Readers of PRUDENTIA will have noted with interest that their special area of concern, the thought of later antiquity, has been an area of intense controversy during the last 12 months. The controversy has grown from the claims of a book which purported to discuss the meaning of divine incarnation in early Christian thought, and to relate it to the background of pagan religion and later classical thought.1 Much of the argument has centred around the claim to have put forward a more credible account of the Incarnation than that found in the classical statements of Chalcedon and in most treatments of early Christian doctrine.2

As a contribution to knowledge, the book has little to offer, nor does it offer a more plausible version of Christianity. The crux of the argument lies in the contention that while Jesus was not God incarnate 'the power of God was set at work in the world in a new way through his life, ministry, death and resurrection'. (p.9) This does not answer the chief objection to a doctrine of incarnation, which has been that any account of incarnation has to mix statements about God with statements about the world. When these statements are mixed, then two different kinds of language are confused and the result is incredible. This objection (stated 20 years ago by Bernard Williams) indicates the main point of contention.3 Nothing is done to meet this objection in the book under consideration, which is a perfect example of 'housemaid's baby' argument. Insularity of approach is evident in the account of Simon Magus and Samaritanism, where a theory long since discredited is put forward without any attempt to answer the serious objections raised against it over the last 20 years.4

Whatever the book has to teach lies in its method of approach rather than in its content and conclusions. I am convinced that it has a great deal to teach scholars, in a cautionary mode, about method in history of ideas. There is a warm and human mutual appreciation and respect between the various members of the group who believe they are riding the crest of a wave. ('growing number' p.x) As a result methods are used with an eager enthusiasm which does not attempt to conceal their weaknesses. This kind of openness provides a rare and refreshing opportunity to examine the ways in which the history of ideas

2. Ibid. Preface, 'Let it then be said that our hope is to release talk about God and about Jesus from confusions, thereby freeing people to serve God in the Christian path with greater integrity.'
4. MGI, 64-85.
may be studied.

Of the five main approaches to the history of ideas, all but one seem to have been used:

The polemical approach which treats statements in another context as directly applicable to present controversies and problems lies behind many parts of the book.\(^5\) It is concerned to see whether the arguments used by early Christian writers carried any degree of validity. Arguments are to be tested by their immediate value according to present definitions and present concepts. The weakness of this approach is evident in the failure to understand the different kinds of questions which were being asked in each of the first centuries.

The cultural approach interprets all ideas as part of the historical setting in which they arose.\(^6\) For this reason, the background to early Christian belief is set out in terms of pagan ideas which have some rough similarity to the Christian claim. Here again the weakness of a method is allowed to carry its full force, for having interpreted many aspects of Christian thought in this way, it is insisted that the discussion was ‘culturally determined’ and that what the early Christian Fathers wrote was not ‘timeless’.\(^7\) How anyone could write in a timeless way or avoid being culturally determined is not indicated, and having endeavoured to set these writers within their context, any ability to use ideas which were current is held against them.

The polemical and cultural approaches start from opposite points. The first regards statements of an earlier age as contributions to a continuing unambiguous debate. The second approach doubts the existence of permanent questions and problems, and insists that every writer must be understood against the background of his period and only against that background. There can be no cross reference from one age to another where the ages represent cultural change of any magnitude. The use of both these approaches without an awareness of their contradictory basis is a weakness in the work under consideration.

The three kinds of method which are concerned with elucidation must also be considered.\(^8\) The doxographical approach which connects opinions of one writer with those of earlier writers moves on the basis of tradition. This is part of the claim made in this book concerning early Christian thought: the account of God and the logos may be traced back to similar ideas in other thinkers. Where similarity is found, a link within tradition is maintained.\(^9\) So we have a rather naive series of episodes in the history of thought beginning from Plato’s *Parmenides* and running through to the third century A.D. The writer does not

\(^5\) e.g. p.5, ibid.
\(^6\) e.g. p.28, pp.87-119, ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid., p.28.
\(^9\) *MGI*, 24-28.
realise the important distinction between regarding the two hypotheses of Plato as logically relevant, and claiming them to be a historical source of later doctrine.\textsuperscript{10}

Elucidation is most commonly retrospective. It takes a fixed point in the history of ideas and it views preceding developments in the light of that fixed point. For the writers of this book, the fixed point is Chalcedon, where the definition of the full divinity and full humanity of Christ is to be found.\textsuperscript{11} Previous accounts are considered in relationship to this and working towards it. Here again difficulty arises because such an approach can give only a limited awareness of what earlier writers were saying, since their problems were different, and because the interpretation of the key event is open to challenge.

