

# **SAINT DIONYSIUS ALEXANDRIA**

ST. DIONYSIUS OF  
ALEXANDRIA: LETTERS  
AND TREATISES

Saint Dionysius of Alexandria

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Letters and Treatises**

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# **Saint of Alexandria Dionysius**

## **St. Dionysius of Alexandria:**

### **Letters and Treatises**

#### **PREFACE**

Not long after my edition of this Father's writings appeared in the *Cambridge Patristic Texts* (1904), I was invited to translate the Letters and some of the other more certainly genuine fragments that remain into English for the present series; but it is not until now that I have been able to accomplish the task I then undertook. Since then, though chiefly occupied in other researches, I have naturally acquired a more extensive and accurate knowledge of St. Dionysius and his times, some of the results of which will be found in this volume. Nevertheless, I was bound to incorporate a considerable amount of the information and conclusions arrived at in the former work, and wish to express my acknowledgments to the Syndics of the University Press for leave to do so, as well as to those again whose names I mentioned as having assisted me before.

In the present book Dr. A. J. Mason was kind enough to advise me over the choice of extracts from the two treatises, *On Nature* and *Refutation and Defence*, and on one or two minor points, while a friend and neighbour (the Rev. L. Patterson) read through the whole of the MS. before it went to the printer and gave me the benefit of a fresh mind upon a number of small details of style and fact, for which I sincerely thank him.

*C. L. Feltoe.*

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## INTRODUCTION

1. None of the many influential occupants of the see of Alexandria and of the many distinguished heads of the Catechetical School in that city seem to have been held in higher respect by the ancients than Dionysius. By common consent he is styled “the Great,” while Athanasius, one of his most famous-successors as Bishop, calls him “Teacher of the Church universal,” and Basil (of Cæsarea) refers to him as “a person of canonical authority” (κανονικός). He took a prominent and important part in all the leading movements and controversies of the day, and his opinions always carried great weight, especially in Eastern Christendom. His writings are freely referred to and quoted, not only by Eusebius the historian,<sup>1</sup> but also by Athanasius, Basil and John of Damascus amongst others. And what we gather of his personal story from his letters and various fragments embodied in the works of others – and very little, if anything else, for certain has come down to us – undoubtedly leaves the impression that the verdict of the ancient world is correct.

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<sup>1</sup> In one of Eusebius’s works (the *Præparatio Evangelica*) he is quoted side by side with great authors like Plato and Aristotle.

## His Family and Earlier Life

2. The references to his family and early years are extremely scanty and vague. In the *Chronicon Orientale*, p. 94, he is stated to have been a *Sabaita* and sprung from “the chiefs and nobles of that race”: and several writers speak as if he had been a rhetorician before his conversion (as Cyprian of Carthage had been). The exact meaning of the term “Sabaita” above is doubtful. Strictly used, it should mean a member of the Sabaitic convent near Jerusalem, and the *Chronicon* may be claiming Dionysius as that, though, of course, without any ground for the claim. If it is equivalent, however, to “Sabæan” here, it implies an Arab descent for him, which is hardly probable, as he seems always to consider himself connected by education and residence, if not by birth, with the city-folk of Alexandria, whom he distinguishes from the Coptic inhabitants of Egypt (Αἰγύπτιοι); so that it would be rather surprising to find that his family came from the remoter parts of Arabia, where the Sabæans dwelt. The other tradition of his having been a rhetorician may be due to some confusion between our Dionysius and a much later Alexandrian writer of the same name, who edited the works of the Areopagite with notes and wrote other treatises. On the other hand, Dionysius’s literary style is such that it might very well have been formed by the study and practice of rhetoric, while he has been thought himself to corroborate the statement of the *Chronicon Orientale*, as to the high position of his family, in his reply to Germanus ([p. 49](#)), where he refers to the “losses of dignities” which he has suffered for the Faith.

3. He was probably a priest, and not less than thirty, when he became head of the Catechetical School in 231, and in 264 he excused himself from attendance at the Council of Antioch on the ground of age and infirmity; and so it is a safe inference that he was born about or before 200, being thus nearly of an age with Cyprian of Carthage, and only ten or fifteen years younger than Origen, his master.

## His Conversion

4. The *Chronicon Orientale* assigns the reading of St. Paul's letters as the cause of his conversion to Christianity, and proceeds to state how, after their perusal, he presented himself for baptism to Demetrius, then Bishop of Alexandria, who admitted him in due course. Whether this was actually the cause of his conversion or not, we know from what he has himself told us in his letter to Philemon ([p. 56](#)), that both before and after baptism he was a diligent student of all that was written for and against Christianity.



