

Greek Philosophy and Myth
Tools of Evangelism

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Abstract

The growth rate of Christianity in the Roman Empire between 40 AD and 350 AD is an interesting phenomenon given that for much of that time its followers were persecuted and ostracized. The theories for its rapid growth have been much debated but typically involve social welfare aspects. Even some of the Roman emperors attest to the Christian religion's service, especially in areas where the Roman society was lacking such as welfare for those sick or marginalized. However, in order to attain a genuine understanding of the phenomenon, it seems sensible to investigate those sources who were spreading it—the Christians themselves, especially those few in the early centuries who earned the designation, Church Father. While some of the early Church Fathers decried pagan philosophy and myth as impediments to the gospel message, others embraced these as a tool to connect the old with the new. The others included Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebius. Each endeavored to show that both the philosophers and poets spoke as led by the “spermatic” Logos that created the cosmos and ordered it. Clement specifically asserted that this Logos, whom he called Jesus, used Greek philosophy and myth to prepare the Greeks and Romans to understand and receive the gospel. If true, this would provide a strong reason for the religion's rapid rise since studies show that people are more apt to adopt a new religion in direct proportion to the connection it retains with the old one. Certainly, that could be said of the Jewish converts who saw Jesus as the Messiah foretold in their law and prophets. This dissertation surveys the efforts of those early evangelists and the specific aspects of philosophy and myth they claim served this purpose for the Gentiles.

Introduction

The incredible growth rate of Christianity in the Roman Empire between 40 AD and 350 AD is an interesting phenomenon given that for much of that time, its followers were persecuted and ostracized. In Chapter 1 in the *Rise of Christianity*, author Rodney Stark lays out a quite plausible mathematical scenario reflecting an increase of 40% per decade so that conceivably, by the year 350 AD, 33 million people called themselves Christian.¹ These Christians would have represented more than half of the Roman Empire's generally accepted population number of 60 million.² Stark uses the number 120 as a starting point; this is the count the Book of Acts infers existed right after the crucifixion of Jesus.³ Subsequently, according to Acts, that number increased to 5000,⁴ so that "by the sixth decade of the 1st century, there were many thousands of Jews in Jerusalem who now believed."⁵ Stark cites several distinguished historians whose estimates of the number of Christians in the year 300 fall somewhere between 5-7.5 million.⁶ In order to reach that number, he determines the rate of growth would have been about 40% *per* decade which lands us at a possible 33 million circa 350 AD.⁷

Stark supports his determination by pointing to the conversion of Constantine in the 4th century who declared Christianity as the state religion. However, in contrast to crediting the conversion of Constantine, in 312 AD, for producing a Christian majority as do some historians, Stark argues that the Edict of Milan was merely affirming *what was already a reality*.⁸

¹ Stark 1996: 3-13

² Boak 1955a; Russell 1958; as cited in Stark 1996: 6

³ *The Bible The Study Bible English Standard Version* Acts 1:14-15

⁴ Acts 4:4

⁵ Stark 1996:5

⁶ Ibid: 6

⁷ Ibid: 7

⁸ Stark 1995: 10

Constantine did not create a new state policy but rather continued one that had begun earlier in the 4th century — affirming the large population of Christians and securing their prayers for the protection of the state. This move to placate Christians and their God came after unsuccessful attempts by the emperor Diocletian and some of his successors earlier in the century to force the Christian population to return to the worship of the state’s gods.⁹ Nonetheless, whether or not we agree with Stark’s growth numbers or his explanation for the change of Imperial policy in 312 AD towards Christians, the policy did change, establishing Christianity as the official religion of the West for many centuries yet to take the stage. And it is, of course, indisputable that the Christian religion did indeed grow in a just a few centuries to the point where it superseded a pagan religious and philosophical system that had stood at the center of Greco-Roman life for centuries.

How? How did a small obscure movement overtake a culture that boasted of such literary talent as that of Homer or the wise musings of men as Socrates and Plato whose works still grace the curricula of our Universities? One answer is that God willed it. But aside from this theological posit, researchers and professors of religious studies have offered the following propositions: Most importantly, Christianity offered the groundbreaking idea that all people were equal — “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰ This worldview conferred dignity and status on even the lowliest slave. And it held masters accountable to treating their slaves accordingly. One can certainly imagine not only the improved lot a slave might experience but also the improved relations between citizens themselves. In fact, the early Christians “were most

⁹ Renwick 1963: 49-50

¹⁰ Gal 3:28

numerous in the setting of urban households where freeing [of slaves] was most frequent.”¹¹

The Christians showed concern for the welfare of those marginalized by Roman society. And in fact, it was the Christian Church that began such enterprises through which charity was generously disseminated. For example, widows who lacked money suffered at the bottom of the Roman social ladder but found support and community in the Church.¹² When epidemics raged and people scurried out of the cities, it was the Christians that stayed and nursed the sick. In fact, so obvious was it that pagans fled from their friends and family during times of pestilence whereas Christians stayed to help that the Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363 AD) who hated the Christians lamented, “The impious Galileans [Christians] relieve both their own poor and ours; it is shameful that ours should be so destitute of our assistance.”¹³ People who were hungry and destitute could find refuge in Christian homes. Loving and caring for strangers was not a choice; it was a requirement of the Christian religion. Christians were to imitate and reflect the love the Christian God had demonstrated to them through His sacrifice on the cross.¹⁴ This would have been an extraordinary thing for a pagan culture that recognized *pietas* or duty to the state to be a higher calling than even love as reflected in Virgil’s Roman epic, *The Aeneid*. In this cultural handbook, every Roman read of their city’s founder, Aeneas, who was forced by Zeus to abandon his paramour, the Queen of Carthage, to fulfill his duty to establish the eternal city.¹⁵ Thus, the free-will choice of an innocent Jesus to submit to the atrocities of the cross as a demonstration of selfless love for those who even spit on Him and to whom he owed *no duty* would have been a remarkable thing, especially to the Roman mind. While sacrificing to honor a

¹¹ Fox 1986: 298 as cited in Schmidt 2004: 274

¹² Tertullian *Apology* 39 as cited in Schmidt 2004: 125

¹³ *Epistles of Julian* 49 as cited in Schmidt 2004: 129

¹⁴ PBS Frontline 1998

¹⁵ Virgil *Aeneid* 4.495-500 (trans. Fagles) p. 141

deity was certainly a familiar pagan custom, being unconditionally loved by one and having this love tangibly expressed by His followers was likely a powerful draw.

