

Christianity and Paganism in Procopius of Caesarea

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I

THERE IS an apparent ambiguity about Procopius of Caesarea's attitude towards the Christian faith which, ever since Edward Gibbon, has led modern historians into conjectures about his personal beliefs.¹ Brought up on history books which relate the theological disputes of the late Empire among Arians, Nestorians, Monophysites and their variants, we are hardly prepared to find a contemporary of Justinian state that he thinks it absurd to want to know the nature of God. Yet Procopius does say this (*De Bellis* 5.3.5–9), even with a touch of disdain. "The words imply," remarked J. B. Bury, "an oblique hit at the Emperor who in the *Secret History* is described as gratuitously busy about the nature of God."² Of course, it is virtually necessary to believe that Procopius maintained a successful façade of orthodoxy. He was appointed *assessor* to Belisarius in 527, the year of Justinian's first law against pagans, heretics, Jews and Samaritans, which forbade them to hold public office.³ Procopius' record must have been clear. Yet a long series of distinguished historians have suspected, first, that his orthodoxy was only skin-deep and at heart he was a skeptic on matters of Christian faith, and second, that his history was cast within an intellectual framework which belonged to the classical, pagan past, and owed nothing to the Christian thought-world.

For Edward Gibbon,⁴ Procopius betrayed "occasional conformity,

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Mid-west meeting of ancient historians held at the University of Buffalo in the Spring of 1970. It has profited from the discussion which followed its presentation there, particularly from the remarks of the commentator, Mrs Averil Cameron.

² J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*² II (London 1923) 427f.

³ *Cod.Iust.* 1.5.12.

⁴ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, IV (London 1901) 210 n.12.

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with a secret attachment to Paganism and Philosophy,” and the best of Gibbon’s editors, J. B. Bury, called him “at core, in the essence of his spirit, a pagan.”⁵ Others have labelled him variously a theist, a deist, or an agnostic with a fatalist outlook, attached to the philosophy of Pyrrho, or, to give modern examples, Spencer and Huxley.⁶ Even Glanville Downey, in an important article published twenty years ago,⁷ where he disagreed with the conventional opinion up to his time and pointed out parallels between Procopius’ concept of *τύχη* and St Augustine’s, concludes (p.102), “Procopius may well have been a Christian of the independent and skeptical sort, which seems to have existed, apparently tolerated, or at least not seriously molested, by the orthodox believers.”

The question was reopened in 1966 by Averil Cameron,⁸ who showed not only that the case for Procopius’ skepticism was weak, but that there was a considerable amount of internal evidence from the *De Bellis* which indicates that he subscribed to the popular Christian beliefs of his day. Yet she, too, saw elements of pagan thought and Christianity side by side in his works, apparently unreconciled. “There is too much of the specifically pagan idea of Fortune in the *Wars*,” she noted (p.479), “to allow us to suppose that he had really thought out the implications of trying to combine such disparate conceptions as the Fortune explanation and the Providence explanation, and, to judge from Procopius’ classicism as expressed in the *Wars*, we ought to regard the ‘pagan’ passages rather than the ‘Christian’ passages cited by Downey as more typical of the impression he wanted to give.”

Thus, in place of Downey’s picture of Procopius as an independent, skeptical Christian influenced by Christian thought, Mrs Cameron argued for conventional Christian influenced by pagan thought. The following year, an article by the late M. A. Elferink⁹ undertook to refute Downey entirely and restate the case for the agnostic, fatalist Procopius. “. . . Agnostique et fataliste,” he concluded (p.133), “il se

⁵ J. B. Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*¹ II (London 1889) 178f.

⁶ e.g. F. Dahn, *Prokopius von Caesarea* (Berlin 1865) 181f, 217 (a mixture of Christian and theist, a fatalist); B. Rubin, *RE* 23 (1957) 331f (skeptical); W. G. Holmes, *The Age of Justinian and Theodora*² II (London 1912) 745 (a freethinker).

⁷ G. Downey, “Paganism and Christianity in Procopius,” *Church History* 18 (1949) 89–102.

⁸ A. Cameron, “The ‘Skepticism’ of Procopius,” *Historia* 15 (1966) 466–82.

⁹ Elferink, “*Τύχη* et Dieu chez Procope de Césarée,” *Acta Classica* 10 (1967) 111–34.

contente en général de relever l'insignifiance de la volonté humaine dans l'histoire, et de rattacher les faits historiques à une puissance supérieure, qui peut être indifféremment Dieu ou la *τύχη*."

Yet we cannot read the *Historia Arcana* without feeling that, if Procopius was a skeptic, he was not an altogether gentle one. Could the visceral hatred on display in the *Historia Arcana* be *odium theologicum*? Harold Nicolson¹⁰ called him a "Jew from Caesarea." Berthold Rubin¹¹ thought he might be a Jew, but preferred to make him a Syrian. He could, apparently, read Syriac. Another scholar made him a Samaritan who pretended to profess Christianity.¹² There were a good number of Samaritans in Caesarea who went through the formality of adopting Christianity to escape the legal penalties which Justinian prescribed for Samaritanism. Procopius seems to have thought they were sensible fellows, but this is fragile evidence for making him into a Samaritan himself. Could he have been a heretic?¹³ The possibility may deserve some attention. He claims to know all about contemporary theological disputes, and in the last book of the *Gothic War* (*Bell.* 8.25.13), he announces his intention of writing a treatise on the "matters over which the Christians fight among themselves." As far as we know, he never did. But we must allow Procopius a more than passing interest in Christian theology.