## Was He Married or Not?

5. Whether, in accordance with the common practice of the Eastern Church at that time, Dionysius was married or not, is a moot point. He addressed his treatise *περὶ Φύσεως* to one Timotheus ὁ παῖς, and we read of οἱ παῖδες (of whom Timotheus was one) as accompanying him in his flight ([p. 44](#)). One would naturally infer from this that he was then a widower (his wife not being mentioned), and that these were his sons; but they may have been his pupils, on the supposition that he was still Catechete as well as Bishop, or, which is less likely, his servants.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Most of those who read this will be aware that *παῖς* (Lat. *puer*) can be used in various senses, like our “boy” and French *garçon*.

## He becomes Head of the Catechetical School

6. When Demetrius died in 231, Heraclas, who for some years had been associated with Origen at the Catechetical School and had just been left in charge of it by him on his final retirement that year from Alexandria, was elected Bishop, while Dionysius, who had himself been a pupil of Origen there, was appointed to fill the vacancy he created. It is possible that the treatise *περὶ Φύσεως*, extracts from which are given below (on [pp. 91 ff.](#)), was composed while Dionysius held this important post, and that a commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, some genuine fragments of which probably remain, belongs to the same period. The former of these is much the more valuable work, for in it for the first time a Christian undertook systematically to refute the atomistic theories of Epicurus and his followers.

## **He becomes Bishop of Alexandria**

7. Sixteen years later, in 247, upon the death of Heraclas, Dionysius succeeded to the bishopric as the fourteenth occupant of the see, possibly, as has already been suggested, without at once resigning his post at the School. Philip the Arabian (of Bostra) had then been Emperor for three years, a position he was destined to retain for two years longer. Like Alexander Severus before him, he was known to favour the Christians, and Dionysius himself bears witness to the comparative mildness of his rule ([p. 37](#)). For a short time, therefore, the new Bishop and his flock were left in peace, though even before the death of Philip signs of the coming storm appeared. In the last year of his reign Dionysius tells Fabius, Bishop of Antioch ([p. 35](#)), that “the prophet and poet of evil to this city, whoever he was,” stirred up the populace against the Christians in Alexandria, and several persons were cruelly martyred. This reign of terror lasted some time, but was interrupted in the autumn of 249 by the revolution which caused the deposition and death of Philip, and which set Decius on the throne in his stead. The respite was only too brief, for by the beginning of the new year the edict which Decius had issued was being actively carried into effect. The Bishops were at first singled out for attack. Origen, though not one of them, was included among the earlier victims – on account, no doubt, of his prominence as a scholar and a teacher – being imprisoned at Tyre and cruelly tortured, though not actually martyred.

## Under the Persecution of Decius

8. Decius's reversal of his predecessor's policy towards the Christians was probably due to reasons of state and expediency rather than, as Eusebius implies, to mere spite and hatred of Philip and all his ways. Anyhow, the severity of the Decian persecution is undoubted, and it fell with great force upon the Church at Alexandria. The Prefect of Egypt, Sabinus, lost no time in attacking Dionysius and his followers. Many endured tortures or death, or both. Dionysius himself, after waiting four days, fled and was sought for by a secret service messenger (*frumentarius*, see [note on p. 43](#)) sent by Sabinus. A brief search was sufficient to recover him, and he was carried off with four of his companions to Taposiris. But through a strange interposition of Providence (related on [pp. 44 f.](#)) he was rescued by a wedding party of rustic revellers and removed to a place of safety in the Libyan Desert, where he appears to have been left unmolested, with two of his four companions (see [pp. 64 ff.](#)), till the persecution ceased and he was able to return to the city. In after days Dionysius's action in fleeing on this occasion was violently attacked by a certain Bishop Germanus, who was perhaps one of his suffragans. Germanus boasted of his own much braver conduct under persecution. Dionysius in his reply (see especially [pp. 43](#) and <sup>45</sup>) maintains that it was not of his own will nor yet without divine intimation that he had fled, and that he had suffered far more than his critic for the Faith. Decius's rule was brought to a calamitous end in 251, but Gallus, who succeeded him, continued his treatment of the Christians for another two years, when he, too, suffered an untimely fate.

9. For the next four years the Church of Alexandria enjoyed comparative rest and peace. In 253 Æmilianus<sup>3</sup> the Governor of Pannonia and Moesia, who had in that spring wrested the imperial power from Gallus, was in his turn, after four months' rule, defeated by Valerian and his son Gallienus, and slain by the soldiery. The new Emperors (father and son) left the Christians alone during the first four years of their reign – a somewhat surprising fact, when it is considered that Valerian had been specially chosen to fill the office of "Censor," which Decius had revived. It may in some measure have been due to what Archbishop Benson (*Cyprian*, p. 457) calls his "languid temperament" as well as to his son's connexions with the Christians through his wife Cornelia Salonina.