Certainly the sociological reasons for the growth of Christianity in the early Roman-Greco period are demonstrable; however, what about the theology of the message itself? Did it influence the rise in converts? Eusebius of Caesarea, an early Greek convert who was probably born around 260 AD and the first to document the travails of the early Christian Church in a landmark of Christian historiography, *The Church History*, defined the message in this manner: It is the “good tidings”¹⁶ that the One and Only God seeks friendship with mankind and reconciliation, “not imputing their trespasses unto them;”¹⁷ rather, He has taken those trespasses unto Himself and now offers a blessing, the gift of peace. Eusebius asserted that this God was the maker and dispenser of all things good. Further, he maintained that though this blessing was foretold by the Hebrew prophets, it was not meant for the Hebrew people alone but rather had been the plan of God from time memorial to bestow upon all nations.¹⁸ Interestingly, as part of his defense of Christianity in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* or *The Preparation for the Gospel*, he contends that God did not stray from man but rather the reverse. Nevertheless, it is the contention of Eusebius and other early Church Fathers, namely Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, that though man wandered, he, however unknowingly, manifested knowledge of God and His message through the mediums of poetry and philosophy, albeit an imperfect knowledge.¹⁹ For example, in the *Praeparatio*, Books X-XII, Eusebius explores how the nature of God may be seen in Plato’s works, commenting, “For what else is Plato than Moses speaking

¹⁶ Eusebius *Preparation for the Gospel* 1.1 (trans. Gifford) p. 21

¹⁷ Ibid 22

¹⁸ Ibid 21-22

¹⁹ This view of the early Church Fathers, specifically Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, will be explored later in this dissertation.

Attic Greek?”²⁰ As we will shortly survey, these early Church Fathers were extremely adept at building a bridge from the literary and philosophical icons of Greek culture to faith in the Christian message. So adept was their skill that I believe their efforts, in this regard, were a major and perhaps overlooked factor contributing to the rapid rise of converts.

Even modern Christian philosophers have contended that cultures untutored in the Christian faith who reflected vague notions of the Faith in their works were exhibiting either Divine inspiration or manifesting the Divine spark within all men. In fact, these stalwarts of the faith put forth the curious idea that Christianity was “the Myth [that] Became Fact,”²¹ the premise of which is reflected by the title of C.S. Lewis’ essay thus named. C.S. Lewis, the 20th century author who is most known for his children’s series *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* but whose works span philosophy and religion, shared both in his biography and essays that his conversion to Christianity was heavily influenced by his good friend, J.R.R. Tolkien, author of the classic, *The Lord of the Rings*. It was Tolkien who shared this perspective of mythology with him. Lewis had stubbornly refused to attribute any veracity to the Christian faith due to its similarity to other myths around the world, especially those which featured a god dying and rising again. Tolkien, a devout Catholic, challenged Lewis’ objection. Rather than viewing the gospel as the culmination of imaginative stories created by men, Tolkien proposed that Lewis view it as the “myth that became fact.” In Tolkien’s essay, “On Fairy Stories,” he describes the gospel as a story in which “legend and history have fused.”²² Tolkien’s premise is

²⁰ Ibid 11.10 (trans. Gifford) 467

²¹ Lewis: 1970: 63

²² FairyTale 2020: 15 In his essay, Tolkien discusses the need for and importance of fairytales. In reflecting on the genre, he recounts that though characters typically must face evil of some sort, the usual happy endings validate the hope both children and adults harbor that evil will *not* triumph in the end. Rather, just as in the gospel story, there is typically what Tolkien terms a “eucatastrophe” which by virtue of the word’s prefix denotes the opposite of a catastrophe. This is, in fact, what the gospel story reflects. With the unexpected and surprising resurrection of Jesus on the third day, the horrors of the cross are redeemed. Where once there was desolation, unexpected joy

that if the story of the gospel were true, namely that a God had planned to redeem man's broken relationship with Him via a God-man born of a virgin who would die and rise again, then certainly such a God might have fashioned people to yearn for such a prospect. And in their yearning, would people not create stories that reflect such a premise?²³ Lewis would eventually embrace this perspective. In fact, in his essay, "Myth Became Fact," Lewis states, "We must not be ashamed of the mythological radiance on our theology. We must not be nervous about 'parallels' and 'pagan Christs:' they ought to be there — it would be a stumbling block if they were not."²⁴ Just as surely as Lewis made this connection, the ancients had done so before him.

Both Tolkien and Lewis stood upon the shoulders of an earlier 20th century Christian philosopher who asserted this perspective as well — G.K. Chesterton. Known for such erudite apologies such as *The Everlasting Man* and *Orthodoxy*, he postulated within them the notion of the gospel as the fulfillment of myth, Greek myth in particular. In a public debate circa 1904 with the atheist editor of the British newspaper, *Clarion*, Chesterton confronted the argument that Christianity was just another myth. In countering that argument, he reasoned that the further one might wander from a central fact, the more likely that fact would be distorted. If man is made to eventually be redeemed by the Son of God, would not man dream of that fact and would

was found. Fairytales resonate with people because they tap a deep longing within them for just such a happily-ever-after ending. In Tolkien's words, "The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the "happy ending."

