Father & Son: Separate, Distinct Beings


In debate with Trypho, Justin [Martyr] exploited this principle: because the almighty Father is transcendent, the God who appeared to Moses at the burning bush cannot have been the Father but his Word and Reason (Logos) who is therefore “other than the Father in number thought not is will”. (p. 53.)

Justin’s language about the distinction of the Father as God transcendent from the Son as God immanent, which Irenaeus had made his own, precipitated sharp debate (the so-called monarchian controversy) at Rome c. 190–225. In combating Gnostic dualism orthodox writers had insisted on the divine monarchy: there is only one ultimate principle [principal?]. But Justin’s language about the otherness of the divine Word suggested a dyarchy. What had St John meant when he said that the Word was “with God”?

The distinction of the Son from the Father was a theme vehemently taken up by the Roman presbyter Hippolytus. Hippolytus fell out with Callistus, the archdeacon in charge of the cemeteries in the catacombs, and found Callistus’ election to be bishop more than he could endure, so he became bishop in rivalry. Callistus had publicly accused him of being a ditheist, and used language offering cover to those (soon associated with a presbyter named Sabellius) who held that Father, Son, and Spirit are names for one God under different aspects…. (p. 55.)

The most important and eloquent theologian in the West at the end of the second century was Tertullian, a lay Christian of Carthage. A brilliant polemical writer, he overwhelmed his opponents (heretics, Jews, pagans, and, after he became a Montanist, orthodox bishops) with a combination of rapier and bludgeon. The earliest writer of Christian Latin (and a fascinating witness to the emergence of a specifically Christian Latin vocabulary), he coined the terminology which was to dominate Western theology—for example, trinitas, “three persons in one substance”, or of Christ, “two substances or natures in one person”…. (p. 56.)

Origin’s doctrine of God bequeathed a legacy of problems (and some solutions) to his successors. He insisted that Father and Son must be distinct realities or hypostases, not mere adjectives of one personal divine substance…. (p. 62.)