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<sup>45</sup> Not the Prefect of Egypt of that name mentioned by Dionysius on [p. 46](#), though he did afterwards try to usurp the throne (see [p. 16](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Not the Prefect of Egypt of that name mentioned by Dionysius on [p. 46](#), though he did afterwards try to usurp the throne (see [p. 16](#)).

## His Action about Heretical Baptism

10. During this interval of peace, but chiefly towards the end of it, Dionysius took part in that controversy about heretical baptism to which the letters on [pp. 51 ff.](#) belong. Up till now various parts of Christendom had followed various customs on this matter without much disputing. In Asia Minor and in Africa baptism by heretics was not recognized, while in the West baptism with water in the name of the Trinity or of Christ was held valid by whomsoever performed. Before the middle of the third century, however, the difference of practice gradually became more and more a matter of controversy. In or about A.D. 230 two synods were held one after the other at Iconium and at Synnada (see [p. 58, n.](#)), which confirmed the opinion that heretical baptism was invalid: and some twenty-five years later on Cyprian of Carthage convened several synods in North Africa, which arrived at the same conclusion. Thereupon a violent quarrel arose between Cyprian and Stephen the Bishop of Rome; this became, perhaps, all the keener, because of the former alliance and co-operation between Cyprian and Stephen's predecessor, Cornelius, in combating the Novatianist schism,<sup>4</sup> which had eventually led also to heresy over the restoration of those who had lapsed under persecution. Severe language was now used on both sides, and other leading Churchmen of the day were naturally drawn into the discussion: among them our Dionysius, who – after the first, at all events – with characteristic sagacity steered a middle course and advised that the older spirit of toleration should be maintained, the circumstances of different churches requiring different methods. Fragments of five letters on this subject have come down to us, all addressed to the Church of Rome or rather to representative members of that Church, the first of them probably written in 254 when the Novatianist schism was subsiding (see [p. 52](#)), and the others belonging to the year 257 (see [pp. 54 ff.](#)).

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<sup>4</sup> For Dionysius's share in this dispute see his letter on [p. 50](#).

## Under the Persecution of Valerian

11. Suddenly, in the summer of that year, the Church was startled by the issue of an edict which revived the reign of terror and threw her into a state of persecution which lasted for more than three years. This unexpected change of treatment is attributed by Dionysius to the influence of Macrianus, who at one time held the office of *Rationalis* (Treasurer or Accountant-General) to the Emperor. This man was apparently a cripple in body, but mentally and otherwise a person of considerable ability and force of character: but he seems to have associated himself in some way with the soothsayers of Egypt,<sup>5</sup> and to have conceived a violent hatred against the Christians. Quite early in the proceedings which were instituted against them at Alexandria in consequence of the edict, Dionysius, with several of his clergy, was brought before Æmilianus the Prefect,<sup>6</sup> and after examination – chiefly as to his loyalty to the Emperors, which his refusal to pay them divine honours rendered doubtful – was banished first to a place called Cephro (probably not far from Taposiris, where he had been sent before), and then somewhere on the high road in the district called Colluthion. Dionysius's own account of the circumstances which led to and attended this second exile is given on [pp. 46 ff.](#), an account which is valuable, among other reasons, because it is largely drawn from the official memoranda of the Prefect's court, and because it shows how both sides did their ineffectual best to understand each other's position.

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<sup>5</sup> Dionysius's phrase about him on [p. 66](#) is "tutor and chief ruler of Egyptian magicians"; see note 3 *in loco*.

<sup>6</sup> This Æmilianus was one of several who afterwards attempted to seize the throne; see above, [p. 14](#). Macrianus was another of them in Egypt ([p. 68, n.](#)).

## Restoration of Peace

12. The persecution lasted till the autumn of 260, and was then, on the disappearance of Valerian, stayed by an edict of Peace issued by his son Gallienus, who was now left alone upon the throne. The Greek version, which Eusebius gives us, is apparently not that of the actual edict, but of the Emperor's letter or rescript which applied it to Egypt. It is addressed to Dionysius and other bishops, and runs as follows: "I have ordained that the benefit of my concession be enforced throughout the world, to the effect that men should withdraw from (*i. e.* not interfere with) your places of worship. And accordingly ye, too, may use the terms of my rescript, so that none may interfere with you. And this, which may with authority be carried out by you, has already been granted by me some time ago. And accordingly Aurelius Quirinius, who is in charge of the Exchequer,<sup>7</sup> shall preserve this form now given by me." Instructions were also issued permitting the Christians to have free access to their cemeteries – a privilege which was always much prized.

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<sup>7</sup> The office indicated seems to be the same as that of *Rationalis* mentioned above on [p. 16](#).