²³ Cothran 2012 This article relays the story told by Humphrey Carpenter in his book *The Inklings* in which Tolkien, walking with C.S. Lewis on the grounds of Magdalen College in 1931, argues that since man is made in the image of God, he cannot ever be ultimately a liar. He may twist and corrupt the things of God, but he may never fully "efface" the image of God within him. Thus, all the myths and fairytales and even the wisdom of man must have a semblance of truth in them however corrupted. Tolkien posited that the similar aspects seen in myths across the centuries and cultures — Creation, Flood, and Apocalypse — did not disprove the Christian motifs but rather the opposite. It was not too long after this discussion that Lewis became in his own words "a reluctant convert."

²⁴ Lewis 1970: 67

it not permeate everything he touched? ²⁵ Blasting the position of the editor, Robert Blatchford, Chesterton argued, “The Blatchfordian position really amounts to this — that because a certain thing has impressed millions of different people as likely or necessary, therefore it cannot be true.” ²⁶ Chesterton had a valid point. In fact, centuries before him the early Church Fathers postulated the gospel as the fulfillment of both myth and philosophy.

Jesus came in the “fullness of time.”²⁷ And certainly, at His coming, the status of the Roman Empire under Caesar Augustus afforded the quick spread of the gospel. The *Pax Romana* allowed for fairly safe travel, and the ambitious and advanced infrastructure of the Empire in terms of roads facilitated that travel. But was there a spiritual component to this “fullness?” Does it infer that people had reached a state of preparedness that better enabled them to receive Jesus and His gospel? Certainly, for those who claimed Jesus as Messiah, it inferred that the promises of long ago had come to fruition. And, while Scripture records that many early believers were Jewish converts, history shows that there was eventually a clean break between those Jews who believed in Jesus as the long-anticipated Messiah and those that did not. The timing of that break is debatable, but it seems clear that the utter annihilation of Jerusalem in 70 AD under Titus and approval of this by some Christians such as Eusebius ²⁸ likely drew distinct lines forever between Jews and Christians. Additionally, the continuing presence of Jewish

²⁵ Chesterton 1904: 18

²⁶ Ibid. In his essay, “Christianity and Rationalism,” Chesterton acknowledges that the story of Christ is very common in legend and literature. But so is the story of lovers parted by fate or the story of the faithlessness of one of the lovers. These kinds of narratives are common because they reflect real life and real relationships. Are we to think that because they are common, they really haven’t or don’t happen? It is more reasonable to think that they are common because our nature makes them so. Can this not apply to spiritual things? Chesterton concludes that it is ridiculous to think that just because there are pagan Christs that that somehow disproves Christianity. He continues, “You might as well take the number and variety of ideal schemes of society, from Plato’s Republic....to More’s Utopia...and then try to prove from them that mankind cannot ever reach a better social condition. If anything, of course, they prove the opposite; they suggest a human tendency toward a better condition.”

²⁷ Gal 4:4

²⁸ Eusebius *The Church History* 3.5 (trans. Maier) p. 82-83

synagogues even amidst the decline of pagan houses of worship throughout the early centuries infers that the exponential rise of converts within the Roman Empire consisted largely of it native inhabitants, Romans and Greeks. Had they been prepared in some manner to recognize who Jesus claimed to be? Like the Hebrew nation, the Greco-Roman culture had its own Bible of sorts, *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*. Its author, Homer, was even credited by such erudite philosophers like Plato for educating Greece.²⁹ As the ancient poet crafted his stories and the philosopher searched for truth, would not a God who desired to reconcile them to Himself have assisted in their endeavors? The early Church Fathers thought so. Paul, the evangelist who wrote most of the New Testament affirmed to the Greeks that God is close, asserting that “His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us.”³⁰ Thus, if this “fullness of time” did indeed apply to all nations, it seems reasonable to expect that all cultures would have been prepared, however vaguely, to recognize such a purpose.

Though some Church Fathers, such as Tertullian (155-240AD), decried the ancient Greek poets and philosophers charging, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”³¹ others viewed their works not only as bridges to the gospel but proof of the ultimate intent of God —the calling and redeeming of all men. These included Justin Martyr, Eusebius and Clement of Alexandria, all early Church Fathers who advocated that God had prepared 1st century Rome for the gospel via its own philosophers and poets. The message dimly glowed within the culture itself though “...through a glass darkly.”³² . While reasons vary as to why the Christian religion attracted such a tremendous volume of converts, an important consideration highlighted by Stark is that “people

²⁹ Plato *Republic* 10.606e (trans. Griffith) p. 328

³⁰ Acts 17:27

³¹ Tertullian *Prescriptions Against Heretics* 7 as cited in Reynolds p.17

³² 1 Cor 13:12

are more willing to adopt a new religion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with [the] conventional religion with which they are already familiar.”³³ A good many of the early Church Fathers seemed to operate on this principle, preaching the Christian religion as the true philosophy to which all other philosophies pointed and the ideal the myths foreshadowed. On that supposition, the following chapters will briefly survey the writings of some early disciples of Jesus himself who allude to this link then move to canvass the writings of the early Church Fathers as they sought to make connections between cultural icons and the tenets of Christianity. Included in this inquiry will be an exploration of the icons themselves as they relate to foreshadowing the gospel. The claims of Christianity continue to be at the heart of events that move and shake human history, and thus, understanding how the “obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the western world in a few centuries”³⁴ is a question that continues to be both timely and relevant.

