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CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA ON PHILOSOPHY AS A DIVINE TESTAMENT FOR THE GREEKS

J. T. MUCKLE

IT IS uncertain where Titus Flavius Clemens (*ca.*150-*ca.*216) was born. It is generally considered by scholars today that he was a native¹ of Athens and that he received his early education in that city. After his conversion to Christianity, he travelled considerably, like St. Justin Martyr, seeking a teacher to give him higher instruction. His journeys took him from Greece to Southern Italy, to Palestine, and finally to Egypt, where at Alexandria he found the greatest teacher, likely Pantaenus.²

Clement remained at Alexandria as student and teacher for over twenty years (*ca.*180-*ca.*202). Although he himself makes no reference to it, Eusebius³ and St. Jerome⁴ say that he became head of the catechetical school upon the death of Pantaenus.⁵

Alexandria had long been a great commercial centre and a cosmopolitan city. In a sense it was the New York of the East. There was a large Greek population, probably an even greater Jewish element, besides a native group of considerable size. It was a centre of letters marked by a tendency to attempt to harmonize the various schools of thought.⁶ About two centuries before, Philo had tried to adapt Platonism to his interpretation of the Old Testament. Clement was likely following a tradition received from Pantaenus in using Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato and the Stoics, in building up a structure of Christian thought and practice which, to his mind, would lead a Christian to the acme of perfection. He does not write primarily as a philosopher or as a dogmatic theologian. His chief work, the *Stromata*, is a loosely connected series of chapters in seven⁷ Books in which he would point the way for the Christian who is properly disposed to reach the perfection of a Christian gnostic.⁸ He expounded dogma only in so far as his general purpose required. He was a man of wide learning and apparently of deep piety. Although there is more than one doctrinal error in his gnosticism, his devotion to the cause of Christ and to the salvation of men stands out in all his writings.⁹

To Clement the Incarnation is the central fact in the history of man.¹⁰ All previous human thought, in so far as it was true, all revelation before Christ had been a preparation for the acceptance of Christ and His Gospel. The two great forces in this process were the

Old Testament and Greek philosophy. To Clement they disposed and prepared the Jews and the Pagans respectively for belief in Christ and His Gospel.

Just as at the opportune time came the preaching (of the Gospel), so also at the opportune time were the Law and the prophets given to the barbarians and philosophy to the Greeks to fit their ears for the Gospel.¹¹

Clement even speaks of philosophy as leading the Greeks to justification before the advent of Christ.

Philosophy, then, before the coming of the Lord was necessary to the Greeks for justification.¹²

By this he does not mean that philosophy is the efficient cause of justification. It predisposed the Greek mind to recognize and penetrate truths and to formulate a rational ethic. Relative to the attainment of justification, philosophy was like the first step or two of a stairway or as the study of grammar for one who is to pursue philosophy.

Philosophy by itself formerly justified the Greeks—not justification in the full sense to the attainment of which it helps, but as the first and second steps of a stairway which leads to an upper story, or as the grammarian is of assistance to the philosopher.¹³ . . . The same God Who as the sponsor (*χορηγός*) for both the covenants (the Old and the New) was the giver of Greek philosophy to the Greeks through which the Almighty is glorified among them . . . accordingly, from the Greek discipline (*παιδεία*) as also from that of the Law, men are gathered into one race of the saved . . . trained in different covenants.¹⁴ . . . The philosophy of the Greeks was given to them as their own covenant, which was a stepping stone to the philosophy which is according to Christ.¹⁵

But for Clement philosophy alone was not enough to conduct the Greeks into heaven. Faith was necessary, which is the mark of free will on the part of one well disposed and aided by grace. The Gentiles who through a special attribute of their nature lived according to reason led a true life even as the Jews who lived according to the Law. But they reached their ultimate goal, heaven, only after they made an act of faith in Christ and His Gospel.

If to live well is to live lawfully, and to live rationally is to live according to law, if those who lived uprightly before the Law were considered men of faith and judged just, then it is manifest that those of old, who being outside the Law had lived uprightly because of their special character (*διὰ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἰδιότητα*), reaching the ward of Limbo (*Ἄλδης*), were straightway converted and believed on hearing the voice of the Lord . . . through His apostles.¹⁶ . . . For those who were justified by philosophy not only faith in the Lord but also turning away from idolatry was lacking.¹⁷

By the term Greek philosophy Clement does not mean that of any particular school. Although, in a general sense, he is a pronounced

Platonist, he chooses from the tenets of each school¹⁸ what he considers true, at least in part, and capable of adaptation to the teachings of Christ.