## **His Return to Alexandria**

13. It is practically certain that Dionysius returned to Alexandria as soon as Gallienus's edict came into operation there. But almost immediately fresh disturbances were felt in the city, followed by one of those frequent outbreaks of pestilence to which the East was always liable, and these hindered for a time his work of bringing the brethren together again. The disturbances are with good reason thought to have been those connected with the attempt of Macrianus to overturn the power of Gallienus in Egypt, though that country was so often the scene of tumults and civil wars for the next twelve years and more that it is almost impossible to identify any particular disturbances with certainty during this period.



## The Troubles Connected with his Protest against Sabellianism

14. For another five years Dionysius was spared to administer his charge and to benefit the Church at large with his prudent counsels. But, though attacks upon himself never seem to have troubled him very much, he had still to endure one such attack which probably grieved him more than all the rest, and the after results of which lingered on till the days of Athanasius and Basil in the next century. This was in connexion with the Sabellian controversy, especially that phase of it which had recently arisen in the Libyan Pentapolis (on the north-west coast of Cyrenaica). Sabellius was a native of the district, and his heresy consisted in laying too much stress on the unity of the Godhead and in so hopelessly confounding the Three Persons in the Trinity as to imply that the Person of the Father was incarnate in Christ. It is in 257 that we first find Dionysius, in a letter to Xystus II ([see p. 55](#)), calling the attention of the Bishop of Rome to these views, by which time Sabellius was himself probably already dead. From what he says there, it appears as if Dionysius was unaware that these views were not of quite recent origin and were already rather prevalent in both East and West, whilst his words seem also to imply that this later phase of Sabellianism endangered the dignity of the Third Person as well as of the First and Second. In Libya the heresy gained such a hold upon the Church that it even infected certain of the Bishops, and the Son of God was no longer preached. Dionysius, therefore, feeling his responsibility for the churches under his care, became active in trying to eradicate the evil. Among a number of letters which he wrote on the subject, there was one (about the year 260) in which he made use of certain expressions and illustrations with regard to the Son of God, which were seized hold of by some members of the Church either at Alexandria or in the Pentapolis as heretical. This letter was apparently one of the later letters of the series, when his earlier overtures had failed to produce the effect he desired.

15. Dionysius's critics laid a formal complaint against him before his namesake (Dionysius), who had by now succeeded the martyred Xystus II as Bishop of Rome; they accused him of having fallen into five errors himself, while correcting the false views of the Sabellians.

They were as follows, as we gather them from Athan., *de sent. Dion.*: —

- (1) Separating the Father and the Son.
- (2) Denying the eternity of the Son.
- (3) Naming the Father without the Son and the Son without the Father.
- (4) Virtually rejecting the term ὁμοούσιος (of one substance) as descriptive of the Son.
- (5) Speaking of the Son as a creature of the Father and using misleading illustrations of their relation to One Another.

One or two of these illustrations which were objected to will be found in the extract translated on [p. 103](#), and they are sufficient to give some idea of the rest. It may, however, be acknowledged that neither Dionysius himself in his original statements and in his attempts to explain them, nor Athanasius, who, when Arius afterwards appealed to Dionysius in support of his opinions, put forward an elaborate defence of him, was altogether happy or successful.

16. Upon receiving the complaint mentioned, the Bishop of Rome appears to have convened a synod, which condemned the expressions complained of, and a letter was addressed by him on the modes of correcting the heresy to the Church of Alexandria. From motives of delicacy he made no actual mention of his Alexandrian brother-bishop in this letter, while criticizing his views, though he wrote to him privately asking for an explanation. A considerable portion of the public letter has been preserved for us by Athanasius, but it is not included in this volume, nor is it necessary to particularize his treatment of the question or to say more than this, that, though the Roman Bishop wrote quite good Greek and gives no impression that he felt hampered by it in expressing his meaning, yet he

does naturally exhibit distinct traces of Western modes of thought as opposed to Eastern, and is not always quite fair in his representation and interpretation of what Dionysius had said.

Dionysius's answer to his Roman brother was embodied in the treatise called *Refutation and Defence* (Ἐλεγχος καὶ Ἀπολογία), some extracts from which (as given by Athanasius) will be found on [pp. 101 ff.](#)

The following is an indication of Dionysius's line of defence against the five points raised against him, other matters which arose more particularly between him and his namesake of Rome being passed over.

(1) As to the charge of separating the Three Persons in the Trinity, he distinctly denies it: all the language he employs and the very names he gives imply the opposite: "Father" must involve "Son" and "Son" "Father": "Holy Spirit" at once suggests His Source and the Channel.

(2) As to the eternity of the Son, he is equally emphatic. God was always the Father and therefore Christ was always the Son, just as, if the sun were eternal, the daylight would also be eternal.