³³ Stark 1996: 55

³⁴ Stark 1996

Chapter 1 Jesus, Paul, John and Heraclitus

When asked by a Jew to define “neighbor” in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus told a story. The context of the request involved a lawyer who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded by prompting the lawyer to express what was written in the Law. The man answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with your entire mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” After receiving commendation from Jesus for replying correctly, the man proceeded to ask for a definition of “neighbor.”³⁵ What came next is arguably one of the most famous and well-known Bible stories ever told: The Good Samaritan.³⁶ While Jesus could have given an abstract meaning of “neighbor,” he instead painted a picture of what it means to be a good neighbor. He imaged forth a meaning of the word that drew his audience into the victim’s experience both at the hands of the robbers and those of his rescuer —the Samaritan; thus, his 1st century Jewish audience personally experienced the definition of “neighbor.” For those of us who are much more adept at putting an object together after watching a video of its construction rather than reading or listening to instructions, we can definitely relate to this type of teaching.³⁷ But even more than just painting a picture of what being a neighbor means, Jesus was able to convey deep truths about faith by employing cultural suppositions and characters familiar to his audience.³⁸

³⁵ Luke 10:27

³⁶ Luke 10: 25-37

³⁷ Ryken 1984: 9-15

³⁸ Not only does the story of “The Good Samaritan” provide a definition of the word “neighbor” and a clue as to what the faith of a person destined for eternal life looks like, but Jesus also communicates that that action is not to be limited to only those of one’s family or friends; it should even extend to one’s enemies! The Jew who was victimized and needed help was an enemy of the Samaritan. Being half-bloods as descendants from intermarriage between the Jews and Assyrians, the Samaritans were hated by the Jews. Thus Jesus infers that a good neighbor is one who is willing to go beyond prejudices and see all people as God’s children. True faith worthy of eternal life

The adept teacher not only answers an inquiry but answers it in such a way that takes into account the listener's framework of reference. Certainly any good teacher knows that helping a student understand a new concept is much easier if a connection to previously understood material can be made. Even better, if a teacher can couch the new material in an engaging story, as Jesus does repeatedly through his telling of parables in the New Testament, the student is apt to engage not only his mind but emotions, thus truly making the learning experience more relatable. In the estimation of Louis Markos, author of *From Achilles to Christ*, Jesus seems to be doing just that in responding to a group of Greeks who sought to speak with Him shortly before the Last Supper. In his book, Markos relates an account in Scripture where some Greeks accompany a group of Jews to Jerusalem to worship at the Jewish Festival of Passover.³⁹ This feast commemorates the Jews' deliverance from Pharaoh thousands of years before in Egypt. (The Christians know it as the Last Supper since it was celebrated the night before Jesus' death on the cross). As Markos notes, Jesus chooses not to meet with these Greeks but rather answers them through one of his disciples saying,

Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.
⁴⁰

Markos remarks that though there are many verses which use the metaphor of a seed being planted and reaping growth of some kind to illustrate gospel teachings, Jesus explicitly pointing to a corn as worthless unless buried in the ground and essentially "dying" in order to give way to

involves actions of selfless love; in fact, He even intimates that the priests (Pharisees of the time) are far from true faith. The priest in the story, the reader will recall, leaves the victim to die. It is the hated Samaritan who is commended for having true faith in that his faith translates to helping not only the helpless but an enemy.

³⁹ John 12:20-26

⁴⁰ Markos 2007: Loc 137

new and abundant life (more seeds and fruit) is intriguing.⁴¹ It is intriguing because Jesus is possibly pointing to a framework in which these Greeks might be able to understand Jesus' ultimate mission, namely, that *He* is the “corn” who would be crucified, buried and raised on the third day to new life, and when that happened they would then have access to the gift of redemption in keeping with God's plan, “...to the Jew first then for the Greeks”⁴²

One of the most widespread, longstanding, and famous Greek cults sprung from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the sister-wife of Zeus. She was considered the goddess of Agriculture, especially of grain and corn, and through her annual separation in the fall/winter months from her daughter, Persephone, and subsequent reunion with her in the spring/summer, the Greeks explained the annual cycle of the seasons.⁴³ This cult of worship included what was known as the Elysian mysteries. As told in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Demeter, in her search for Persephone, stumbles into the town of Eleusis, fourteen miles west of Athens. Later, when Persephone is found and the issue of her separation from her mother is resolved by Zeus, Demeter commands the people there to build a temple in celebration. For at least two-thousand years before Christ, that celebration culminated in the Elysian mysteries.⁴⁴ A few peculiarities about the cult included: either gender of any class status, even slaves, could join as long as he or she had not shed blood through murder; a person had to be pure from pollution and not be conscious of any evil in his soul; and finally, he must have lived well and justly.⁴⁵ While

⁴¹ Ibid: Loc 154

⁴² Romans 2:10

⁴³ Day 2007: 72 In Classical mythology and as part of the Green pantheon of gods, Demeter was the sister and wife of Zeus. Together they produced a daughter, Persephone. Unbeknownst to Demeter, Zeus promised Persephone to his brother Hades, god of the underworld. When Hades came and kidnapped Persephone for his wife, Demeter was so inconsolable that she caused a famine and threatened to destroy mankind. Zeus relented and allowed Persephone to visit Demeter from the underworld for part of the year, the times known as spring and summer. In the winter, when she returned to her husband, Hades, Demeter was inconsolable thus fall and winter ensued.

