CHAPTER FIVE

THE DOCETIC VIEW OF CHRIST

Following on from the previous two discussions of Clement’s Logos-theology, I shall now examine the other charge in this category. According to Photios, Clement of Alexandria held at least a quasi-docetic belief regarding the nature of Christ, namely that the Word/Logos did not become flesh, but only “appeared to be in flesh”, an interpretation which directly denied the reality of the incarnation. Opinion is divided among modern scholars about how docetic Clement’s theology was. Some defend Clement’s orthodoxy ardently,1 while others are inclined to note a degree of ambiguity on the subject.2 Clement’s position does seem to have been rather complex. Photios’ charge clearly saw him as a heretic. However, I believe, there is a theo-

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2 “Zu einem massvollen Doketismus, hat Clemens auch sonst bekannt ... und das trotz aller Polemik gegen die eigentliche δόκησις” (T. Zahn, Forschungen zur Geschichte, 3:97). “Though criticised as such by Photios, Clement was not Docetist, and defended the reality of incarnation; but many of his statements, e.g. that Christ was not ordinary man with physical passions, have a distinctly docetic ring” (J.N.D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines [London: A&C Black, 5th edn, 1993], 154.
E.F. Osborn characterises Clement’s view in relation to other contemporary patristic authors: “there is some of Irenaeus’ sense of balance, but Clement is worried that this will be upset by a lack of weight on the ‘God’ side. If Jesus were really limited by the needs of a physical body, could he be anything more than a late and inferior entrant to a well-stocked pantheon? Consequently Clement’s attitude to the manhood and body of Christ is a sharp contrast to that of Tertullian, although he still rejects the position that the body of Christ was unreal” (E.F. Osborne, The Beginning of Christian Philosophy [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 214). See also an interesting comment by M. J. Edwards: “As we shall observe, there was some contention in Clement’s time as to whether Christ assumed the ‘psychic’ flesh that all men receive from Adam or the spiritual flesh of the resurrection; even those who held the first position, on the grounds that only such a psychic Christ would be truly human, would not have taught that the measure of humanity is the despoticism of the alimentary canal” (Origen against Plato, 23). “Clement nevertheless insisted on the reality and concreteness—as well as significance—of the advent, life, and death of Christ” (Hägg, Clement of Alexandria, 196).
logical grey area within which Clement of Alexandria can be located. For he was constructing Christology rather than dogma. In order to investigate Photios’ claim I will analyse the statements on this subject from Clement’s existing oeuvre and compare them with some examples of docetic theology which appeared at the same period. This comparison should verify whether or not Clement had similar ideas to those in the docetic documents.

1. **Controversies over the Logos’ Body in Clement’s Oeuvre**

I will focus first on those parts of Clement’s main writings that seem to show a docetic inclination. Discussing the value of ‘self-control’ or ‘self-mastery’ (ἐγκράτεια) in the context of the Christian-Gnostic ideal, Clement referred to Valentinus’ teaching on Christ’s continence without, surprisingly, any criticism. Clement records:

Valentinus in his letter to Agathopus says that “Jesus showed his self-control in all things which he experienced. It was his aim to gain divine nature; he ate and drank in a way specific to himself without excreting his food. His power of self-control was so great that the food was not corrupted within him, since he was not a subject of corruption.”

By referring to Valentinus’ letter, Clement wished to point to a parallel with his own views on Christ’s virtue of self-control, possibly as an example of the Christian-Gnostic ideal. Although the passage does not use the term ‘docetic’ explicitly, it presents a description of Christ’s digestive abilities assuming some vague or marginal connection with his material body. A number of comments need to be made at this point. Clement of Alexandria and Valentinus shared, as far as we are able to reconstruct Valentinus’ theology, a view in which the divine and human elements encountered each other in the specific nature of the Saviour, despite Clement and Valentinus understanding ‘the Saviour’ differently. Both Valentinus and Clement emphasised the priority of the spiritual element over the material one with all its consequences. So the truly spiritual, mature Christian must be free from

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3 Clement, Strom. 3.59.3: Οὐαλεντῖνος δὲ ἐν τῇ πρὸς Ἀγαθόποδα ἐπιστολῇ "πάντα” φησίν “ὑπομείνας ἐγκρατής ήν. θεότητα ἰησούς εἰργάζετο, ἤσθιεν καὶ ἔπινεν ἰδίως οὐκ ἀποδιδοὺς τὰ βρώματα. τοσαύτη ἦν αὐτῷ ἐγκρατείας δύναμις, ὥστε καὶ μή φθαρῆναι τὴν τροφὴν ἐν αὐτῷ, ἐπεὶ τὸ φθείρεσθαι αὐτῶς οὐκ εἶχεν”.

4 The complex Valentinian Christology, or rather the concept of the divine Saviour, has been noted in section 4 of Chapter 4 above.