(3) The charge of omitting the Son in speaking of the Father and vice versa is refuted by what is said under (1): the one name involves the other.

(4) Dionysius's rejection or non-employment of the term ὁμοούσιος is less easily disposed of. He practically acknowledges that, as it is not a Scriptural word, he had *not* used it, but at the same time that the figures he employed suggested a similar relationship, *e. g.* the figure of parent and child who are of one family (ὁμογενεῖς) or seed, root and plant which are of one kind (ὁμοφυῖ), and again source and stream, and in another place the word in the heart and the mind springing forth by the tongue (see [p. 106](#)): but for the unsatisfactoriness of this defence the reader should consult Bethune-Baker, *Early History of Christian Doctrine*, chap. viii. pp. 113 ff, who points out that Dionysius had not grasped the Western tradition of one *substantia* (οὐσία) of Godhead existing in three Persons.

(5) But the most serious misunderstanding naturally arose from Dionysius speaking of the Son as ποίημα (creature), and illustrating the word by the gardener with his vine and the shipwright with his boat. His defence is that though he had undoubtedly used such rather unsuitable figures somewhat casually, he had immediately adduced several others more suitable and apposite (such as those mentioned under (4) above). And he complains that not only here, but throughout, his accusers did not take his utterances as a whole, but slashed his writings about and made what sense of them they liked, not sincerely, but with evil intent. He tries further to explain that in his context ποιεῖν (make) was equivalent to γεννᾶν (beget), as of a Father, not a Creator, which he maintains is legitimate, but the defence is not very convincing all the same.

So far as we can now judge, however, his arguments seem to have satisfied his critics at the time, and were certainly held in high repute by the ancient Churches, for they are quoted or referred to not only by Athanasius, as has been stated, but also by Eusebius, by Basil of Cæsarea (who is, however, much more temperate in his support), and by Jerome and Rufinus.

## **Dionysius's Last Days**

17. It is evident that, in spite of this controversy, his great reputation in the eyes of the Church was maintained to the end: for when the Council of Antioch was being summoned to deal with the troubles connected with the heresies of Paul of Samosata, who held views somewhat similar to those of Sabellius, Dionysius was specially invited to attend. As was said above on [p. 10](#), he excused himself from attendance on the ground of old age and infirmity, but he sent a letter in reply to the invitation which contained his views on the matter, and these were unfavourable to the heretic. In 265, before the Council had finished its sessions, he passed to his well-earned rest.

## Dionysius as Author

18. From what has already been said, it will be gathered that Dionysius was a person of remarkable versatility, and at the same time unusually free from those snares of the versatile man, shallowness and inaccuracy. The critical remarks on the Revelation of S. John the Divine from his treatise *On the Promises* (περὶ Ἐπαγγελιῶν), which are given in full (from Eusebius) on [pp. 82 ff.](#), have received the most respectful consideration from such authorities as Bishop Westcott and Dr. Swete and are well worth reading, while some of the expositions of Biblical passages attributed to him are probably genuine and by no means destitute of merit, though none of them are printed in this volume.

## As Christian Philosopher

19. The long extracts which remain from his book *On Nature* (περὶ Φύσεως), directed against the Epicureans, show him to have possessed on the whole a clear grasp of their tenets, together with much genuine humour and entire absence of bitterness of spirit in criticizing them.

The extracts given by Eusebius appear to be fairly continuous throughout: they deal (1) with the atomistic portion of the Epicurean philosophy, and (2) with the more strictly “theological” portion of it, the references to the hedonistic doctrine being only slight and passing.

Dionysius begins by remarking that of the various hypotheses which have been started as to the origin of the universe, one of the least satisfactory is that of Epicurus, viz. that it is the result of a chance concourse of an infinite number of atoms, as they rush through space.

He then proceeds to show by a series of illustrations taken from human workmanship that mere chance could never produce the wonderful results that we see all around us. So, too, from the study of the heavens the same inference must be drawn.

His next point appears to be that the difference in durability, which Epicurus postulates for the various bodies produced by atoms, goes to upset his theory. If some products (*e. g.* the gods) are eternal and some are short-lived, what determines the difference? Some of the senseless atoms themselves must be gifted with powers of directing, arranging and ruling. But if it is mere chance, then Epicurus asks us, who study the order and the phenomena of earth and heaven, to believe the impossible.

The same conclusion is arrived at by the study of man, whose mere body is a machine so marvellous that some have emerged from the study of it with a belief that Φύσις herself is a deity. The higher powers, too, of man, his mind and reason and skill, all point in the opposite direction to Epicurus’s solution of the problem. It cannot, surely, be the atoms rather than the Muses which are responsible for the arts and sciences.

