Eusebius of Caesarea, Demonstration of the Gospel VIII.1

The hegemony of the Romans and the tribe of Judah

Name of the author: Eusebius of Caesarea
Date: 313 CE to 324 CE
Place: Caesarea Maritima
Language: Greek

Category: Christian
Literary genre: Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: Demonstration of the Gospel
Reference: VIII.1
Commentary: For a general introduction to Eusebius, please see the commentary on his Ecclesiastical History I.6.6-11.

Eusebius’s Demonstration (or Proof) of the Gospel (?????????? ??????????? ????? ?????, Evangelik?s Apodeixe?s deka logoi) originally consisted of twenty books, of which we now possess only ten. The work formed the latter half of a larger composition which also included the Preparation of the Gospel (?????????? ???????????, Evangelik? proparaskeu?). At the beginning of the Preparation Eusebius claims his objective is to show Christianity’s nature to those unfamiliar with it. The work supposedly attempts to address questions about the Christian faith posed by either Jews or Greeks, acting as a guide for those recently converted to Christianity. In the Demonstration, Eusebius claims, he will continue in the same vein, but tailor his dogmatic instruction towards the more advanced student who can conceive of higher truths. Despite Eusebius’s own characterisation of the two-part work (the Preparation and Demonstration), an apologetic agenda clearly underlies it, for example in his efforts to refute arguments claiming that Christ was a magician or a charlatan. Much of Eusebius’s apologetic content draws on the arguments of previous apologists, particularly Justin and Origen. There are quotations from Porphyry’s Against the Christians in both the Preparation and the Demonstration, but it was not Eusebius’s intention here to address Porphyry’s arguments one by one (for a recent discussion of Eusebius’s engagement with Porphyry, see Sébastien Morlet, “Eusebius’ Polemic”). Instead, his strategy was more global, to show Christianity’s critics that it was a divinely sanctioned, and powerful force which was growing day by day. The dominant and recurring theme in the Demonstration is that the Church is flourishing, and that this proves the divine and human nature of Christ. Essentially, the Preparation and Demonstration “set out [Eusebius’s] providential arguments for the coming of Christianity, the defeat of paganism and God’s plan of salvation” (Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall, Life of Constantine, p. 2).

Various passages in both works refer to persecution of Christians as though it is a present issue, perhaps indicating a compositional date for certain parts before the end of the Diocletianic persecution (i.e. prior to 312 CE when the Edict of Milan was issued; see Preparation XII.10; Demonstration III.5). However, other passages speak of the flourishing of the Church throughout the inhabited world, with the Christian religion multiplying more and more having overcome years of persecution by earthly rulers (see Demonstration V.3; Preparation I.4). It seems, then, that the works were composed over the course of a period spanning both the so-called “Great Persecution” of the early-fourth century and its cessation (for the dating of the work, on which most scholars tend to agree, see Timothy Barnes, Constantine and Eusebius, p. 278; Aryeh Kofsky, Eusebius of Caesarea, p. 74). The first two books serve as an introduction, refuting the argument that Christianity only has room for faith and not reason. Moreover, Eusebius affirms that because Christianity accepts Jewish scripture, but not the Jewish religion, it can be understood as mirroring the religion of the patriarchs. In book two, Eusebius synchronises the downfall of the Jewish people with the coming of the Messiah and the mission to the Gentiles. Book three deals with the humanity of Christ, while books four and five move on to discuss his divinity. Christ’s life and his fulfilment of prophecy fills books six to nine, with book ten focusing on Jesus’s passion and his betrayal by Judas Iscariot.

Book VIII, from which the above extract is taken, broadly consists of Eusebius’s consideration of how Christ’s incarnation in human form fulfils prophecies from the Old Testament. As Aryeh Kofsky identifies, in the present passage Eusebius picks up the well-established argument that the instituting of the Roman empire and the Pax
Romana was the universal peace which the Jewish scriptures had prophesied, and was another sign as testifying the coming of the Messiah (Eusebius of Caesarea, p. 216). The whole of the lengthy first chapter of book VIII is devoted to an exposition of Jacob’s prophetic blessing to his sons in Genesis 49:1-27, which he speaks to them before he dies. Each of the twelve tribes of Israel are treated by Jacob, but key to Eusebius’ exegesis here is that which is prophesied to Judah (verses 8-12). Similarly to the blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 23:1-27), where the tribes of Gad and Dan are respectively presented as a judge and a lion cub, Jacob’s prophecy presents the tribe of Dan as a judge and Judah as a lion cub, with Judah given many blessings and marked out as having a prominent position among his brothers. Eusebius’s focus in the present extract are the words of Genesis 49:10: “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his” (NRSV). Jacob’s blessing of Judah was dealt with by other patristic authors such as Hippolytus and Justin, who like Eusebius understood it a prophesying the coming of Christ (for the particular verse in focus, see respectively On Christ and Antichrist IX; Dialogue LII), although their exegetical efforts are much less detailed that that of Eusebius (see Kofsky, Eusebius of Caesarea, p. 156). As Kofsky explains, Eusebius is ultimately concerned with showing that the prophecy to Judah spoke of the tribe (?????, phul?of Judah in general—not Judah himself or any of the tribe’s individual leaders—as the leader of the people from Moses’s time. He argues that the prophecy did not refer to specific rulers from the tribe of Judah because there were many leaders who did not come from this tribe. Earlier in the chapter, Eusebius states the following in this regard (translation by Ferrar, p. 370):

“For there were rulers and governors of the Jewish nation at many times who were not descended from him (i.e. Judah). Moses, for instance, its first ruler, was not of the tribe of Judah but of Levi. Joshua was of the tribe of Ephraim...And they were followed by the first king, Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin.”