There are two questions which I shall examine in this essay. The first is, what was Procopius' theological position? In other words, can we conjecture what might have been his stance in his unwritten work on Christian heresies? The second is a related question. What rôle did *τύχη* play in Procopius' conception of historical causation, and was it a specifically pagan one in the context of his own thought-world?

First, a matter of procedure. Part of the ambiguity we find in Procopius stems from the literary mask he assumes. He was the greatest of the school of 'Profanhistoriker' which started with Ammianus Marcellinus, a product of the Greek East although he wrote in Latin, and ended with Theophylact Simocatta.¹⁴ It was a school which carried on many of the traditions and literary idiosyncrasies of the

¹⁰ Sir H. G. Nicolson, *Monarchy* (London 1962) 109.

¹¹ Rubin, "Das Römische Reich im Osten, Byzanz," *Propyläen Weltgeschichte IV: Rom, Die römische Welt* (Berlin/Frankfurt/Vienna 1963) 641.

¹² R. Atwater, *The Secret History of Procopius* (New York 1927) 1.

¹³ Cf. P. Bonfante, "Il movente della Storia Arcana di Procopio," *RendLinc* 1932, 381-85.

¹⁴ On their characteristics, see Averil and Alan Cameron, "Christianity and Tradition in the Historiography of the Late Empire," *CQ* 14 (1964) 316-28.

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‘Greek Renaissance’, the period which runs from Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Diodorus to Aelian and Philostratus. The great exemplars were Herodotus and Thucydides, modified somewhat by the conventions of the Second Sophistic, and Procopius wrote consciously in language which might be understood by citizens of Periclean Athens. Now, one of the problems of wearing a literary mask which was a thousand years old, was that there were in Justinian’s Constantinople institutions of which fifth-century Greece was quite ignorant—most of the imperial bureaucracy, for one thing. Hence Herodotus and Thucydides had no words for such outlandish officials as the *a secretis* (*Hist.Arc.* 14.4) or the *referendarii* (*Hist.Arc.* 14.11). They had never heard of a Roman legion, which was a very elderly institution in the sixth century. Hence Procopius must introduce words unfamiliar to a fifth-century Athenian; but when he does, it is with an apologetic “so-called” to qualify them, or some explanation to make their meaning clear. In so doing, he was following a tradition which can be traced as far back as Herodian.¹⁵ But we must not think Procopius was detached from the imperial bureaucracy because of the somewhat distant manner with which he introduces officials. On the contrary, he was a bureaucrat himself. His apologies for contemporary terms were simply an attempt to reconcile his style with the exigencies of writing a history of his own times.

Yet what are we to make of a writer of the sixth century who is reluctant to sully his literary purity by calling a church a church (*ἐκκλησία*) or a bishop a bishop (*ἐπίσκοπος*), but instead uses circumlocutions such as “a shrine . . . which they call an *ἐκκλησία*” (*Bell.* 2.9.14) or “one of the priests whom they call ‘bishops’” (*Bell.* 3.10.18)? What this manner of speaking means is only that churches and bishops were non-classical. Procopius’ classical mask is purely literary. Its traditions were derived from a pagan world; but like many other pagan traditions, they were quite capable of being denatured and re-used by Christians. We can infer nothing about Procopius’ personal beliefs from his mask. Nor, I think, can we make anything of the fact that in the *De Aedificiis*, Procopius appears somewhat more willing to employ contemporary terminology for churches and monasteries. In the first place, that work is unfinished, and sections of it sound like the

¹⁵ Cf. Herodian 5.4.8 (the Greek and Latin terms for ‘praetorian guard’); 1.9.2. (an explanation of the *ludi Capitolini*).

raw material for a panegyric rather than the finished product. In the second, Justinian's building programme included great numbers of churches and monasteries, and it would have been intolerably clumsy to describe them all without naming them except by circumlocutions. Yet, in spite of the difficulties, even in the *De Aedificiis*, Procopius does not lay aside his classical mask. He uses it as well as his subject allows him.

We are dealing here with the problem of sincerity in literature, and for our study it is an important one. For not only does Procopius express conventional embarrassment when he must use non-classical words, but he borrows phrases and *topoi* from his classical models. When he writes that it was necessary for Antioch to fall to the Persians in 540 (καὶ γὰρ ἔδει Ἀντιοχέας τούτῳ τῷ Μήδων στρατῷ ἀπολέσθαι, *Bell.* 2.8.14) or that it was not fated that Sergiopolis be captured (καὶ ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἔδει Σεργίουπολιν Πέρσαις ἀλῶναι, *Bell.* 2.20.10), to take only two examples, he uses language which Herodotus might have used. But is this evidence that Procopius viewed the workings of history in the same way that Herodotus did? It would be dangerous to leap to any such conclusion. A Christian with a teleological view of history, such as Evagrius, could have agreed that Antioch was fated to fall and that Sergiopolis was not.¹⁶ Nor need the language which the Christian used to express this view have differed from that of Procopius if he chose to write secular rather than ecclesiastical history, and his choice would depend on his subject matter rather than his personal convictions. The domain of secular history was the world of politics and affairs; ecclesiastical history dealt with the church in the world.