The half-humorous allusion to these heaven-born personages of heathen mythology leads Dionysius to attack the Epicurean theory of the gods. According to Epicurus, the gods in no way concern themselves with mundane matters, but spend a serene existence without labour or exertion of any kind. But such an existence, says Dionysius, is so repugnant to the very idea and instinct of man that it must be absolutely false with regard to divine beings.

At this point occurs a short passage in which the inconsistency of Democritus, from whom Epicurus had confessedly borrowed his physics, *mutatis mutandis*, is criticized, though it has only a general bearing upon the line of argument. Democritus, he says, who professed that he would have given the world in exchange for the discovery of one good cause (αἰτιολογία), yet in putting forward his ideas of Chance as a cause could not have been more absurd: he sets up Τύχη as the sovereign cause of the Universe, and yet banishes her as a power from the life of men. The truth is that, while practical men and even philosophers find their highest pleasure in benefiting others, by this theory the gods are to be kept from any share in such pleasure.

One other inconsistency in the Epicurean writings Dionysius next deals with, and that is Epicurus’s own constant use of oaths and adjurations, in which the names of those very beings occur whose influence upon men’s affairs he so depreciates. This is, in Dionysius’s opinion, due to his fear of being put to death by the state for atheism, as Socrates had been: though he is probably doing Epicurus a wrong.

The extracts end with a repetition of the appeal to the wonders of the sky and of the earth as a conclusive contradiction of Epicurus’s views.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I was much assisted in drawing up this summary of περὶ Φύσεως and also in writing the notes upon the extracts from the text by Professor H. Jackson, of Cambridge fame.

A selection from these interesting portions of a not unimportant work for its time will be found on [pp. 91 ff.](#)

## General Characteristics of his Writings

20. The letter to Basilides on several points of ecclesiastical order (the larger portion of which is given on [pp. 76 ff.](#)) is a model of what such episcopal utterances should be: it definitely states which is the highest and best course, but leaves the decision to the individual conscience. But it is to the general correspondence ([pp. 35 ff.](#)) that the bulk of English readers will probably turn, and that deals with a large variety of subjects: in some cases theological matters like Novatianism and the baptism of heretics are discussed; in others there are descriptions of the martyrdoms of his time at Alexandria and his own personal experiences under persecution, all told with a vividness and a sobriety eminently characteristic of the man: others are addressed to persons or districts in his province, especially at Eastertide, treating of matters of local and temporary importance, while one or two incidents which he records are of much value as illustrating church customs and manners of the period (*e. g.* the case of Sarapion on [p. 42](#), prayers for the Emperors on [p. 47](#), matters connected with the celebration of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion on [p. 59](#)).

In his controversy with the Sabellians, as we have already remarked, some of the expressions and figures employed were insufficiently guarded or explained and so laid Dionysius open to criticism: but we must remember how much more easy it is for us, who have the benefit of subsequent history and experience, to see this and to correct it, than it was for him and for his contemporaries to grope their way, as they slowly but surely did, under the Divine guidance to a fuller knowledge and a more accurate statement of the truth.

21. It is further to be noticed how very seldom, if ever, Dionysius offends against the principles of good taste either when attacking opponents, or when describing horrors, or when dealing with the mysteries of the Faith. In controversy he always displays an admirable moderation and sweetness of tone, which is the more remarkable because his convictions were strong and definite. This is especially to be observed in his treatment of Novatianus the intruder (see [p. 50](#)), in his criticism of the deceased Nepos of Arsenoe (see [p. 82](#)), and to a less extent in his defence of himself against the charges of Germanus (see [p. 43](#)). Even when he has to speak of one whom he believes to have done him wrong, like the Prefect Æmilianus ([p. 48](#)), or of one whom his soul abhors like Macrianus ([p. 68](#)), his language is mild in comparison with that of many in similar circumstances. So, too, when he takes upon himself to describe the tortures and deaths of the martyrs ([pp. 35 f.](#)), or the ravages of pestilence ([p. 74](#)), he indulges in but few ghastly or revolting details, though his narrative is always lively and thrilling. And once more when he deals with such a subject as the Eternal Sonship of our Lord, or, if the passage (not here given) be authentic, His Death and Passion, the same good taste and restraint of language is to be observed.