And by philosophy, I do not mean the Stoic or Platonic or the Epicurean or Aristotelian, but whatever has been well put by any of those sects, teaching righteousness along with knowledge pervaded by piety (μετὰ εὐσεβοῦς ἐπιστήμης): all this assortment (τὸ ἐκλεκτικόν) I call philosophy.¹⁹

Using the words of Socrates,²⁰ he calls those philosophers who have philosophized right; he also adopts the words of Plato.²¹

Philosophers are those who delight in seeing the truth (τῆς ἀληθείας φιλοθεάμονας).²²

He justifies his position by citing Holy Scripture,²³ stating that certain chosen men, wise of heart, God filled with the spirit of insight (αἰσθησις)²⁴ which is nothing else than understanding (φρόνησις), a faculty of the soul capable of contemplating realities, and this power extends not only to the arts but also to philosophy itself.²⁵

Philosophy "partaking of a more exquisite perfection . . . participates in wisdom."²⁶ It is a gift of divine Providence to the Greeks to prepare and dispose the Greek mind for true faith (i.e. belief in Christ's Gospel). So there is no absurdity in philosophy's having been given by Divine Providence to the Greeks as a preparatory discipline for the perfection which is through Christ.²⁷

Clement holds then that certain men were gifted by God to enable them to reach a partial truth. The Word (ὁ λόγος) was in them to the extent that they discovered truth:²⁸ a doctrine much like that of St. Justin Martyr.

In drawing upon Greek thought, Clement does not confine himself to philosophers. He quotes from the poets²⁹; more than any other early ecclesiastical writer. Some parts of his works, e.g. *Stromata* 5.14; 6.2, are but tissues of quotations from them. Clement holds that they too were taught by the prophets and utter truth in a veiled manner (δι' ὑπονοίας).³⁰ Like all the Fathers of the Church, he does not try to bring out the beauty of their style; he is not a humanist in that sense.³¹ He gleans from their works passages which contain thought that supports the truths of revelation. He quotes not only from works extant today, but also from many Greek poems now lost. Stählin lists over seven hundred passages from the poets.³² Clement must have known the *Iliad* almost by heart. Of the tragedians, Euripides is his favourite; he is ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς σκηνῆς φιλόσοφος (*Strom.* 5.11.70; 2.373) who keeps his eye on truth and disdains his audience (*Protrepticus* 7.65; 1.58).

Clement does not describe in detail how Greek thought was a preparation for the Gospel, but it is possible from his writings to glean texts besides those already given, which show his mind fairly well. According to him, the object of Greek philosophers and poets alike

was to pursue truth.³³ The doctrines that there is one first cause, that God is without beginning or end, that He is the searcher of hearts, that for man the highest purpose in life is to become like unto Him, that the world was created, that there are angels, good and bad, all this and more Clement professes to find in Greek thought. He goes so far as to say that the Greeks reached God in the sense that they learned truth about Him. They see God as He is reflected in man himself, as we see images and reflections in water.³⁴ The truth reached by Greek philosophy is partial and elementary in regard both to its content and its degree of certitude. But faith rests on the voice of God Himself and so presents truth absolute which cannot be impugned; it is authentic and unassailable. It is self-sufficient and perfect in its own right and needs nothing for its defence, not even philosophy. Most of the faithful who have never learned philosophy have been trained by Wisdom and have received the Word of God through faith. Philosophy does, nevertheless, touch on the truth and so can fit the mind, as the rain does the soil, and dispose it to assent to God's Word, but it is not a *conditio sine qua non* for the faith, much less the efficient cause.³⁵ At most it can be called a concurrent or contributing cause; as many men launching a ship all concur in the task, yet it can be accomplished if any one of them drops out.³⁶

It is the content of faith which is the criterion of philosophical truth, not *vice versa*.³⁷ But philosophy, as well as all other erudition, purges, ennobles, trains, and predisposes the mind towards truth.³⁸ Just as the grammarian is of assistance to one who is to devote himself to philosophy,³⁹ so is philosophy the servant of its queen, the truth of faith which is wisdom. Clement repeats the thought and almost the words of Philo⁴⁰ when he says:

As the general studies (ἐγκύκλια μαθήματα) contribute to philosophy, their mistress (δέσποιναν), so also does philosophy to the acquisition of wisdom. For philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, and wisdom is the knowledge of things human and divine and of their causes. Wisdom is then the queen (κυρία) of philosophy as the latter is of the preparatory studies (προπαιδεία).⁴¹

