation of the main charges. Overall,
of the classical version of the Stoic cosmology of ‘cosmic cycles’ or ‘world-periods’, which from a later, Byzantine stance was not in any way acceptable. If true, this would place Clement of Alexandria alongside other ancient philosophers, such as Empedocles, Heraclitus of Ephesus, Pythagoras, Plato and later representatives of the Old Stoa, Middle Platonists, Neoplatonists and Hermetists, who shared the idea of the periodic character of the present world as well as its eschatological destruction followed by its restoration. On another level, the accusation tries to attribute to Clement of Alexandria ‘a Platonic view’ on the multiplicity of worlds (Timaeus 55c–d), although Plato himself after consideration was convinced of the existence of only the one, present world.

As has been noted in the previous chapter, Clement of Alexandria interpreted the Biblical concept of the creation of the world or worlds allegorically, and his general cosmological as well as metaphysical outlook allowed for the existence of two worlds. The original or archetypical one, was the intelligible world (κόσμος νοητός), while the visible and material, present world (κόσμος αἰσθητός) is only its temporary copy. This Platonic paradigm was assimilated by Clement to his philosophy and theology and harmonised with the Scriptural theologoumena from the first chapter of Genesis. But Photios’ allegation goes further, even if he was not aware of all the theological ramifications of that development. If Clement of Alexandria truly held the view of “the cyclical nature of the present world”, this opinion would lead to a particular concept of salvation as liberation of the soul from its link with the present world. In Photios’ opinion, the belief in many...