22. Dionysius's literary style is excellent for the age in which he lived, and so far confirms the truth of the statement that he had been a master of rhetoric before his conversion. He gives evidence of having read widely and to good purpose both in classical and in religious literature. As to the former, he actually quotes from or refers to Homer, Hesiod, Thucydides, Aristotle, and Democritus: but his language is really saturated with classical uses, and a large number of the words and phrases which he employs recall the best writers of antiquity. His compositions exhibit signs of much care in production, notably the treatise *On Nature* (περὶ Φύσεως) and the two Easter letters, to the Alexandrians and to Hierax ([pp. 70](#) and [73](#)). Here, and to a somewhat less degree in the letter to Hermammion ([pp. 65 ff.](#)), he writes in a more rhetorical and elaborate manner than in most of the other fragments which are extant, but even in these passages he is seldom fantastic, or stilted, or obscure; whilst in pure narrative or simple description (*e. g.* in the letters which record his own or others' sufferings and in the treatise *On the Promises* (περὶ Ἐπαγγελιῶν)), his language could hardly be more unaffected or better chosen.

## Dionysius as Interpreter of Scripture

23. To what extent did Dionysius accept the principles and methods of Origen, especially in the matter of Biblical criticism and interpretation? The evidence, such as it is, is rather doubtful and conflicting. It is somewhat ominous that after the death of Bishop Demetrius, whose denunciations had caused the master's removal from Alexandria and his retirement to Cæsarea, we hear of no effort on the part of Dionysius or of any other pupil to obtain his recall. This certainly suggests that, great as their regard and respect for him as a man and a scholar may have been, they either felt themselves powerless to reinstate him, or else considered his views and methods of advocating them detrimental to the welfare of the Church at large. On the other hand, it is pleasing to remember that Dionysius wrote an epistle to his old teacher on the subject of martyrdom, which we may presume was designed to comfort him during his imprisonment at Tyre. We learn, too, on somewhat late authority that after Origen's death Dionysius wrote a letter to Theotecnus, Bishop of Cæsarea, extolling his master's virtues. The chief methodical comments on the Bible, of the authenticity of which we may be certain, are those contained in the fragments of the treatise *On the Promises* (περὶ Ἐπαγγελιῶν), reproduced on pp. 82 ff. This was a direct reply to the *Refutation of Allegorists* (Ἐλεγχος Ἀλληγοριστῶν), in which Nepos of Arsenoe had thought to support his grossly materialistic views of the Millennium by the Revelation of S. John the Divine. As the title suggests, this work had, no doubt, attacked Origen's fondness for the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, and especially on the subject of the Millennium, and therefore we may with some amount of certainty infer that Dionysius in his refutation of Nepos would accept Origen's methods as a commentator. But the extracts preserved by Eusebius deal almost wholly with the authorship and textual criticism, and so give no proper clue as to his method of interpreting the subject-matter of the book.

In the letter to Basilides (pp. 76 ff.) the requirements of the case do not call for a style of interpretation which would bring out either a correspondence or a disagreement with Origen's methods, except so far as it is marked by the frank and free exercise of critical judgment. The commentary on the *Beginning of Ecclesiastes*, if it is, as seems likely, in part the work of Dionysius, is not inconsistent in style of treatment with a general acceptance of his master's position. Procopius of Gaza, however, ranks him among the opponents of the allegorical school of interpreters, stating that it was in this very work that Dionysius attacked his master, and a short extract which has been assigned to it by Pitra (*Spic. Solesm.*, i, 17) is distinctly less allegorical in treatment than the rest: it runs as follows —

“On Eccles. iv. 9, 10: ‘Two are better than one,’ etc. As we understand this literally, we do not admit those who accept the interpretation of the statements as referring to the soul and the body; for it is by no means justified, seeing that the soul has the entire control over the ruling and governing both of itself and of the body, whereas the body is the bondman of the soul, subservient and enthralled to it in all its decisions. If, then, the soul be inclined to what is mean and evil, and become careless of better thoughts and considerations, the body is unable to restore it and lead it back to higher things: for that is not natural to it.”

There is also another short extract (on Gen. ii. 8, 9<sup>9</sup>) attributed to our author, which is non-allegorical in its treatment. The evidence therefore is inconclusive on this point: for though Jerome also mentions Dionysius as a commentator on the Bible three times in his letters, he throws no further light on the question.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The particular passage, however, adduced by Procopius above is Gen. iii. 21.

<sup>10</sup> On this point C. H. Turner's article in Hastings's *Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. V, pp. 496 f. (on Patristic Commentaries), may be consulted.



On the subject of Inspiration we have no ground for thinking that Dionysius took up an independent position.<sup>11</sup> He introduces his Biblical quotation with the phrases current amongst early Christian writers.

The general impression therefore left upon the reader is that Dionysius reverted to the more sober methods of interpreting Scripture that prevailed throughout the Church of his day as a whole, though he approached his master's theories in his usual sympathetic spirit and availed himself of much that was valuable in them.

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<sup>11</sup> The passage on Luke xxii, quoted by Dr. Sanday (*Inspiration*, p. 36), is of very doubtful authenticity.