Philosophy prepared the Greeks for the Gospel also by training their minds and raising them up to intellectual subjects. It purified the Greek mind from mundane things and gave it clearness of vision, effects which contributed to the apprehension of truth. It trained it, aroused its intelligence, and produced in it an inquiring shrewdness.⁴² Philosophy gave the Greeks the "feel" for truth wherever found; trained by the Spirit of Wisdom to a high degree of understanding, they came to recognize and embrace the truth even when it was presented to them in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The philosophers, severally trained to a proper power of discernment⁴³ under the Spirit of discernment, whenever they carefully investigated not philosophy in part but philosophy absolute bore witness to the truth in a truth-loving and humble manner, even in the case of truths well put by those not of their school, and advanced to understanding under the divine ministration of the ineffable Goodness which regularly leads creatures on to what is better according to their capacity. And further, having come into contact not only with Greeks but also with barbarians (i.e. the Hebrews), they were led on to the Faith in virtue of a discipline they had undergone together for an individual comprehension. And, once having embraced the foundation of truth, they received in addition the power of advancing to investigation and, loving to be learners and reaching for knowledge, they hastened on to salvation.⁴⁴

Philosophy enabled the Greek mind to rid itself to some extent of false ideas. For dialectics especially enables one to detect error and to defend oneself against it.⁴⁵ Borrowing the terminology of the mysteries of Greek religion, Clement says that Baptism is an initiation into a mystery which is preceded by a mental discipline.⁴⁶

With Clement, as with Plato, philosophical thought has a moral aspect; it is the knowledge of goodness as well as of truth. "It makes men virtuous," and the true philosopher is the thinker whose life conforms to his true and noble teaching.⁴⁷ But Clement does not press the point to the extent that he claims that the moral precepts of the Greeks sanctified them. At most, he asserts that philosophy prepared them for justification through faith in Christ and His Gospel. But the moral effect of Greek philosophy, if not expressed, shines through nearly all the texts quoted above regarding philosophy as a preparation for the Gospel.

Perhaps Clement's attitude towards Greek philosophy is best illustrated by his application of the parable of the five barley loaves and two fish with which Christ fed the multitude.⁴⁸ Both the barley loaves and the fish represent the preparatory training of man for the wheat bread of the Gospel. The loaves represent the Jewish Law and the two fish "signify the Hellenic philosophy . . . given as food for those lying on the ground."⁴⁹

Although Clement was not much quoted by subsequent Greek ecclesiastical writers, yet he made a contribution to the establishment of the Christian attitude in the East towards classical culture. He counteracted the extreme position of Tatian, who, like Tertullian in the West, looked with pronounced disfavour on all classical culture. Both were extremists who ended up in heresy and their attitude towards the classics is not representative of early ecclesiastical writers. Clement's position was somewhat modified by Origen who like him was a Platonist with eclectic tendencies. But it was especially St.

Basil who established the true place of classical thought in Christian education in the East.

NOTES

1. Epiphanius *Haereses* 32.6 says that in his day some thought he was a native of Athens, others of Alexandria.

2. *Stromata* 1.1.11. O. Stählin's *Clemens Alexandrinus* 2 (Leipzig 1906) 8 in *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* is a critical edition in four volumes, the last of which is made up of indices: vol. 1 (Leipzig 1905); 2 (Leipzig 1906); 3 (Leipzig 1909); 4 (Leipzig 1936). In this paper all references to the works of Clement relate to this edition. I give the title of the work, the book (if more than one), the chapter and paragraph, followed by a semicolon; then the volume and page of Stählin's edition.

3. *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.6.

4. *De Viris illustribus* 38 (PL.23.686).

5. For a discussion of the historical value of this statement of Eusebius and St. Jerome, see G. Bardy, "Aux Origines de l'école d'Alexandrie," *Recherches de science religieuse* 27 (1937) 65-90.

6. For a description of the Alexandria of Clement's time, see R. B. Tollington, *Clement of Alexandria* 1 (London 1914) chapters 2 and 3; Claude Mondésert, *Clement d'Alexandrie* (Paris 1944) chapter 1.

7. The eighth Book is not considered an integral part of the *Stromata*; cf. A. Puech, *Histoire de la littérature chrétienne* 1 (Paris 1928) 345; Stählin 1.xli.

8. An exposition of Clement's gnosticism does not come within the limits of this paper. Suffice it to say that for him it is a scientific knowledge of the full content of faith culminating in love, achieved by comparatively few of the faithful. It is a knowledge not only of the Scriptures but also of a so-called secret tradition handed down orally from Christ through Saints Peter, James, John, and Paul. This tradition is not at all that of Catholic Doctrine contained within the *magisterium* of the Church. Clement tried to establish a Christian to counteract the heretical gnosticism of his day, but he does not escape entirely from the errors of the latter. Philosophy plays a necessary part in the discipline of the Christian of simple faith towards *γνώσις*.

