Book Review

The Letters of St Cyprian of Carthage


Here we have the fourth and final volume of Professor Clark's splendid translation and commentary. Two earlier volumes were reviewed in Prudentia vol. xix, no. 2 (November, 1987); and here it is necessary only to confirm the admiration and enthusiasm already expressed.

Once again, the volume contains extensive commentary - over two hundred pages: virtually two thirds of the book. Professor Clarke's translation is, as usual, clear and graceful; and he has made available thereby, to the non-specialist student in particular, an important source of information for our understanding of the third-century church, and indeed of much else in that obscure era. But the commentary reaches to the very edges of scholarship in its learning and judgement, and makes these four volumes an indispensable tool to the most advanced researcher.

Volume IV covers the period 254-258, throwing light on some confusing confrontations in church affairs, and culminating in the persecution of Valerian, which brought to Cyprian his own martyr's crown.

Professor Clarke returns to his emphasis that Africa, like several other parts of the empire, appears from this correspondence to have been remarkably unperturbed by the political and strategic crises of the age: a reminder that we have here access to a provincial milieu whose sense of identity and security could be surprisingly out of alignment with the preoccupations of the 'imperial' cadre. It may well be that many conflicts which appear on the surface to have been merely 'ecclesial' sprang from a failure on the part of some (including opponents of Cyprian) to appreciate that dichotomy of view.

Both persecution itself and, even more, the internal aftermath of persecution revealed the potential embarrassment that could be felt at local levels in the face of policies imposed from above. This was to recur under Diocletian; and Christian emperors would face an analogous difficulty in the face of heresy.
Of course, it matters enormously that we capture and gauge accurately an impression of this provincial ecclesiology, mid-way, so to speak, between two such crucial pillars of Christian thought as Tertullian and Augustine. I say 'provincial' advisedly, because the fascinating paradox behind the bitter polemic here revealed over purity and inclusion revolved around the need to preserve, on one side, a sense of community that allowed exclusion to carry its fullest possible sanction and, on the other side, a belief that the church was truly 'universal'. The secular analogue, indeed the secular facet, of that dilemma is not far to seek: the tension between local tradition and imperial loyalty that afflicted the ambitions of so many emperors, pagan and Christian, in the following two centuries.

So we have to emphasize once more the centrality of this priceless correspondence to our understanding of many aspects of history. Professor Clarke has again been astute and lucid in his sorting out of the chronology of the letters. And we take to heart his pained reminder that his typescript was ready and accepted in 1983.

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