## **His Place in the Church Kalendar**

24. We hear of a Church dedicated to S. Denys in Alexandria at the beginning of the fourth century, which was destroyed by fire in a tumult in the time of Athanasius. October 3 and November 17 are the two most usual dates for his Commemoration in the Kalendar, the former date more especially in the East, where he is honoured as “a holy martyr.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Martyr” in this case need not necessarily be taken strictly as meaning “one put to death for the Faith,” though no doubt the mediæval tradition was in favour of his martyrdom in that sense.

## **Concluding Remarks**

25. The foregoing sketch is sufficient to show that, as a man of action and a ruler of the Church, Dionysius's personality is no less striking than as a student, a writer and a thinker. He was clearly a strong yet conciliatory administrator of his province as Bishop of Alexandria, just as he had been a competent and successful teacher and director of sacred studies as head of the Catechetical Schools – one who in each capacity carried on and maintained the great traditions which he inherited from S. Mark and his successors, from Pantænus, Clement and Origen. And not only at home and within his own jurisdiction, as we have seen, did he worthily “magnify his office” and “make full proof of his ministry”; for he made his influence for good felt throughout Christendom. Bishops and clergy from all parts naturally turned to him in their difficulties for advice and guidance; and it is impossible not to feel that his wonderful breadth of judgment and his love of conciliation were of the greatest value to the Church of the third century, and will remain a model for imitation to each succeeding age. Men will always be tempted, as they were in that century, to speak strongly and to act vehemently where their spiritual beliefs are involved, and we may pray that God will never fail to raise up amongst the rulers of His Church men of the type of S. Denys the Great of Alexandria.

## Bibliography

26. The first attempt at making a full collection of our author's remains was undertaken by Simon de Magistris, whose edition was published at Rome in 1796. Routh (*Reliquiæ Sacræ*, tom. iii. and iv.; Oxford, 1846) and Migne (*Patr. Græc.* tom. x.) published considerable portions with Latin notes, while Gallandius (*Bibliotheca vett. patrum*, app. to vol. xiv.), Pitra, Mai and (more recently) Holl in vol. v. of *Texte und Untersuchungen (neue Folge)* have printed a number of fragments from various sources and of very varying degrees of probable authenticity.

The earliest list of Dionysius's literary productions, except the scattered references to be found in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, is that of Jerome (*de viris illustribus*, 69), which more or less tallies with what we gather from Eusebius. The student will, however, find a complete modern list of them, together with other valuable matter, in Harnack, *Altchrist. Lit.*, vol. i. pp. 409-27, and in Bardenhewer, *Altkirch. Lit.*, vol. ii. pp. 167-91: the account in Krüger, *Early Christian Literature* (Eng. Trans.) is much shorter. Several compositions mentioned by Eusebius and Jerome are only known to us by name, unless some of the short extracts attributed to Dionysius come from one or other of them, and the contents of them are almost wholly matter for conjecture. The most important of these is perhaps the ἐπιστολή διακονική διὰ Ἱππολύτου (Eus., *H. E.* vi. 45), because of the various theories which have been put forward about it. Dom Morin (*Revue Bénédictine*, xvii., 1900), for instance, suggested that Rufinus's translation of the doubtful epithet (διακονική) being *de ministeriis*, it was none other than the *Canons of Hippolytus*, and that the Canons were afterwards attributed to the church-writer, Hippolytus, through a mistaken identification of the unknown bearer of Dionysius's missive with the well-known author; but the theory has not met with much acceptance since, and the discussion has of late died down, quite different views being now held about the Canons of Hippolytus.

It may also be mentioned that several fragments in Syriac and in Armenian are attributed to Dionysius, but only three of these, in the former language, appear to be genuine: one is a translation of the letter to Novatian ([p. 50](#)), and the two others are, whether rightly or wrongly, thought to be part of the Letter to Stephanus on Baptism, and will be found as §§ 2 and 3 of it on [pp. 53 ff.](#)

The article on Dionysius in Smith's *Dictionary of Christian Biography* is by Dr. Westcott, and, though not very full, is, it is needless to say, worthy of being consulted.

Three German books on our author will also be found useful, though not very recent: viz. Förster, *de doctrin. et sententiis Dionysii*, Berolini, 1865; Dittrich, *Dionysius der Grosse*, Freiburg, i.B., 1867; and Roch, *Dionysius der Grosse über die Natur*, Leipzig, 1882. Of these the second is the most important for the general student.

Dr. Salmond produced a serviceable translation of the fragments in 1871 (T. & T. Clark's series, Edinburgh), and since then we have had Dr. Gifford's (in his scholarly edition of Eus., *Præpar. Evang.*, Oxford, 1903), of such as there appear.

For the general history of the period much valuable help will be found in Archbishop Benson's *Cyprian*

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