9. See e.g. his appraisal of the role of Christ and his exhortation to men to embrace His Gospel in the last two chapters of his *Protrepticus*.

10. Although Clement expressly describes the role of Christ as redeemer, yet His role as teacher finds greater emphasis in his works. The Incarnate Word is the Saviour; "The Word (ὁ λόγος) who was with God and by whom all things were created, has appeared, our Teacher" (*Protrepticus* 1.7; 1.7). The Word Incarnate is "The Lord who from the beginning gave revelations by prophecy but now is plainly calling to salvation" (*op. cit.* [see n. 2] 1.7; 1.8). "The Word is in the heart of each man as the seed of truth." See *Strom.* 6.7.57; 2.460. For the role of the Word see also *Strom.* 5.5.41-43; 2.452-453; 7.2.6; 3.6 *et passim* in the *Protrepticus*, *Paedagogus*, and *Stromata*. See also J. Lebreton, "La théorie de la connaissance religieuse chez Clément d'Alexandrie," *Recherches de science religieuse* 18 (1928) 465-469; C. Mondésert *op. cit.* (see n. 6) 187, "Histoire religieuse de l'humanité"; also A. de la Barre, "Clément d'Alexandrie," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 3. cols. 158-163, 188-190. For a discussion of the statement in Photius, *Bibliotheca Cod.* 109 ascribing a doctrine of two *Logoi* to Clement see R. P. Casey, "Clement and the two divine *Logoi*," *JTS* 25 (Oct. 1923) 42-56.

11. *Strom.* 6.6.44; 2.453. Clement often uses the term, "barbarians," to denote the Jews; also "barbarian philosophy" to denote the Old Testament, sometimes both Old and New; and he even includes in *Strom.* 6.4.35; 2.448 Egyptian and Eastern thought, i.e. non-Greek. Of course he makes no reference to that of the Latin West.

12. *Strom.* 1.5.28; 2.17. See also *Strom.* 6.17.153; 2.510.

13. *Strom.* 1.20.99; 2.63.

14. *Strom.* 6.5.42; 2.452.

15. *Strom.* 6.8.67; 2.465. See *Strom.* 1.7.37; 2.24.

16. *Strom.* 6.6.47; 2.455.

17. *Strom.* 6.6.44; 2.454. See also *Strom.* 2.9.44; 2.136. Clement holds that after their death Christ and His apostles descended into Limbo (*Αιδης*) to preach the Gospel to those of good will who were detained there; Christ preached to the Jews, the apostles to the Gentiles. Those of the latter who made an act of faith in Christ and His Gospel and rejected idolatry were taken to heaven.

18. Clement draws from all the schools but is most indebted to the Platonists and Stoics. Stählin *op. cit.* (see n. 2) 4.30ff. lists the references to his quotations. Those from Plato fill ten columns, those from Chrysippus (fragments) five columns. Plato is the lover of truth (*φιλαλήθης*), *Strom.* 5.10.66; 2.370; as one inspired (*οἶον θεοφορούμενος*): *Strom.* 1.8.42; 2.28.

19. *Strom.* 1.7.37; 2.24; 6.7.55; 2.459.

20. *Phaedo* 69C. *Strom.* 1.19.92; 2.59.

21. *Rep.* 5.475E.

22. *Strom.* 1.19.93; 2.60.

23. *Exodus* 28.3 (*Septuagint*); 31.2-6.

24. In patristic Greek *αἰσθησις* often means mental perception, discernment, insight.

25. See *Strom.* 6.17.154; 2.511: 1.4.25-26; 2.16.

26. *Strom.* 6.17.156; 2.512.

27. *Strom.* 6.17.153; 2.510.

28. *Strom.* 1.19.94-95; 2.61. In other places, Clement accepts the Judaeo-Alexandrine doctrine that the philosophers borrowed most if not all their basic truths from the Old Law. Cf. *Strom.* 5.4.19; 2.338, and many other passages. Clement is not always consistent. He is striving to win over numerous Christians in Alexandria who held that revealed truth contained all that was needed to become perfect. His varying positions on this and other topics may be due largely to circumstances of time, place, and persons he hoped to reach. The composition of his *Stromata* probably extended over a span of about ten years; cf. O. Bardenhewer, *Geschichte der altkirchlichen Literatur* 2 (Freiburg im Br. 1914) 66-67. For the "anti-classical" section at Alexandria, see J. Lebreton, "Le désaccord de la foi populaire et de la théologie savante dans l'église chrétienne du III^e siècle," *Rev. hist. ecclés.* 19 (1923) 492ff; M. de Faye, *Clément d'Alexandrie* (Paris 1906) 137.