On the other hand, it is sometimes profitable to compare a *topos* borrowed from Herodotus or Thucydides with its prototype. The passage in the *Vandalic War* (*Bell.* 3.10.1–21) where Justinian announces his expedition against North Africa is modelled, though without elaboration, after the scene in Herodotus (7.8–13) where Xerxes announces his expedition to Greece. The man who plays the rôle of Artabanus is John the Cappadocian, and John's arguments against Justinian's offensive parallel those of Artabanus, with one significant difference. Artabanus expatiated to Xerxes on the jealousy of God, who loved to bring the lofty low. John says merely that the vicissitudes of war lie on the knees of God. Procopius was capable of refer-

¹⁶ Cf. Euagr. *Hist.Eccl.* 5.11.

ring elsewhere to the “jealousy of Fortune”¹⁷ but he does not allow John to attribute jealousy to God. In the sixth century jealousy of this sort was regularly ascribed to the Devil. What Procopius suggests, instead, is that warfare is subject to chance, and that chance in turn is, somehow, the lapdog of God. I think this avoidance is significant. We find it is often the case that a comparison of a *topos* in Procopius with its Herodotean or Thucydidean prototype brings out the difference in Procopius’ outlook.

II

I propose now to examine Procopius’ theological position. Was he a skeptic, a heretic or a Christian of some sort or other? The problem with labelling Procopius a skeptic is that, if we examine the evidence of the *De Bellis* and the *Historia Arcana*, it is hard to discover what he is skeptical about that a good Christian should believe. Admittedly he did express doubts about the Sibylline oracles (*Bell.* 5.24.34–37), which he claimed to have examined in Rome, but these were pagan. It is hard to discover any trace of disbelief in matters touching Christian faith. He evidently accepted miracles which involved Christianity. One entertaining anecdote in the *Persian War* (*Bell.* 1.7.5–11) tells how a band of White Huns came upon a hermit in Syria, Jacob by name, who devoted his life to prayer and contemplation. The Huns raised their bows to shoot the holy man, but as they did so, their hands became paralysed, and they could do nothing. Cabades, king of Persia, came to see what had happened, and on learning the truth, begged Jacob to forgive the Huns. He did so, and the paralysis left them. I can find no trace of skepticism here.

Let us take another example, from the account of the great siege of Rome by Wittigis in the *Gothic War* (*Bell.* 5.23.4–7). Part of the city wall had split open, and Belisarius was about to repair it. But the Romans told him that the apostle Peter had promised to guard this section of the wall, and so Belisarius let it be, quite safely, as it turned out. “We wondered,” remarked Procopius, “that this part of the wall did not come to our mind, or to that of the enemy, during the whole time (of the siege).” No skepticism about St Peter’s powers here.

He apparently believed in omens. A comet appeared in A.D. 539 and was duly described by Procopius (*Bell.* 2.4.1–3). Wise men disagreed

¹⁷ *Bell.* 6.8.1; cf. Cameron, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 471.

about what this phenomenon meant, if anything, and Procopius declined to take sides. He states merely that he would put down what happened next and let everyone judge as he wished from the outcome of events. Herodotus might have done likewise.

But what happened next was, first, that a horde of Huns crossed the Danube and pillaged as far south as Thermopylae, and shortly thereafter, the Persians launched an offensive which culminated in the sack of Antioch. Procopius' presentation of the evidence would not encourage us to think that he was skeptical about omens.

The *De Aedificiis* is not a good witness for Procopius' private beliefs since it was evidently a work commissioned by Justinian. But we may take it as evidence of those attitudes he saw fit to assume publicly. We would not expect to find skepticism in this panegyric, and as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁸ Procopius here appears to accept fully the conventional Byzantine view of the empire as an imitation of Heaven, with the emperor the vicegerent of God and the friend of the Logos—a concept which he reversed in the *Historia Arcana*. Yet in the *De Aedificiis* (1.1.68–71) we do find one example of “skepticism” used for a purely artistic motive. When the architects of Hagia Sophia were at a loss what to do at one crisis during the construction, they turned to Justinian, who solved their engineering problem for them. Procopius claimed not to know whence the emperor got his expert knowledge, though he supposed it came from God. I think that none of his contemporaries was unaware of what the source of a Byzantine emperor's wisdom was supposed to be, and Justinian himself would scarcely have tolerated sincere doubt in a commissioned panegyric. But he could accept literary convention.

In the *Historia Arcana*, if anywhere, we should expect to find evidence of disbelief, and yet it too fails to yield anything of importance. On the contrary, the secret historian adopted a moral tone. He berated his victims when they broke their promises, and professed to find their private lives offensive to a good Christian. He would not name Theodora's profession before she married because God would not be merciful to a man who uttered such a name (9.28). In the *Historia Arcana* Procopius is closest to the doctrine openly professed by his continuator, Agathias, that punishment from God inevitably fol-

¹⁸ Evans, “Procopius of Caesarea and the Emperor Justinian,” in Canadian Historical Assn. *Historical Papers* 1968, pp.126–39.

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lows sin.¹⁹ When Belisarius was sent against the Persians in 542, he was “guilty of cowardice” (3.30). The reason was that he had broken his word to his stepson Photius and thereafter found God hostile, “as one would expect.” Solomon, Belisarius’ successor as commander in Africa, suffered punishment from God for the murder of Pegasus (5.34–38). In addition, the *Historia Arcana* reveals a Procopius who believed in demonology. He condemned witchcraft and sorcery, but accepted their power; he even speculated that Antonina and Theodora practised witchcraft on their husbands (1.26, 22.26–27).