⁴⁴ George Mylonas 1947: 143

⁴⁵ Ibid: 130-133; 141

some of the activities of the initiation ceremonies which included the blood of a sacrificed pig being sprinkled on the initiates for purification are well known, the ceremony and goings-on within Demeter's sanctuary remain unclear; nevertheless, scholars know one thing for certain — the central mystery revealed to the initiated was a reaped ear of corn.⁴⁶

It should be understood that this corn, of course, was not the “corn” many might associate with the maize of the New World since that sort of corn would not have been known in the ancient Greek world. Rather the word “corn” as understood even in Europe now would have been translated from a word that is more or less associated with kernel, specifically a kernel of wheat. The Eleusian Mysteries revered Demeter and the blessing of wheat, but even more interesting, it seems the annual return of Persephone from Hades, manifested through the cyclical seasons of farming wheat, is what captured initiates minds and hearts. For them, it raised the prospect of life after death. While the ancient Greeks had some sense of eternal life as depicted in their myths, that sense was a shadowy hope at best.⁴⁷ The soul did move on, but there was no meaning in death, and even the hero Achilles who presumably resided in a blessed sector of Hades nevertheless famously lamented in Homer's *Odyssey*, “I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire to some landless impoverished peasant than be King of all these lifeless dead.”⁴⁸ Still there were descriptions that offered some hope that life after death was tolerable and perhaps even pleasant such as those “fields of joy” known as the Elysian Fields, reserved for honorable dead, depicted in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Frazer 1894: 305

⁴⁷ Day 2007: 67

⁴⁸ Homer *Odyssey* 11.490 [trans: Rieu] p. 152

⁴⁹ Virgil *Aeneid* 6.861 [trans: Fagles] p. 207

Eternal life and joy despite death and, in fact, only by death were what the culmination of the Mysteries seemed to offer its initiates. Indeed Sophocles claimed, “Thrice happy for those of the mortals who having seen these rites depart for Hades; for to them alone it is granted to have true life on the other side....”⁵⁰ Whatever was shown to initiates, it seems to have imparted some sort of peace for they did not seem troubled by death any longer. Interestingly, Aristotle infers that the initiates became worthy of this peace because they suffered an experience.⁵¹ One theory regarding the nature of this experience is that initiates were made to feel the utter desperation of Demeter at the loss of Persephone. Undoubtedly, the experience of being reunited with a long lost loved one was something that would have resonated deeply in any human. Scripture states that God has put eternity in man’s heart.⁵² If so, then man has an innate sense to connect with something beyond death. Jesus’ reply to the Greeks who sought him seems odd, but given the fact that most Greeks would have been familiar with the well-known and long heralded Elysian Mysteries and their core message of hope after death, it is reasonable to think, as Markos does, that Jesus intended to connect with these Greeks on the matter of His identity and mission in a way that would have made sense to them. In the Samaritan story, Jesus draws on familiar cultural suppositions to connect with those Jews who needed to understand what faith entailed beyond keeping God’s law. What better way for Jesus to reach the Greeks than to allude to a popular rite within their own culture that offered a framework for understanding His mission and message? Notably, Paul himself, evangelist to the Gentiles, might even have had the popular mystery cult in mind when he speaks of the “mystery of Christ” that is now being revealed even to the Gentiles who are invited as “fellow heirs” into the promise of eternal life.⁵³ Indeed, many

⁵⁰ George Mylonas 1947: 143

⁵¹ Nancy Evans 2002: 249

⁵² Eccl 3:11

⁵³ Ephesians 3:3-5

of those Greeks who had experienced the Mysteries later founded nascent Christian communities.⁵⁴

Paul, a Jew and former Pharisee, wrote a large part of the New Testament; he was very adept at recognizing and using the bridge that Greek culture presented. Walking through Athens on one of his many missionary journeys, he engaged a group of Greeks at the Areopagus or Mars Hill. On this famous hill, northwest of the Parthenon, Paul introduced God. His reference point is compelling. According to Scripture, there were altars scattered around Greece and most conspicuously on the hill with the inscription “To an Unknown God.”⁵⁵ Using this memorial, Paul thus began a remarkable defense of the God of Scripture, telling the Greeks that he would identify what they, in their ignorance, did not know.⁵⁶ The origin of these altars is not clear. However, according to a tradition recorded as history by Diogenes Laertius, a Greek author of the third century A.D., in a classical work called *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, an unknown God intervened in history to save Athens from a deadly pestilence sometime in the sixth century before Christ.⁵⁷ Apparently, a respected Cretan hero named Epimenides responded to a request by a council at Athens to advise the city in the matter of the plague. Arriving in Athens, he instructed the council to gather black and white sheep and release them on the hill. He then directed men to follow the sheep and note those that lay down.⁵⁸ The apparent purpose of Epimenides was to permit any god that was concerned in the matter of the plague an opportunity to reveal his or her willingness to accept those sheep as an offering and lift the plague. As some may know, sheep do not easily lie down, and they most certainly will not lie

⁵⁴ Evans Nancy 2002:251

⁵⁵ Richardson 1981: 21 Acts 17: 23

⁵⁶ Acts 17: 22-31

⁵⁷ Diogenes Laertius Vol 1 p. 110 as cited in Richardson 1981:20

⁵⁸ Ibid

down when they are hungry. Presumably, Epimenides had the sheep released in the morning to feed. According to the Diogenes account, many of them did indeed lay down! Those were marked to be sacrificed, and amazingly, it was reported the plague subsided. Assuming that the council had sacrificed to every god they knew before they reached out to Epimenides, it makes sense that altars were built in honor of an “unknown god.” Whether this story is true or not, Plato at least verifies Epimenides as a genuine historical figure who prophesied that the Persian army would come against Athens in ten years’ time but that Athens would stand its ground and defeat it.⁵⁹ Was Paul aware of this backstory? Even if he was not, surely those who met to hear him on Mars Hill that day were mindful of it. Paul may not have known of the sheep account as related by Diogenes, but it seems likely he knew of the man, Epimenides.