All these different approaches are given some place in the work under consideration. They are used indiscriminately and with little awareness of their conflicting purposes and incongruous results. However the one method which finds little or no place is that of problematical elucidation. On this approach one asks of any thinker, 'What problem was he trying to solve? How did this problem arise for him? What new method of tackling it did he use?'\textsuperscript{12} It has been argued convincingly that this is the only approach which throws light on the inner development of philosophy, since truth has no history but the discussion of problems has a history. Yet such a method makes demands upon those who would use it. It requires an analysis of the thought of any writer rather than a listing of his opinions. It requires an awareness of the variety of ways in which similar problems may be treated. Above all, it sees philosophy (and theology too) as something to which ready answers cannot be found. The problematic historian sees the philosopher as essentially a puzzled man. Further, no competent philosopher is concerned with building a system; his only concern is to solve problems.

The application of this method to early Christian thought has been tried in several instances, and while the other approaches continue to be used, it is doubtful whether they can continue to provide much of value. For example, the doxographer has largely run out of material, and while new parallels may continue to be found, they are not likely to add much to what is already known in this area. Further, the polemical historian has to face the growing awareness that the material he handles is complex and that his quick identification of problems is unlikely to convince his reader. The cultural historian ends with the dilemma that Christians were very much part of the world in which they spoke and wrote. Yet at the same time their ideas were treated with continuing hostility in that environment. Had their theology been so much an absorption of contemporary themes, they could not have been regarded with disdain and rejection. The retrospective historian has to telescope long developments into

11. \textit{MGI}, 177.
12. See John Passmore, \textit{op.cit.}, p.29.
one continuing field of view. He knows that this cannot give individual writers
the autonomy necessary for their views to be understood.

The chief value of the book under consideration is that it shows more clearly
than any other the results of ignoring the problems behind early Christian
thought. In the first place, there is a remarkable failure to comprehend what
early Christian thinkers were doing.

The central claim of the Christian account of the Incarnation is described as
‘poetic, anthropomorphic, or mythological language,’ and is contrasted to ‘a
theological conclusion based on logical argument’. (p.35) Here the contrast is
made between poetry and myth on the one hand, and theology and logic on the
other. The interesting thing is that throughout the discussion of ancient
philosophy, no awareness is shown of its logic; it is handled in a poetic or
mythological way. The relationship of the transcendent one to a world which is
many is seen in pictorial terms. ‘Inevitably the solutions involve some kind of
system of mediators or a “hierarchy of being” linking the ultimate transcendent
one, who was even beyond being, with the known world.’ The two terms which
are considered important are emanation and mediation, neither of which has any
clear logical significance. (p.25) Like the philosophers outside the Church, the
Christian philosophers saw the logos as a mediator ‘who was both one and many,
sharing in some sense the nature of both, and bridging the gulf between them’.
Oddly the writer continues in a way which shows a complete insensitivity to the
difference between pictorial language and logical terminology. ‘Logically there
was no room in this scheme for the Holy Spirit, but he found his place as
another sort of mediating link in the chain of being.’ With such an approach of a
poetic or mythological kind to philosophy, it is not remarkable that while the
different schools were deeply conscious of their radical divergence one from the
other, ‘From our vantage point they all look much the same in principle if not in
detail’. (p.25)