In imitation of Herodotus, Procopius was fond of relating a story and then adding that he could not vouch for its accuracy. This skepticism is part of his classical mask; but even so we should note that if it touches matters of Christian faith, it does so with circumspection. Procopius relates the story of how Abgar, toparch of Edessa, received a letter from Christ; this is his only reference to Christ on earth, and it has already been noted that he terms him the “Son of God” here without a trace of personal disbelief.²⁰ This letter kept Edessa safe from capture. Procopius concluded his story of how it came to Edessa as follows:

And the thought once occurred to me that, if the Christ did not write this thing just as I have told it, still, since men have come to believe in it, He wishes to guard the city uncaptured for this reason, that He may never give them any pretext for error. As for these things, then, let them be as God wills, and so let them be told.²¹

This is a conventional Herodotean conclusion. But the suspension of belief is very literary, and gentle. Procopius does not necessarily believe in the authenticity of all relics, but he does think that they fulfill a function prescribed for them by God. If this is skepticism, it is a variety hardly repugnant to Christianity.

Two further passages should be examined, for they have assumed some importance in the argument about Procopius’ beliefs. One is his outburst over the fall of Antioch in 540 (*Bell.* 2.10.4–5).

But I become dizzy as I write of such a great calamity and transmit it to future times, and I am unable to understand why indeed it

¹⁹ Cf. A. Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford 1970) 94.

²⁰ Cf. A. Cameron, transl. *Procopius. History of the Wars, Secret History, and Buildings* (New York 1967) xxii.

²¹ *Bell.* 2.12.30, LCL transl. of H. B. Dewing.

should be the will of God to exalt on high the fortunes of a man or of a place, and then to cast them down and destroy them for no cause which appears to us. For it is wrong to say that with Him all things are not always done with reason, though He then endured to see Antioch brought down to the ground at the hands of a most unholy man . . .

This passage has been taken by Rubin²² as evidence of Procopius' pessimistic resignation, and by Mrs Cameron as a sign of piety.²³ I should agree in general with Mrs Cameron's arguments, but I would add that this passage is also a bitter, bewildered outburst over the senseless destruction of a city which Procopius knew and no doubt loved. Moreover, when he writes *αὐτῷ γὰρ οὐ θέμις εἰπεῖν μὴ οὐχὶ ἅπαντα κατὰ λόγον αἰεὶ γίνεσθαι*, he is stating his *credo*: there must be a *λόγος* or divine reason attached to the actions of God, although here he cannot discover what it is. I do not think it too much to say that this is the *λόγος* with which a true Byzantine emperor was supposed to have a special relationship. The emperor was supposed to be the friend of the *λόγος*. Procopius was not expressing resignation to fate, and he was being more than conventionally pious. He meant that the sack of Antioch by an enemy of the Christian faith, which the Persian king was, did not seem to fit with the doctrine that God's actions accord with the *λόγος*, a view he accepted fully, and hence he was at a loss for an explanation.

The second passage is taken by Elferink²⁴ as evidence of Procopius' agnosticism and fatalism. It is his comment on Belisarius' failure in his second campaign in Italy (*Bell.* 7.13.15, LCL transl.):

And to me it seemed either that Belisarius had chosen the worse course because it was fated at that time that the Romans should fare ill, or that he had indeed determined upon the better course, but God, having in mind to assist Totila and the Goths, had stood as an obstacle in his way, so that the best of the plans of Belisarius had turned out utterly contrary to his expectations.

What this passage and its immediate sequel mean, I believe, is that either Belisarius used bad strategy because it accorded with the divine plan of things that the Goths should be victorious at this point in time,

²² Rubin, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 335.

²³ Cameron, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.8) 468.

²⁴ Elferink, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.9) 116–22.

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or that he used good strategy, which ordinarily should have brought victory, but God intervened to see to it that the plan was carried out. The question was simply whether or not Belisarius' strategy was sound. If it was not, then Belisarius was unwittingly falling in line with the divine plan. If it was, then God was preventing its success. The question was not without importance for Belisarius' reputation. As John the Cappadocian had reminded Justinian, borrowing the sentiment from Herodotus, sound planning is a mark of wisdom, for even if a man's plans fail, he will have the consolation of knowing he planned well (*Bell.* 3.10.1–21).

I find support for this view from the fact that Procopius returned to the same question in his *Historia Arcana* (4.42–45). Here he indicates that Belisarius' tactics in his second, unsuccessful campaign against the Goths were better than in his first, but he had bad luck, and public opinion credited him wrongly with strategic errors. Procopius goes on to generalize in this passage that the affairs of men are governed not by human counsels but by the authority of God, "which men are accustomed to call *τύχη*." "For the label of *τύχη*," wrote Procopius, "is wont to be attached to what appears to be senseless."

Elferink's interpretation of these two passages is different. In the first, he argues that there is a clear alternative: either Belisarius' ill success was caused by the arbitrary, incomprehensible action of *τύχη*, or it was caused by the intervention of God, which was comprehensible, and he claims to find this concept of alternative causation throughout Procopius' works. Yet, a strict translation of this passage cannot bear such an interpretation. The alternative concerns Belisarius' tactics, which were either good or bad. Procopius appears to assume that God was the author of the necessity that the Romans should fare ill, no matter how skilfully Belisarius led them. As for the passage from the *Historia Arcana*, Elferink takes it as an isolated comment.

