

PIER FRANCO BEATRICE

EUSEBIUS AND MARCELLUS
CONFLICTING THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES
IN THE AGE OF CONSTANTINE

« THEOLOGY » AND « DISPENSATION »
IN THE « HISTORIOGRAPHIC DISCOURSE » OF EUSEBIUS

When Eusebius addressed the debate triggered by the Arian controversy around 320 CE, he had already autonomously developed a precise *conception of divinity*. A clear formulation of his thought is to be found at the beginning of the *Ecclesiastical History* (*HE*), a work that can be placed in the years 313/5. Here all the characteristic elements of his Trinitarian thought appear and, despite the brief exposition, the main ideas which would remain at the centre of his activity as an apologist, theologian and polemicist in the years that followed are clearly evident.

It may seem strange for a modern reader to see that a work entitled *HE* begins with a strictly theological discussion, but for Eusebius it was not possible to grasp the meaning of the history of the new Christian nation without placing at the beginning of this historiographical exposition *the theology* (θεολογία) and *the dispensation* (οἰκονομία) of the Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God¹. This manner of proceeding springs from the assumption that ecclesiastical history is nothing other than the progressive development over time of the consequences of the Incarnation, and that therefore the exposition of the facts that followed the Incarnation, the real history of the Church, will be perfect only if

1. *HE* I, 1, 2 ; I, 1, 7-8. Greek text in the Loeb edition by K. Lake.

the complete history of Christ in his *dual nature as God and man* is told right from the start.

The *theology* concerns the divine nature of Christ, his relations with the Father and his function as creator. It is true that his generation and his nature cannot be adequately described through human speech (Is 53, 8), since neither does any know the Father save the Son, nor did any ever know the Son properly, save only the Father who begot him (Mt 11, 27). Despite this, *the mystical biblical discourses on his divinity* (τὰς περὶ αὐτοῦ μυστικὰς τῶν γραφῶν θεολογίας) enable Eusebius to process a unitary and articulated image of this figure. The Son coincides with the divine Light and Word mentioned in the prologue of John's gospel, and with the person of Wisdom who reveals herself in the Book of Proverbs 8, 12-31. He is therefore *a substantial entity* that can be defined with any of the names Only-begotten Son, Word, Wisdom, mysteriously generated from the Father, pre-existing everything, before the world, *second cause* of all things, occupying the *second place after the Father*, demiurge of the universe together with the Father and executor of his orders².

If no one has ever been able to see the uncreated Father, his innate and unchangeable substance, and if no one can understand the mysterious manner of the generation of the Word from the Father, the Son-Word has been known by all those men who, like Abraham and Moses, on account of their righteousness and virtuous piety, have seen him with the pure eyes of the mind and paid him the reverence that was due to him. This is the *dispensation*, that is all the earthly manifestations of the Word in human semblance, which culminated in the actual incarnation, that is the final manifestation through man. Eusebius defines these apparitions or revelations of the Word in the Old Testament with the term *theophanies* (τὰς θεοφανείας)³: not the Father, who is invisible, but his Son, the first-born Word of God, distinct from the Father and God himself, was the one who appeared to the patriarchs and the prophets as an ordinary man and spoke with them⁴.

2. HE I, 2, 2-5; 14-16. According to Eusebius, further evidence of this teaching is also found in Gen 1, 26 and Ps 32, 9.

3. HE I, 2, 6-13. Examples of Old Testament theophanies are found in Gen 18, 1-3 and 25; Ps 106, 20; Gen 19, 24 and 32, 28-31; Joshua 5,13-15; Ex 3, 4-6.

4. This idea had already been clearly expressed for the first time by Justin, *Apol. I*, 62, 3-4 and 63, 13-14; *Dial. Tryph.* 56-60; 126-128; and was then taken up by Irenaeus of Lyons, *Epid.* 44-47. See also Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autol.* II, 22. Further discussion in J. Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 127, Leiden-Boston 2014, p. 25-26, 102-104, 125-130, 151 and 161; B.G. Bucur, « The Early Chris-