Around 49 A.D., Paul visited the island of Crete in order to preach the gospel and establish Churches. As inferred by Paul’s admonition to a fellow proselytizer, Crete was proverbial in the ancient world for its immorality. When Paul’s short stay came to an end, he entrusted the work he had begun to Titus, a servant of God and apostle. In handing the reins over, Paul warns Titus to exercise discernment and caution when appointing Cretans. He cautions him that even “one of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true.”⁶⁰ The prophet quoted? None other than Epimenides.⁶¹ Accordingly, Paul must have been acquainted with the poetry of this well-known Greek poet and scholar of the 7-6th century BC. Even more interesting, Paul echoes Plato and refers to Epimenides as a *prophet*. Epimenides was a poet and a philosopher who counseled

⁵⁹ Richardson 1981: 20-21

⁶⁰ Titus 1:12-13

⁶¹ Ibid In the notes to this verse, reference is made to the ancient historian Polybius who wrote that personal conduct was treacherous (*Histories* 6.47). Also, Cicero is cited as stating, “Moral principles re so divergent that the Cretans consider highway robbery honorable” (*Republic* 3.9.15). The quote itself Paul cites seems to be from Epimenides of Crete, although there is some debate regarding this since his writings are only known through other authors’ quotations of them.

Solon, the renowned 6th century ruler, whose reforms of Athens are credited with setting the earliest forms of democracy.⁶² It is telling that Paul described him as a prophet rather than a poet or philosopher, especially in light of the religious connotation attached to the word. Certainly, the Athenians that day listening to Paul would have been familiar with Epimenides and have known something about the history of these obscure altars. Whether the God of Scripture truly intervened in Greek history under this “unknown” guise can only be speculated upon, but if so, then Paul made an enlightening connection for his listeners that day. Indeed, in his address to the Athenians, Paul cites a line from Epimenides’ poem, “A Hymn to Zeus” which says, “In him we live and move and have our being.”⁶³ According to Luke, who is credited with writing Acts, Paul segues into this direct quotation immediately after recounting both the attributes of the “unknown god” and this God’s generosity in not only granting life to all men but more importantly wanting men to reach out and find Him though “he is actually not far from each one of us...”⁶⁴ Continuing, he assures the Greeks that God is not angry with them for their ignorance, but He does expect them to abandon that ignorance and move forward in the knowledge that Paul now shares. In quoting the line from Epimenides’ poem, Paul highlights that Epimenides understood a higher power sustained life. Those Athenians who knew of the obscure altar backstory and the fact that Epimenides had not called on Zeus to stem the plague surely were intrigued by Paul’s presentation.

Paul gains a further cultural foothold by noting another Greek poet as he challenges the Greeks’ propensity to worship images of gold and silver; He notes that the poet Aratus said, “For

⁶² Cadoux 2020

⁶³ Acts 17:28

⁶⁴ Acts 17:27

we are indeed his offspring.”⁶⁵ The source of the quote is the fifth line of Aratus’ poem, “Phenomena.”⁶⁶ In a bid to note the incongruity of worshipping idols, Paul infers that if men are God’s offspring, it is not logical to think that God was formed by man’s hands or his imagination.⁶⁷ Greek philosophers such as Xenophanes of the 5th century posed the same puzzle. Xenophanes viewed the existence of the Greek gods as immoral and questioned their existence, pointing out that if cattle had hands with which they might fashion some gods, they would form cattle, horses would shape horses.⁶⁸ The truth is that Greek philosophers, even before Socrates who was killed for supposedly being an atheist, did not put much stock in the gods. So Paul was definitely on familiar footing. And though some that day disregarded the new teachings on which Paul expounded, others inquired further and according to Scripture believed. Those who did believe surely viewed the memorials “To an Unknown God,” along with their own prophet, Epimenides, in an entirely new light.

Paul was not the only New Testament disciple who used Greek history and culture to establish a connection to Christianity and win new converts. The disciple John, in the Book of John, chose to open his gospel with the words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”⁶⁹ The use of “Word” in this verse clearly manifests some profundity. John not only endows it with an existence that precedes the world and is distinct from it, but further on he identifies it as Jesus in that it “became flesh and dwelt among us.”⁷⁰ John, no doubt, intended to ascribe to Jesus several concepts unique to God: the use of the spoken word by God to create (as seen in the Genesis account) to instruct, admonish, and

⁶⁵ Acts 17: 28

⁶⁶ Theoi Project, 2000

⁶⁷ Acts 17: 29

⁶⁸ Reynolds 2009:41

⁶⁹ John 1:1

⁷⁰ John 1:14

facilitate a personal relationship with His people. Scholarship generally assigns the writing of John's gospel after a date of AD 70. His audience consisted of both Jews and Greco-Roman Gentiles living in Ephesus, an important urban center of the Roman Empire at the time. This may be noted as he frequently explains Hebrew terms to his listeners.⁷¹ So it is not surprising that he employs the Greek Logos (translated as "Word" in English) to explain the identity of Jesus and the relationship He has to the God of the Old Testament. In fact, as will be explored further on, it was a link that some of the early Church Fathers latched onto in order to argue that God had indeed prepared the Greeks through their own philosophy for the Christian gospel.