So much for the agnostic, skeptical Procopius. The evidence suggests that he was a Christian, who accepted the conventional beliefs and superstitions of sixth-century Christianity. But was he an orthodox Christian? He never fulfilled his intention of writing a treatise on Christian heresies, although in the *Historia Arcana* (11.33) he appeared to repeat the promise. The *Historia Arcana*, however, does devote a section (11.14–33) to what Procopius seemed to regard as a separate subject, the "many rejected beliefs of the Christians which they are

accustomed to call 'heresies'." Under this heading of "rejected beliefs" he listed Montanism, Sabbatianism, Arianism, and "all others by which the opinions of men are wont to wander from the truth." Samaritanism and paganism also fell into this category. But there was one omission which, unlike the others that Procopius did mention, was still a burning question and dangerous to the empire's fabric—Monophysitism. Apparently Monophysitism was a disputed but not a rejected doctrine.

There is, in this connection, one passage in the *De Aedificiis* (4.3.12) which I find puzzling. Beneath the cool, correct praises in this panegyric, the reader occasionally hears, or thinks he hears, a note of irony. At one point Procopius explains that the centaurs of classical mythology were the product of a childish belief which the ancients held, that there could be one animal with two natures. Is there here a distant echo of the creed of Chalcedon? Of course, Procopius was no Monophysite; otherwise he would have been kinder towards the memory of Theodora, who enjoyed a certain odour of sanctity in Monophysite tradition. Instead, Procopius accused Theodora and Justinian of actually causing strife by pretending to take opposing theological positions. But if Procopius was no Monophysite, there is nothing to show that he was a strict Chalcedonian either. His own position, which he expresses briefly in the *Gothic War* (*Bell.* 5.3.5–9), is that God is completely good and omnipotent and that it is madness and folly to try to define his nature.

This disapproval of Justinian's religious policies which Procopius voiced seems to have been based simply on *raisons d'état*. The emperor, in his determination to impose one single belief on everyone, created senseless destruction (*Hist.Arc.* 13.7). Procopius does not appear to have disliked Justinian's theology (at one point in the *Historia Arcana* [13.4] he calls it, with apparent approbation, a "firm belief") so much as the consequences of his determination to impose it on others. In Palestine Justinian's efforts to enforce orthodoxy drove the Samaritans to revolt, and Procopius estimates that 100,000 died in the struggle. As a result, the land, "the most fruitful in the whole world" (here we have a native speaking), was denuded of its Samaritan farmers, and this had serious consequences for the Christian landholders. For they became responsible for the taxes on the abandoned farms, even though they derived no income from them (*Hist.Arc.* 11.29–30). Intolerance was clearly bad for business.

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Yet we should note that, though Procopius disapproved of Justinian's muscular orthodoxy, the fanatic resistance of the heretics was equally senseless in his eyes. He thought the Montanists were unreasonable creatures, who shut themselves up in their churches and set fire to them rather than accept orthodoxy (*Hist.Arc.* 11.21–23), and he seems to have approved of those urbanized Samaritans in Caesarea who went through the pretence of becoming Christians rather than suffer persecution (*Hist.Arc.* 11.25).

Procopius faulted fanaticism on both sides. This is not to make him into a nineteenth-century liberal, and J. B. Bury went too far when he suggested that Procopius' projected work on Christian heresies would have been "a document of some significance in the literature of toleration."²⁵ It was rather that Procopius' ideal statesman was a man who upheld established usages and subordinated ideology to the practical art of maintaining peace and justice within his realm.²⁶ On these grounds he faulted Justinian's treatment of the Jews in his *Historia Arcana*. The emperor would not allow them to celebrate the Passover when it fell before Easter (28.16–19), and Procopius viewed this as an unwarranted breach of custom and hence an innovation, a positive evil in the Byzantine world. The *De Bellis* gives little to indicate what Procopius' attitude towards the Jews may have been. The Jews in Naples supported the Ostrogoths when Belisarius laid siege to the city in 536 (5.8.41), and when the Byzantines took it by storm, they met stubborn resistance from a group of Jewish soldiers who guarded one section of the wall (5.10.25). To the modern historian, the obvious inference is that the Jews preferred Ostrogothic rule because it was more tolerant. If Procopius intended his readers to come to this conclusion, as he may have done, he was only pointing out subtly the military consequences of Justinian's policies towards religious dissidents. There is no good evidence for making Procopius himself a Jew, not even one who had come to terms with Christianity.

Most of this is negative evidence. On the positive side, there are two passages worth consideration. The one, to which I have already referred, is from the *Historia Arcana* (13.4). Procopius gave somewhat

²⁵ Bury, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) II.428.

²⁶ Cf. *Bell.* 5.1.26–29, where Procopius characterized Theodoric as in name a tyrant but in fact a true βασιλεύς. His qualifications for this title were that he observed justice, upheld the laws (i.e. was no innovator), protected the realm from its enemies, and acted with wisdom and courage.

grudging approval of Justinian's theological position, which is evidence that he was generally orthodox himself. The other is from the first book of the *Gothic War* (*Bell.* 5.3.7–8, LCL transl.):

For man cannot, I think, apprehend even human affairs with accuracy, much less those things which pertain to the nature of God. As for me, therefore, I shall maintain a discreet silence concerning these matters, with the sole object that old and venerable beliefs may not be discredited. For I, for my part, will say nothing whatsoever about God save that He is altogether good and has all things in His power.