Moreover, the kings from David’s house had not continuously ruled (translation by Ferrar, p. 371):

“And if it be true that David and his successors sprung from the tribe of Judah ruled the Jewish nation, after so many others, yet we must remember that they did not continue to rule the whole people for the whole of those five hundred years, but only three tribes, and not the whole of them, for during their reigns other kings governed the larger part of the nation.”

In what is not an entirely well-reasoned argument, Eusebius suggests that from the time of the Jewish people’s return from the Babylonian exile until the time of Jesus’s birth, they were ruled by an aristocracy and high priests that did not come from the tribe of Judah. For this reason, the prophecy has to refer to the tribe in general, and not its individual leaders. This is why Eusebius claims that “We understand then that the prophet’s words: ‘Judah, thy brethren shall praise thee,’ were to be applied to the whole tribe” (Kofsky, Eusebius of Caesarea, p. 158).

Subsequently, Eusebius attempts to support his interpretation by paralleling the Roman empire during his time with Jewish history up until the Roman conquest. His argument is essentially that while not all the Roman rulers or authorities were strictly Roman in terms of birth, they were still given the name “Romans,” just as in the tribe of Judah referred to the entire people of Israel——it “stood forth as the head of the whole nation (?????, ethnos)”—even though its kings and rulers were gathered from different tribes (on Eusebius’s themes of the vocation of the nations and the rejection of the Jews, see also Sébastien Morlet, La Démonstration Évangélique, p. 457). Eusebius thereby makes a comparison between the “Roman state” and the “Hebrew state.” As Eusebius argues, in the same way that the Jewish people in general can be referred to as the “tribe of Judah” despite having leaders from outside this original genealogical line, the name “Roman” can be applied to people from all over the inhabited world. Although Eusebius is not specifically discussing the theme of citizenship here, it is worth noting that as someone writing well after Caracalla’s granting of citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire in 212 CE, the right to call oneself a Roman in this sense was a well-established feature of his world.

Eusebius’s exegesis may have well have been ultimately intended to show that Jacob’s prophecy had been fulfilled in Jesus, but in order to strengthen this argument, Eusebius needed to show that the words “the scepter shall not depart far from Judah” could be interpreted in this way. In order to do this, he proceeds to argue that these words refer to Jewish rule coming to an end in Judah: “He will only appear among men, when the ruler fails, and the governor is changed, and the tribe of Judah is removed from its position of power.” In the second part of our extract above Eusebius argues that after Christ’s birth, the tribe of Judah (i.e. Israel) lost its “dominant and royal position” and became “subject to the Romans.” This condition was aided by the Roman senate’s establishment of Herod, the first “alien” (?????????, allophulos) to be made king over the Jews (owing to the fact that Herod’s father was an Idumean whose ancestors had converted to Judaism. See also Ecclesiastical History I.7.11, where Eusebius follows the tradition that Herod’s father, Antipater, was a temple servant in Apollo’s temple in Acalon). This is also dealt with by Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History I.6, where the author similarly discusses the
subjugation of the Jewish people by the Romans as part of the process preparing for Christ’s mission to the Gentiles. This line of argument of course fits in with the frequently made point by Christian writers that the Romans ending the Jews’ period of God-given independence paved the way for the Christian era (see also, for instance, \textit{Sibyline Oracles I.387-400}; \textit{Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5}). Eusebius thus interprets Jacob’s words as referring to Herod’s time, during which Jesus appeared among men and the Romans subjugated the Jewish people. From this point onwards, he claims, because of the Romans, the Jewish people ceased to exist as a “national entity” (to use Kofsky’s words, \textit{Eusebius of Caesarea}, p. 159), meaning that the reign of Christ over the Gentiles could begin. We see in this text a good example of Eusebius’s rhetoric at work, with several of his points not making much real sense. His reasoning that the whole Jewish people constitutes the “tribe of Judah” in the same way that the entire inhabited world constitutes the “Roman” people is pure rhetoric, serving to legitimise his broader argument about Christ.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- \textbf{Christ}
- \textbf{Hebrews}
- \textbf{Herod the Great}
- \textbf{Jewish people}
- \textbf{Judah}
- \textbf{king}
- \textbf{Messiah}
- \textbf{Moses}
- \textbf{prefect}
- \textbf{procurator}
**Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History I.6.6-11***

The falling in favour of the Jewish people, their subjugation by Rome, and the coming of Christ

- Read more about *Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History I.6.6-11*

**Sibylline Oracles I.387-400**

The prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

- Read more about *Sibylline Oracles I.387-400*

**Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5**

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

- Read more about *Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5*