By the time John employed this translation, Greek philosophy, from which John's particular use of the logos sprung, had already secured a prominent place in Greek culture. Heraclitus of Ephesus, a Greek philosopher, circa 540-480 BC, is generally attributed with moving the discussion of the existentiality of man towards an objective truth.⁷² Like other pre-Socratic philosophers, he wanted to find a rational basis for the world. When these early Greek philosophers observed the world, they saw not only order but also that things had a certain purpose and seemed part of a plan. Certainly an eye has the specific purpose of seeing, and it is difficult to not see that the sun is needed for all living things to thrive. While natural phenomena were explained by Greek myths such as the story of Proserpina and the annual return of spring, the unpredictability of the gods and their many whims displayed chaos rather than order. Furthermore, Greek myths may have explained phenomena in one locale, but could not explain phenomena outside of it. The formation of one particular mountain might be explained by some epic battle between gods that took place there, but that battle could not explain mountains everywhere. Conversely, a rational reason can be applied in more than one circumstance. These

⁷¹ John 1:38

⁷² Johnstone 2014: 3

early philosophers looked for a unifying principle underlying the order and plan they observed. Some settled on water; some on air; Heraclitus settled on fire.⁷³ He reasoned that since fire is warm and dead bodies are cold, fire must be the source of life. He built on his predecessors thoughts in determining that a cosmic soul existed within nature providing the foundation of order observed and also providing the source of motion that all living things exhibited. Since dead bodies do not move, that proved the motion or soul was no longer present.⁷⁴ The Greek gods were relegated, if given a place at all by these philosophers, to being some vague creation or expression of this cosmic soul which was, in fact, decidedly divine given the enduring state of the world and cosmos. But let's take a look at Heraclitus' use of the word "logos" in particular.

First off, the use of the word "logos" is fairly infrequent in other prominent works of the time, notably that of Homer and Hesiod. When it is used, it is in relationship to conveying a story and indeed meant story or account or report. However, more specifically, it was used to convey a structured account that was meant to be understood in a certain way irrespective of the listener's viewpoint or belief about the account or even the reality of the situation.⁷⁵ In contrast to "epea," a Greek word more frequently used to refer to people's actual addressing of each other or in reference to anything that happened to be said, "logos" referred to what actually was manifested *through* the words — the argument, the reasoning, or explanation.⁷⁶ A good example cited by Mark Johnstone in *On 'Logos' in Heraclitus*, comes from the mouth of the goddess, Athena, in the drama by Aeschylus called "Eumenides." In line 428, the Furies demand that Athena weigh in on the matter of Orestes who had committed matricide, but she will not

⁷³ Reynolds 2009: 36

⁷⁴ Ibid: 31

⁷⁵ Johnstone 2014: 14-15

⁷⁶ Ibid

give her opinion until she has heard from Orestes, from whom she expects to hear the other half of the “logos.”⁷⁷ The translator, Herbert Weir Smyth, assigns the English word “case”⁷⁸ to “logos” in this context which clearly reflects that what Athena expects to hear is not the actual syllable utterances from Orestes’ mouth but rather his justification of the matricide, his account of it, his reckoning of it, or in plain language, his side of the story. From Heraclitus on, philosophers practiced rational inquiry into the natural source of phenomena and commonly wrote their findings down in prose. Each put forth his argument and evidence in search of the truth of things, and in using the word “logos,” each not only contributed to its implicit connotation of reason or justification but inferred that their argument or “logos” had a certain power to it since reasoning out a matter was a process and involved critical thinking.⁷⁹ Thus, proving one’s truth of the matter through this process lent objectivity to the use of “logos.” After all, just as in a court of law, truth is a matter of a preponderance of evidence presented through a process of reasoning.

Knowing this background of the use of “logos” gives us a frame of reference for Heraclitus’ peculiar use of it as reflected in his work. In nine of the surviving fragments which feature the thoughts of Heraclitus, the word “logos” is mentioned. In most of these, its mention is in the typical context of the time which was either a mere verbal utterance or the reason or case of a matter such as that illustrated with the goddess Athena’s use. However, in some fragments, Heraclitus seems to break with the usual meaning of “logos” and put forth his own philosophical view.⁸⁰ Let’s take a look at the wording of these fragments since they provide a foundation for the meaning of Logos which was interpreted by the apostle John and the early

⁷⁷ Aesch. *Eum.* 428 as cited in Johnstone 2014: 15

⁷⁸ Aesch. *Eum* 428 (trans. Smyth)

⁷⁹ Johnstone 2014: 16-17

⁸⁰ *Ibid*: 6

Church fathers (as we will see shortly in their own words) to be the Christian God embodied in Jesus Christ. Fragment two says the following:

This logos holds always, but humans always prove uncomprehending, both before hearing it and when they have first heard it. For though all things come to be in accordance with this logos, humans are like the inexperienced when they experience such words and deeds as I set out, distinguishing each in accordance with its nature and saying how it is. But other people fail to notice what they do when awake, just as they forget what they do while asleep.⁸¹

As Johnstone notes in his essay, “On ‘Logos’ in Heraclitus,” the use of logos appears to mean more than just the average word or case being conveyed. In fact, since the estimation of “logos” in this fragment “holds always” and “things come to be in accordance with this “logos,” it appears to connote something not only independent of the speaker’s words but something that is unmovable and even eternal and definitely beyond humans’ ability to understand; this does not fit with the typical use of the time of logos as a report or case—for how does it make sense to say humans don’t understand verbal speech before they hear it?⁸² In fragment 92, Heraclitus states, “For this reason it is necessary to follow what is common. But although the “logos” is common, most people live as if they had their own understanding [wisdom].”⁸³ Heraclitus further clarifies this “logos” as distinct from human understanding or wisdom in fragment 96 which states, “For human nature does not possess understanding [wisdom] but the divine [God] does.”⁸⁴ So this wisdom is common, holds things together if we take into account fragment two, but is too lofty for humans to understand. One other notable fragment that seems to imbue “logos” with special characteristics is that of fragment 1: “Listening not to me but to the “logos,”