That is, Procopius accepted an omnipotent God. We might go further and suggest that the spirit of the passage has something in common with that of the *ένωτικόν* promulgated by Zeno, a willingness to compromise, which was official policy (in practice, at least) until the accession of Justin I.²⁷ But even to go so far involves us in conjecture. The best we can say is that the internal evidence from Procopius' works would indicate that he was a Christian who shared some of the contemporary love of theology, but he cannot be attached securely to any faction.

III

It is important to keep in mind the evidence for Procopius' Christianity when we come to the second question I want to examine, the problem of his historical causation. More than anything else, it has been this which has given him the reputation of being a semi-pagan. Necessity, God and *τύχη* play rôles which impinge upon one another. At times, *τύχη* seems to operate as the servant of necessity, bringing about a predestined end. When the Persians were in Petra in Lazica (*Bell.* 2.17.16), the Byzantine commander, John, "by some chance" (*τύχη τινί*) received a mortal wound in the neck, because "it was necessary that Chosroes capture Petra." In another example, *τύχη* brought about an end which God in His mercy had decided upon.

²⁷ Until the reign of Justin I, pagans and heretics had enjoyed a degree of practical toleration, and the laws against them which appear in the codes were not strictly enforced; cf. D. J. Constantelos, "Paganism and the State in the Age of Justinian," *Catholic Historical Review* 50 (1964–65) 372–80. Hence Justinian's persecutions represented an innovation. Even Justinian's persecutions were not all-embracing, however, although they struck a new note of harshness. It has been argued recently that the Academy in Athens survived Justinian's law of 529 forbidding pagans to teach (cf. Alan Cameron, "The Last Days of the Academy in Athens," *ProcCambPhilSoc* 195, n.s. 15 [1969] 7–29), and other exceptions can be cited also, such as the careers of Tribonian and Olympiodorus in Alexandria.

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The emperor Honorius was terrified when he heard of the usurpation of Attalus, Alaric's nominee for the purple. God, however, is wont to assist men who are helpless and rather stupid, provided they are not wicked, and something of this sort happened for Honorius (*Bell.* 3.2.35). Apparently God, being a Christian Himself, was capable of being moved by Christian virtues, and *τύχη* fell into line with His decisions.

Elsewhere, *τύχη* seems to be a capricious force which exalts men at one time and brings them low at another for no discernible reason. When the Vandal king Gelimer was being besieged by the imperial forces on Mt Papua, he asked the Byzantine commander Pharas to send him a lyre, a sponge and a loaf of bread. With the lyre he wanted to sing an ode which he had composed on his misfortunes. He wanted the sponge to bathe his eyes, which had become inflamed, and the loaf of bread because he had not seen one since the siege began. When Pharas heard this, he was deeply moved and lamented the *τύχη* of mankind—here an apparently irrational force which had exalted Gelimer to the throne and then, within a few months, had brought him so low as to make such a pitiful request (*Bell.* 4.6.34).

A similar thought had occurred to Procopius in the midst of Belisarius' triumphal entry into Carthage, where the Byzantine officers had feasted in Gelimer's palace on food prepared the day before for Gelimer himself. One could see *τύχη* in all its glory showing that everything belonged to it, and nothing was in the possession of man (*Bell.* 3.21.7).

The career of the Gothic king Totila provided another example of the caprice of *τύχη*. For no reason, it gave him good fortune and then, without any proper cause, brought him to an ignominious death after his defeat at Busta Gallorum. "But," wrote Procopius (*Bell.* 8.32.30), "these things have never been comprehensible to man, I think, nor will they ever be in the future." *Τύχη* here is a force beyond human understanding, and we may compare this passage with the quotation from the *Historia Arcana* which I have already given (4.43), "For the label of *τύχη* is wont to be attached to what appears senseless."

Τύχη could delight in coincidence for no particular reason. It arranged that Belisarius should march into Syracuse on the last day of his consulship, 31 December 555, and so he laid down his office there instead of at the senate house in Constantinople (*Bell.* 5.5.18–19). *Τύχη*

might also show a predilection for symmetrical patterns in history. The careers of the two imperial officers, Bessas and Dagisthaeus, provide examples of this. Bessas lost Rome to Totila and the Goths, but later, reassigned to Lazica, he recovered Petra from the Persians. Dagisthaeus, who had disgraced himself at Petra and been imprisoned for it, was later sent to Italy, and recaptured Rome. Procopius remarks (*Bell.* 8.33.24–25, my transl.):

At this point in my narrative, I feel like commenting on how *τύχη* makes a game of human affairs, not always visiting men in the same way, or looking on them with just eyes, but shifting about to fit the time and place. She plays a kind of childish sport with them, raising and lowering the merits of the poor wretches *to fit the time, place or circumstance*. So Bessas, who had previously lost Rome, not much later recovered Petra in Lazica for the Romans, while on the other hand Dagisthaeus, who had let Petra slip to the enemy, won back Rome in short order for the emperor. But these things have been since the beginning, and always will be, as long as the same *τύχη* has power over men.

Τύχη plays with men, but for all its freedom, its play still fits “the time, place or circumstance.”