29. Stählin *op. cit.* (see n. 2) 4.30ff. lists the references for his quotations from the poets.

30. *Strom.* 5.4.24; 2.340.

31. Christians are to pay no heed to the rhythm and melody of Greek poetry but should stop their ears to it, passing by its aesthetic appeal. For they know that, once Greek literature has captured their ears, they will never afterwards be able to retrace their steps. But he who is to instruct Greek catechumens should not refrain from the pursuit of learning (*φιλομαθίας*). He should not linger over it, but dwell upon it only long enough to get what is useful to his hearers. Cf. *Strom.* 6.11.89; 2.476.

32. For Clement's use of Greek poetry see P. Camelot, "Les idées de Clément d'Alexandrie sur l'utilisation des sciences et de la littérature profane," *Recherches de science religieuse* 21 (1931) 38-66.

33. See *Strom.* 1.19.93; 2.60: 5.3.16; 2.336: 5.4.24; 2.340.

34. *Strom.* 5.14.99ff; 2.392ff: 1.19.94ff; 2.60-62.

35. *Strom.* 1.20.97ff; 2.62ff. See also *Strom.* 6.8.68; 2.465: 1.7.37; 2.24-25: 2.2.4ff; 2.114ff.

36. *Strom.* 1.20.99; 2.63.

37. *Strom.* 2.4.15; 2.120.

38. *Strom.* 1.6.33-35; 2.21-22.

39. *Strom.* 1.20.99; 2.63.

40. *De Congressu quaerendae Eruditionis gratia* 79.

41. *Strom.* 1.5.30; 2.19. The main theme of the *Stromata* is an exposition of Christian gnosticism and a description of the process whereby a Christian who is well disposed arrives at it. In describing this process Clement really outlines a system of education in which the hierarchy of studies is 1. ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία: 2. Philosophy, 3. Gnosis. His view of the role of philosophy in preparing the Greek world for the Gospel is a preliminary step to establish his point that philosophy is a useful gift of Providence working through chosen men.

42. *Strom.* 1.5.32; 2.21. See also *Strom.* 1.16.80; 2.52: 7.3.20; 3.14.

43. Cf. *Exodus* 28.3. (*Septuagint*); 31.2-6.

44. *Strom.* 6.17.154; 2.511.

45. *Strom.* 1.9.43; 2.29: See also *Strom.* 1.20.99-100; 2.63-64: 6.10.82-83; 2.173.

46. Not only philosophy proper but also the Liberal Arts, especially mathematics and dialectics, contributed to this. *Strom.* 6.11.90; 2.477: 5.2.70; 2.373-374. See Plotinus *Enneads* 1.3.3. for a similar idea: mathematics and dialectics as a discipline towards mysticism.

47. *Strom.* 6.17.159; 2.513: 1.18.93; 2.60: 1.7.55; 2.459.

48. *Matt.* 14.15; *John* 6.9.

49. *Strom.* 6.11.94; 2.479.

FRAGMENT OF A PINDARIC ODE

Celebrating a Californian Heifer

(Prize-Winner at Chicago)

Σάμερον μὲν χρή Καλιφορνιγενῇ
 ἀδυγλώσσοις ἄμμε γεραιρέμεν ὕμνοις καλλικάρπου βοῦν ἐλικογλέφαρον
 γὰς ἄωτον, τῇ μελιγάρνσι κώμοις χρή θέμεν τηλανγές ἐφαμερίους
 κῦδος· ἐπεὶ πότ' ἐν ἀνδράσι τοῖον ἦν τὸ πρὶν ἰδεῖν
 ζῶον, ἀκερσεκομῶν ἀκτὰν ἐριγδούπου θαλάσσας
 οἰκεόντων χάρμ' ἀφώνητον Καλιφορνιαδᾶν ἐρατάν;
 πολλὰ τοιαύταν ἐπεύχοντ' ἔμμεναι ταῦροι σφίσιν
 θυγατέρ' ἢ γλυκερὰν ἄκοιτιν.

Τάν ποτ' ἐν κόλποισιν Ἰωσεμίτας,
 φιλτάταν ὠδὴν', ἀβάτοις τέκε μάτηρ, σπαργάνους δ' ἐν πορφυρέοισι γονὰν
 κρύψε

W. D. WOODHEAD.