A reference to the ‘illogicalities of the scheme as a whole’ is made with a
continuing total abstention from any discussion of logical issues. Philosophy is a
matter of world view, and the contrast between God and the world is avoided by
‘a succession of descent’ which ‘avoided drawing a line between the divine and
the created in its hierarchy of existence’. (p.25) The mediator has to have ‘some
substantial relationship with what was above and what was below his own rung
on the ladder, so providing an effective link. But an ontological distinction, a
real line between the divine and the created could not be drawn without insisting
that the mediator fell on one side or the other, thus destroying his ability to
mediate.’ (p.26) What Arius provides is no different in its achievement of a
satisfactory solution because a line has to be drawn at some point. ‘Where Arius
severed the mediator from God, Athanasius severed him from the world.’
Incredibly this discussion goes on to speak of ‘inherent illogicalities’ and
propositions which were ‘logically incapable’ of making sense of the biblical
message of God’s involvement with this world. (p.28)
Now it is obvious to anyone who has read a single line of ancient philosophy, and especially of Plato, that this account has not begun to look at logical issues. It has not asked what the relationship is between the first cause of things and particular objects, nor the relationship between final causes, efficient causes and formal causes. For Plato, the forms might be all three kinds of cause, and the most ultimate form was the one formal, final and efficient cause of all things. It is true that people have spoken of a Great Chain of Being and that many writers have talked in terms of a world view rather than of a philosophy, but as far as Plato and these early Christian writers who depended on him were concerned, world views and chains of being were not their concern. They were concerned with logical distinctions, and such logical distinctions as they made are completely ignored in this treatment. The same may be said of their ethics and metaphysics.

To sum up, the treatment of philosophy here is one which ignores logical questions, which is unaware of problems which philosophers and theologians were trying to solve and which draws pictures rather than analyses arguments. Wittgenstein once said of something he had written, that it could not be philosophy because if it were, philosophy would be capable of being learnt by heart. The kind of discussion we have considered cannot be philosophy because if it were, philosophy could be embroidered on a tapestry or drawn on a piece of paper. Needlework and sketching may be poetic or mythological ways of expressing certain relations; but when taken in isolation from logical definitions and analysis, they are of no value whatever. Philosophers from Plato to Wittgenstein have used pictorial metaphors but never without a logical framework of definition and argument.

It is not surprising that within the framework of such a treatment, logical contradiction passes unnoticed. It would be tedious to examine the whole book, but the following list of contradictions may be offered as a sufficient proof of the insensitivity of these writers to the problems behind the work which they consider. Formal contradiction is difficult to achieve. It is not enough to say, 'The cat is on the mat' and 'The cat is not on the mat'. To remove any possibility of reconciliation it must be shown that the terms in each of the propositions mean exactly the same thing. If the second proposition is simply asserting that many parts of the cat are not in direct contact with the mat there is no formal contradiction. The contradictions which follow do not include the express claim that the terms in each proposition are identical with those of the parallel proposition. However, since there is no attempt made to overcome the apparent contradiction, they are as close to formal contradiction as any imprecise discourse can come.

8. 'On no showing can the records of his life have absolute significance for us.'

8. 'It would still be possible to see Jesus not only as one who embodies a full response of man to God but also as one who expresses and embodies the way of God towards men.'

22. 'On the whole the New Testament is totally Christocentric.'

29. 'the patristic development of incarnational belief is a historically determined development which led to the blind alleys of paradox, illogicality and docetism'.

32. 'A literal incarnation doctrine, expressed in however sophisticated a form, cannot avoid some element of docetism'.

31. 'There is no room for God as a causal factor in our international, industrial or personal lives...'

34. In the light of this discussion, how am I going to express in the contemporary environment my own testimony to the redemptive effect of faith in Jesus of Nazareth?' (The testimony runs for eight pages)

32. 'Dividing life into compartments does not work.'

33. 'So the Christian believer lives in more than one dimension.'

35. 'God in Christ entered into the suffering, the evil and the sin of this world — entered the darkness and transformed it.'

36. 'Surely I am most likely to be convinced of this, not by a single, isolated and unique occurrence, but by repeated experience of the fact that innocent sufferers and martyrs who bear the abuse of their fellow-men with forgiveness, have a godlike quality of a transforming kind.'