The underlying assumption in this passage is that *τύχη* operates within a scheme of things, and this passage is not alone. When Procopius described the surrender of the Goths in 540, he wrote (*Bell.* 6.29.32), “When I saw the entrance of this army into Ravenna, I considered how actions are not concluded by valour, multitudes or human virtue; but that some spirit steers the wits and judgements of men thither, where nothing can hinder the preordained conclusions.” The term used for ‘spirit’ here is not *τύχη*, but *δαιμόνιον*. I have already cited Procopius’ comment on the sack of Antioch (*Bell.* 2.8.14, 2.10.4–5), where he declared that God did all things according to reason (*κατὰ λόγον*). In the final book of the *De Bellis* (8.12.34–35), he even defines *τύχη* as a word which men apply to what seems contrary to reason. “So human affairs,” he wrote, “are governed not by the power men think, but by the authority of God, and this men are accustomed to call *τύχη*, not knowing for what reason events proceed in the way they are disclosed to them. For the label *τύχη* loves to attach itself to what seems contrary to reason.” *Τύχη* exalted Totila, king of the Goths, and then brought him low, but after the battle of Busta Gallorum, the Goths too came to realize that they were fighting against God (*Bell.*

8.35.33). God had, it seems, ordained their defeat from the beginning.

The passages I have cited, all from the *De Bellis*, have come from Procopius' comments on the operation of *τύχη*, and they seem to indicate that, while men may think it is capricious, it does not transgress a reasonable pattern over which God has ultimate control. In the speeches, where Procopius is putting words into the mouths of others, *τύχη* seems to play a similar rôle. During the Nika revolt, the senator Origines advised the mob not to make war on Justinian, for wars and swift decisions fell under the governance of *τύχη* (*Bell.* 2.14.26–31). The advice which John the Cappadocian gave to Justinian about the Vandal expedition was not dissimilar (*Bell.* 3.10.8–17). He counseled against it, for the outcome of war lay on the knees of God. The assumption seems to be the same: that the wise man did not give *τύχη* an opening if he could avoid it.

On the other hand, Totila and Belisarius, both heroic military leaders in the *De Bellis*, could make speeches to their men in which they assumed that the world was ordered on principles of justice and retribution for wrongs committed. Totila explained to his fellow Goths, by way of defending his policy of moderation towards the Romans in Italy, that *τύχη* was governed according to the life of the individual. Thus men who are unjust and violent cannot win glory in battle (*Bell.* 7.8.24). When Belisarius spoke to his troops before the battle of Decimum in Africa (*Bell.* 3.19.6), he told them that the Byzantine cause was just, since the Empire was merely recovering territory which was its own, and “the alliance of God follows naturally those who put justice forward.” Yet, even if the assumptions of Totila and Belisarius were true, it need not follow that events are in any way predictable. Just before Artasires assassinated the tyrant Gontharis in North Africa, he told his accomplice that he was willing to do the deed, but he did not know if God would help him out of anger against the tyrant, or if He would choose this moment to avenge some sin which Artasires himself had committed, and oppose him (*Bell.* 4.28.12–13). Artasires appeared to accept the view that it was God's plan to punish sin; yet it was still an open question whose sin He might choose to punish at any given time, and since, I suppose, all men are sinners, God had very wide latitude.

Finally in the *Historia Arcana*, Procopius put forward the view that *τύχη* co-operated with Justinian and Theodora in bringing destruction on the empire, and this became the basis for his belief that Justinian

was more than human: he was the Prince of the Devils. What we have here is an inversion of the conventional Byzantine concept of the emperor as the vicegerent of God, the friend of the Logos. But the important point for our study is that Procopius does not conceive of *τύχη* acting as mere caprice when it brought plague, floods and earthquakes to second the evil caused directly by Justinian and his wife. Instead, he uses the coincidence to show that Justinian had supernatural power, and hence had the co-operation of *τύχη*.²⁸

The rôle of *τύχη* is clearly ambiguous. Downey emphasized the parallels between Procopius' use of *τύχη* and Augustinian thought on the subject, and there are passages in Procopius which might have met St Augustine's approval, as Downey pointed out.²⁹ Before the victory at Decimum in the *Vandal War*, Procopius paused to wonder at the ways of Heaven and men, noting how God, who sees from a more distant point what will come to pass, traces out the way that He thinks best for it to come. For God's purpose was that a path be made for *τύχη* which presses on to the preordained end (*Bell.* 3.18.2–4). Again in the *Historia Arcana* (4.44–45), Procopius states that human affairs are governed by God; what men ascribe to *τύχη* is simply that for which they can find no reasonable explanation. However, Mrs Cameron does not regard these "Augustinian" passages as typical, and Elferink, as I have pointed out, attempts to show that Procopius' concept of causation was dualist. The cause was God, who was reasonable, or *τύχη*, which was not.

This ambiguity comes in part from the literary tradition which Procopius inherited. *Τύχη* had played a rôle in history since Thucydides, and it is hardly less difficult to define it exactly in Polybius than it is in Procopius. By the time that the secular historians of Procopius' school came to use the concept, it had been reduced to literary convention by the Second Sophistic, and, in fact, it is instructive to compare Procopius' use of it with Herodian's. Like Procopius, Herodian is capable of using *δαίμων* or something similar as a synonym (1.17.4). Chance could defeat excellent military tactics in war, as Alexander Severus discovered in his campaign against Persia (6.5.4). The *τύχη* of war is the final judge of a commander's strategy, as Herodian remarks elsewhere (3.7.1). In dealing with the fall of Cleander, he even speaks

²⁸ Cf. B. Rubin, *Das Zeitalter Iustinians I* (Berlin 1960) 441–54; J. A. S. Evans, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.18) 126–39.

²⁹ Downey, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 89–102.

