ARGUMENTS FOR FAITH IN CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

BY

ERIC OSBORN

In the history of ideas, the defence of faith, which is offered by Clement of Alexandria, ranks beside that of Paul who, in Romans 4, sought to prove the primacy of the faith of Abraham over the law of Moses. Paul was supported by the Letter to the Hebrews, which claimed that not only Abraham, but all the notables of Jewish scripture were persons of faith. Yet faith found its first principle and perfection in Jesus. For Clement, just as the law was a paidagogos to the Jews, so philosophy was a paidagogos to the Greeks to bring them to Christ. In the second century, both paidagogoi were unhappy at their compulsory retirement, especially since they were required to leave their books behind for use by their younger replacement. Justin made it clear that the scriptures now belonged to Christians; Tertullian warned all that the scriptures were Christian property.

In philosophy, Justin and Clement used an identical formula to assert that whatever had been well said, belonged to Christians. Justin’s logos spermatikos claimed Socrates and Heraclitus as Christians before Christ. Clement, in his Stromateis, claimed that the Greek schools had torn the limbs of truth apart; Christ brought them all together. The need for philosophical argument was self-evident for it would have to be used to prove itself unnecessary. The protest against the Christian acquisition of Greek philosophy was strong and found its centre exactly where Jewish protest against Paul was fixed—the inadequacy of faith. Clement’s reply defended faith with philosophical arguments which he connected to the arguments which Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews had used against a different opponent.

The move from the New Testament to Christian theology through the joining of New Testament ideas to Greek philosophy was, I think, the beginning of European thought, and the argument about faith stands in the centre of that development. Faith became an object of attack from philosophers because it claimed too much and from Gnostics because it
achieved too little. Clement of Alexandria's plea for the faith, which he had learned from his much-quoted Paul, is pervasive and of many strands. These strands have sometimes been separated between bible and philosophy and subjected to limited scrutiny. My concern is to let the two sources speak together, to look at them in the light of recent discussion concerning Greek philosophy, and to solve a long-standing problem of false attribution, where Zeno is supplanted by Aristotle.

Christians were, according to the Platonist Celsus, always saying, 'Only believe', and never offering rational grounds for the acceptance of their creeds. Origen replied that not everyone could be a full-time philosopher, and that the scriptures were studied with logical rigour. Further, most people had neither time nor ability for rational inquiry and they must be helped (Cels. 1.9). Indeed, philosophers choose their school of philosophy on non-rational impulse, either because they have met a certain teacher or believe one school to be better than the rest (Cels. 1.10). Faith in the supreme God is a commendable thing, the writers of the Gospels were plainly honest men and Christian doctrines are coherent with the common notions of human reason (Cels. 3.39f.).

Clement's reply to the same criticism had been more complex. He needed more argument to meet the objections of Gnostics as well as philosophers to the high place which Christians gave to faith in their preaching, worship and discipline. He drew his account of faith from Paul (to whom he attributed the Epistle to the Hebrews), John, Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Stoics, Epicurus and others. The philosophy of Clement's day, Middle Platonism, mixed Plato with Aristotle and the Stoics.

Faith was anticipation, assent, perception, hearing God in scripture, intuition of the unproved first-principle, discernment by criterion, dialectic and divine wisdom, unity with God.

Despite diversity of origin, all these moves in ancient epistemology had served a common end, that of finding a basis for knowledge and avoiding 'infinite regress'.

Clement was a Stromatist, not simply to hide things from unthinking Sophists, but because he wanted his different readers to learn from the similarities between their own ideas and Christian faith. 'To those who ask for the wisdom which is in us, we must present what is familiar to them so that, as easily as possible, through their own ideas (διὰ τῶν ὑπόθεσεων), they may reasonably arrive at faith in the truth' (str 5.3.18).