38. 'Jesus is the supreme disclosure which opens my eyes to God in the present...the unique focus of my perception of and response to God.'

87. 'This is simply an attempt to present samples of the kind of evidence at hand which could be relevant and to outline some of the other theories which have been proposed.'

88. 'roots there were, even if they appear more like a tangled mass whose full unravelling is probably not possible in the present state of knowledge. Let us dig around and see what comes to light.'

89. Celsus: 'no God or child of god has either come down or would have
come down’
and
91. ‘Lucian’s purpose is to poke fun at the fact that simple people were so easily induced to revere exceptional prophets as gods.’

cf.
117. ‘rise of incarnational belief’...
‘the cultural atmosphere of the ancient world was conducive to the development of this idea’.
191. ‘the religion which became the Christianity of the Roman Empire may have had but slight relation to the historical actuality of its founder’.

cf.
195. ‘As for the rise of the early church, Jesus must of course have been all he needed to be to account for the rise of Christianity.’

Each of these contradictions occurs within the work of an individual author. Contradictions between different authors could, in some cases, be defended; but there is one contradiction which jars painfully. In an oasis of coherence (pp.125-132) we are reminded that ‘Today many of us are analysers, for good or ill. As children of the Enlightenment we have to analyse and an appreciation of unity instead of diversity requires a special effort’. (p.125) Yet the book ends with a final chord of triumphalism concerning the church. ‘We cannot break the event into parts and attribute the whole effect to one part, nor can we ascribe any particular part of the effect to any particular part of the event.’ (p.203)

As well as contradiction there is another form of elementary error. On pages 99-100, there is a slide which would discredit any argument:
1. ‘Early Christian confession of Christ as KYRIOS was regarded as excluding Caesar worship’.
2. ‘Jews and Christians alike paid the pagans the compliment of taking their religious language about Caesar seriously.’
3. ‘The early Christians’ confession of Jesus as Lord can be seen as a deliberate antithesis to the imperial cult.’

Logical ineptitude appears in a second important instance. The New Testament is handled in a biblicist way rather than from a critical point of view. This is remarkable, for sympathy with the critical approach is claimed in several places. The chief enemy is fundamentalism, which asserts the literal accuracy of biblical statements and which uses them according to the proof-text method. The critical approach denies inerrancy and the proof-text method, insisting that the documents of the New Testament must be approached with the critical questions: What is the Gospel? What is the writer of this letter or this gospel trying to say? Of the two prongs of fundamentalism, the proof-text approach is much the more serious. Accuracy or inaccuracy of a biblical text or narrative
will always be open to debate, but if the scholar approaches any text with a proof-text mentality, then his chance of understanding it has been reduced to zero.

It is therefore serious when having insisted that the Gospel narratives are unable to prove the accuracy or inaccuracy of the propositions ‘Jesus was morally perfect’, ‘Jesus did not lust’, the writer then goes on to use the proof-text method to establish the inaccuracy of the first proposition. The argument takes the following form:

A 1. The claim for Jesus’ moral perfection is to be based on historical evidence.
   2. Can one base these claims on historical evidence?
   3. No: because historical records cannot prove these sorts of claims. (p. 188)

B 1. The gospel records aren’t concerned with inner development of Jesus. (p. 189)
   2. The gospels only give us three full weeks of life of Jesus. (p. 189)
   3. The gospels may give a consistent picture of sound morals but they are written to prove supernatural claims. (p. 189)
   4. The gospels do not show that Jesus lived consistently with his teaching. (p. 189)
   5. For example, the gospels don’t tell of him being good to a Rabbi. (p. 189)
   6. The gospels show Jesus as the most lovable of men but he did not always stay calm — he condemned some people and could be indignant, sarcastic, bitter. (p. 190)

If A3 is true then propositions B 1-3 are at least irrelevant, because their negation would not affect the argument. If historical records cannot prove these claims it would not matter if the Gospels were concerned with the inner development of Jesus, if they gave us three full years of the life of Jesus or if they were written for any other purpose at all. Secondly, if A 3 is true then B 4-6 must be false or irrelevant since they attempt to disprove the claim for Jesus’s moral perfection. Here it may be replied that what is to Jesus’ discredit may be accepted more readily than what is to his credit; this will only apply if B 3 is denied and the faults had seemed to be faults in the eyes of the author and his contemporaries.