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of nature (ἡ φύσις) wanting to show how τύχη could exalt a man from the lowest depths, and then cast him down (1.13.6). There is here a hint that τύχη is nature's plaything, which we may compare with the similar hint in John the Cappadocian's words to Justinian, that τύχη was on the knees of God, like a lapdog or a toy (*Bell.* 3.10.13). But nowhere in Herodian do we get the same tension between τύχη acting freely, and at the same time as part of a pattern divinely preordained, that we get in Procopius. The literary inheritance has complicated the problem of free will and predestination. Procopius will not do away with τύχη altogether, as his continuator Agathias did, for that would be too sharp a break with literary tradition; nor will he equate God and τύχη completely, possibly because that would have involved him in the problem of how it was that God brought evil into the world. Yet, as I have shown earlier, he states his acceptance of an omnipotent God.

One solution to our problem would be to dismiss τύχη as an example of archaism in Procopius—a Christian writer suffering from indigestion as he tries to absorb a pagan concept. But before we do this, we should recall that the problem of predestination and free will seems to have concerned intellectual circles in Alexandria when Procopius was a youth. Procopius was probably educated at Gaza,³⁰ which was a kind of intellectual outpost of Alexandria. The best-known exposition of Alexandrine ideas on the question we are examining is the fifth book of Boethius' *Philosophiae Consolatio*, for although Boethius' career belonged to Rome, Courcelle has shown that his doctrine derived from Ammonius and has suggested, less convincingly, that Boethius actually studied in Alexandria.³¹ Boethius attempted to reconcile fortune and an omnipotent God by showing that God saw all things eternally and concurrently, although they took place in the world through a succession of time, for God, being eternal, is outside time. Hence for Him to foresee acts of free will does not destroy their free will or contingency.

No such doctrine is elaborated in Procopius, nor should we expect

³⁰ Cf. G. Downey, "The Christian Schools in Palestine: a Chapter in Literary History," *HarvLibBull* 12 (1958) 297–319, esp. 314. The case for making Procopius an alumnus of the Gaza school is by no means proved, and, as Mrs Cameron has pointed out to me, we could as well make him an alumnus of Alexandria, where his continuator Agathias studied.

³¹ P. Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and their Greek Sources* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1969) 295–318; cf. P. Merlan, "Ammonius Hermiae, Zacharias Scholasticus and Boethius," *GRBS* 9 (1968) 198ff.

one. He was not a systematic philosopher. Yet Procopius and Boethius are worth comparison, for I would suggest that there are similarities between their views which derive from the speculations in Alexandria. Procopius acknowledged the popular concept of *τύχη* as something capricious and contrary to reason. This was how men defined it, though whether these men were Procopius' contemporaries, or (more likely) the host of writers before him who made the traditions of writing history, he did not say. Yet there is abundant evidence that Procopius himself believed that historical events operated within a teleological framework, which is not quite the same as saying that he was a fatalist. He felt that the surrender of Ravenna in 540 was preordained, that the sack of Antioch in the same year, though incomprehensible, must have accorded with a reasonable divine plan, and that even Narses' victory at Busta Gallorum was ordained from the beginning. He attempted to explain the relationship between an omnipotent God and *τύχη* in one passage already cited from the *Vandal War* (*Bell.* 3.18.4), which deserves further consideration. God, he wrote, sees events from a "more distant point." He is like a man on a lofty hill who sees a broader scene because of his high vantage point, where he could mark out the distant path of the future. In its context this passage must mean that God's vision is increased in time by His vantage point, rather than in space, which would not make sense here. Yet Procopius went on to state that it was God's purpose to allow scope for contingency. God, from his position as an omnipotent God, knew the predestined ends, but this does not destroy their free will or their contingency, and God willed it so.

There is here none of the careful logic with which Boethius comes to the conclusion that there is no necessary incompatibility between predestination and free will and contingency. Yet we may compare Procopius with one passage of Boethius:³²

For which cause it (God's discernment) is not called praevidentia or foresight, but rather providentia, because, placed far from inferior things, it overlooketh all things, as it were, from the highest top of things. Why, therefore, wilt thou have those things necessary which are illustrated by divine light, since that not even men make those things necessary which they see? . . . But the present instant of men may well be compared to that of God in this: that as you see some

³² Boeth. *Cons.Phil.* 5.6.69–80, LCL transl.

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things in your temporal instant, so He beholdeth all things in his eternal present.

The parallel is not exact, for Boethius goes on to argue that God knows a thing will be, and yet that it need not be, which is too subtle for Procopius. Yet both tried to reconcile contingency and predestination by a comparison of space with time: as a man increases his vision in space by standing on a high hill, so God, freed from finite time and using the vantage point of eternity, increases His vision in time. But chance is none the less chance because God has picked out its path in the future. Thus the popular view of *τύχη* as mere caprice which was the legacy of literary tradition, did have validity for the historian after all.

I would suggest, then, that Procopius was not agnostic and fatalist, and that he did not assign a large portion of historical causation to a purely pagan *τύχη*. Rather, he kept a place for contingency in historical causation, because he refused to see any real incompatibility between an omnipotent God and Divine foreknowledge on the one hand, and free will and contingency on the other. In doing so, he was reflecting the thought-world of Alexandria and, we may conjecture, of Gaza, where he may well have argued these questions with the schoolmen as a student. They were ideas which were not specifically Christian, for in the sixth century, pagan and Christian ideas of predestination, free will and contingency were not always easy to separate. But at least we may say that Procopius' concept of *τύχη* was a product of his own time and education. It was not reused lumber from the pagan past, ill-digested and imperfectly comprehended by him.

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