The contradictions in this set of propositions are important because they show that a biblicist or ‘proof-text’ approach to scripture is the only one which the writer knows. Having made the critical denial of the validity of this approach (A 3) he then goes on to use it (B 1-6). The shape of the argument may be seen in a parallel set of propositions.

Let us suppose that it was asked (‘such a question is not for a moment asked with any intention of casting doubt’, p. 188) concerning the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate*:

Have the authors ‘remained unbrokenly true’ to the tenth Boy Scout Law, 15 during the period of their discussions?

15. ‘A scout is clean in thought, word and deed.’
A 1. This claim is to be based on the historical evidence of the book produced.
2. Can one base these claims on historical evidence?
3. No, because historical records cannot prove those sorts of claims.

B 1. The book is not concerned with the mental cleanliness of the participants and the Baden Powell mentioned on p.152 is not the unique founder of the Boy Scout movement at all.
2. The discussions behind the book only cover three full weeks of the lives of the participants.
3. The book may give a consistent picture of sound morals but it is written to disprove someone else's supernatural claim and it is necessary to stress the purity of one's intention under such circumstances. (Preface)
4. The book does not show that the writers wrote consistently with the respect for argument they teach. (p.x)
5. Further, the documents indicate obvious Freudian tendencies in their selection of this command of Jesus, their interest in Gnosticism and pagan myths.
6. The documents show the writers as the most lovable of people. Their human sensitivity and grandparental devotion are evident in the Preface, and in many places there is an eloquent spirituality (pp.34ff. and p.203); but they do not always stay calm — the incarnation is called a 'shibboleth' (p.xi) and the smear 'theological fundamentalism' (p.184) is used.

In each case propositions B 1-6 are only relevant to the question if the documents of the written gospels or the book are taken as the source from which texts and information may be quarried. In the case of the gospels this is what critical New Testament scholars have called a 'biblicist' approach.

Two other points of logical ineptitude may be linked together — soteriology and Platonism. It is the constant refrain of the book that christology depends on soteriology; after all the Fathers did argue that Christ must have been *in order to save men. Here again the total argument is ignored. Salvation is a highly ambiguous concept and the experience of salvation is remarkably diverse. The above argument only worked because the account of Christ had already determined the content of salvation. On the other hand, Gnostics had fervent experiences of salvation and their strange accounts of Christ derived from these experiences; the Corinthian Christians also had intense experiences of salvation which placed them on the other side of sin and death. Against both groups it was argued that salvation could not be read off one's own navel; it could only be read off an account of Jesus Christ and that was one good reason for having

17. See the extensive treatment of this question in E. Kasemann, Jesus Means Freedom, (London, 1969) chapter 3, *et passim. "According to Paul, any theology of resurrection must not only start from Christology but also remain with it. Anyone who gives prominence to soteriology and anthropology joins his Corinthian opponents."
written Gospels.\textsuperscript{18} If salvation were previously defined in this way, then divergent christologies could be detected by reference to man's salvation. If salvation were not previously defined by christology, the limits to either were hard to imagine.

The swift rejection of Platonism is linked to a similar lack of logical awareness. Platonism proved ultimately uncongenial to Christianity.\textsuperscript{19} — as if there were less than fifty kinds of Platonism and less than two hundred authentic kinds of Christianity — which means that the sweeping generalisation covers ten thousand possibilities! But the rejection of Platonism is tied to a profound ignorance of the logical issues involved. Salvation in John and Paul is clearly defined as an asymmetrical, non-transitive, one-many relation. Only God can save and he who is saved does not become a saviour. There is a fundamental difference between the Word, who was God, and John, the man sent by God.\textsuperscript{20}

The same difference is indicated by Paul as he contrasts Christ, the only saviour, with Apollos, Cephas and himself who were ministers of God.\textsuperscript{21} Now Platonism with its forms was able to express this asymmetrical, non-transitive, one-many relation. Clement writes for example, "and in the spiritual world that which is oldest in origin, the timeless and unbegun first principle and beginning of all being, the Son. From him we can search out the still more ultimate cause beyond, the Father of all things, the oldest and most beneficent of all." "All the powers of the spirit become collectively one thing and come together in the same point — the Son'. "That the true, only, one, almighty, good God might be manifest from eternity to eternity saving by the Son."\textsuperscript{22} Because this logical structure is ignored, the use of Platonism is never understood and we are asked why the saviour needs to be divine.\textsuperscript{23} After all, God should be able to save men on a shoe-string if he really is God. Salvation is now represented as an asymmetrical, transitive, successive relation; the very thing which Paul and John could not accept. The rejection of Platonism is governed by total incomprehension of the reasons behind its acceptance by the Fathers. Further, when, for any reason, Platonism is rejected, the vehicle of expression which takes its place must preserve the logical relations which the New Testament makes central. Of course the biblicist can find an odd verse to justify a different logical scheme; but he cannot handle the counter-evidence which a different logical scheme must survive.

\textsuperscript{18} This was a central issue in the long controversy in the Bultmann school. "The reversion to the form of the Gospel narrative, to the story of the Palestinian preacher... all this occurred as a reaction — theologically relevant and therefore initiated and maintained by the Church — directed towards restoring the autonomy of Christ, of the Spirit and of faith itself." E. Kasemann, \textit{New Testament Questions of Today}, (London, 1965), p.63. See the whole essay, 'Blind Alleys in the “Jesus of History” Controversy,' 23-65.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{MGI}, p.28.

\textsuperscript{20} John 1. 1-18.

\textsuperscript{21} I Cor. 1. 12-17 and 3. 4-9.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Strom} 4, 162; 4, 156; 7, 9.

In conclusion, *The Myth of God Incarnate* has a lot to say to the student of classical antiquity. It shows him that, whatever good things may be gained from polemical, cultural, doxographical and retrospective accounts, the central issues will be misconstrued in the absence of problematic elucidation. Philosophy is concerned with problems and with argument; the early Fathers only wrote because they had to argue a case and only used philosophical material when it was logically helpful.

**COSMOLOGY**

*Gavin Ardley*


To say that readers of Plato will be grateful to Professor Vlastos for this lucid and scholarly study of Plato's cosmology, would be true, yet too decorous for the occasion. For Vlastos is a man with 'fire in his belly'. He writes as Alan Breck would have written. His prejudices are an enormity, his pride insupportable; he hectores, provokes, preaches, conciliates, disarms; and somehow comes through with honour.

Since Plato's universe, with Aristotelian modifications, was destined to dominate the intellectual scene for the following two millenia, Vlastos has taken up a theme of no small moment. He enters with gusto on his task of critical appraisal. His is not the sympathetic and imaginative approach to the *Timaeus* of a Taylor, a Cornford or a Festugière. Vlastos seeks no resonance with the inner spirit of Plato, but judges censoriously by his own standards. He believes that Plato's universe was a great mistake (though historically it was, *per accidens*, a happy mistake); Democritean atomism had the truth, but was born before its time.

Precisely what are Vlastos' own canons of judgement? He nowhere states them explicitly, thus rendering him something of a modern counterpart of Heraclitus the dark. We gather that his general stance is that of an 18th century *philosophe*: another David Hume with a leaning to Spinoza, a sympathy with Deism, and a nostalgia for Lucretius. Like Hume, Vlastos' judgements are governed by his aversions. His principal aversion is to anything supernatural; by which term he means any intervention from above into a self-sufficient, self-regulating universe. Likewise, he is scornful of anything in the nature of things which involves ruler and ruled, any hierarchy of order, any finality. The distinction between *subjicetio civilis* and *subjicetio servilis* escapes him; the distinction, so dear to Plato, between numerical and proportionate equality, he does not deign to notice; nor does he waste any time on the distinction between