⁸¹ Heraclitus Fr.2 (trans. Patrick) loc 1162

⁸² Johnstone 2014: 6-7

⁸³ Heraclitus Fr. 92 (trans. Patrick) loc 1278

⁸⁴ Ibid Fr. 96 (trans. Patrick) loc 1287

it is wise to agree that all things are one.⁸⁵ There are several striking features in Heraclitus' statements. One is that this "logos" has some quality of meaning to it apart from his own uttered words and that it communicates some sort of wisdom. Taking into consideration that the pre-Socratic philosophers worked from the premise that the world reflected order and a plan, Heraclitus seems to be defining this "logos" as perhaps the source of this order, the thing holding all other things together. Johnstone implies that there is a consensus among historians that Heraclitus used "logos" to denote a "kind of general principle or formula or law that governs...the cosmos."⁸⁶ One thing the "logos" most assuredly *is not* is Zeus. Heraclitus, in fragment 65, argues that man ignorantly worships this "logos" under the name of Zeus and that the "logos" is "unwilling and willing" to be called this name.⁸⁷ Remarkably, this echoes the words of Paul when he informed the Athenians at the Aeropagus that God had allowed ignorance of his true name and nature for a time but now He intended to *be known*. What Heraclitus meant by his sometimes peculiar use of "logos" is ultimately arguable, but what is clear is that the disciple John, some five hundred years after Heraclitus, informed the 1st century Roman world that "logos" was, in fact, the triune God of Christianity who took on flesh and was called Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

⁸⁵ Ibid Fr. 1 (trans. Patrick)

⁸⁶ Johnstone 2014: 8

⁸⁷ Heraclitus Fr. 65 (trans. Patrick) loc 1246

Chapter 2 Justin Martyr

The disciples, Paul and John, are voices who still call converts daily through their words recorded in the Bible; if their testimonies connecting Greek culture to the gospel instigated the rise of converts, it stands to reason that there were other witnesses from the 1st century who might have recognized their insight and continued that thread. And indeed there was. One of the earliest and most well-known Greek Church Fathers was Justin Martyr. Little is known about his personal life other than that his birth and death occurred somewhere in the timeframe of 110-165 AD in Samaria.⁸⁸ Justin was a student of Plato and Socrates before finding satisfactory answers to his truth seeking in the person of Jesus. While he was not the first to defend the Christian faith among a culture of pagans, his writings are the earliest extant. The ancient Church historian, Eusebius, in his *Church History*, infers that Justin was well known and successful in refuting common objections to the gospel and at one point, addressed the emperor, Antoninus Pius (Roman emperor 138-161 AD), defending the reputation of those practicing the Christian faith.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, according to Eusebius, Justin offended certain Cynic philosophers of his day, defeating one in particular in public debate and thus paid for that offense with his life.⁹⁰ Based on this information, it is reasonable to infer that Justin captured a fairly wide audience and had a likely influence in the conversion of many. Let's examine a few of the connections he made between Greek philosophy and the gospel of Jesus. First off, his perspective in this regard may be summed up in his own words:

...I confess that I both boast and will with all my strength strive to be found a Christian; not because the teachings of Plato are alien to those of Christ, but because they are not in all respects similar, as neither are those of the others,

⁸⁸ Justin Martyr Introductory Note *Writings of Justin Martyr* loc 12

⁸⁹ Eusebius *Church History* 4.12 (trans: Maier) p. 126-127

⁹⁰ Ibid: 4.16

Stoics, and poets, and historians. For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word [Logos] seeing what was related to it.⁹¹

Like the disciple John, he refers to the Greek notion of Logos in the spirit of Heraclitus' counter-cultural interpretation of it, namely as a divine entity endowed with reason and, in essence, that which defines and upholds the order of the cosmos. The Stoic philosophers themselves had continued the legacy of Heraclitus interpretation. In fact, for the Stoics, God and Logos were interchangeable terms albeit they deemed the entity more of an impersonal force that was at the core of the essence of things. They used the term "spermatic logos" to refer to the structural principle that held things together and defined them – what made a kitten into a cat for example.⁹² Justin, himself, uses the term "spermatic word,"⁹³ interchangeably with logos to refer to the man, Jesus, who lived 150 years ago before him. In personifying this logos and linking it to the Stoic vernacular, he attempted to explain to an ignorant world the person and nature of Jesus. In fact, in doing this, he conceivably pointed to Seneca (4BC-AD 65), the most well-known Stoic philosopher, who arguably came closest to personifying the logos. Seneca refers in his writing to God as "the ruler of earth and heaven, the God of all gods..."⁹⁴ He not only attributes intelligence to this God but also benevolence. In citing the abundant gifts of nature to man and the proclivity of men everywhere to reach out (pray) to God, he even seems to contend for a God who cares.⁹⁵ In his essay on Providence, Seneca speaks of God as a Father who loves and trains men to be virtuous.⁹⁶ From here, it is not many steps to the tenets of Christianity, and certainly it is presumed that Justin capitalized on Seneca's views to successfully move Greeks from ignorance to light. It is interesting to ponder the thread and development of

⁹¹ Justin Martyr *Writings of Justin Martyr Second Apology* 13 (trans. Roberts et.al.) loc 1129

⁹² Parvis 2008: 59

⁹³ Justin Martyr *Writings of Justin Martyr First Apology* 46 (trans. Roberts et.al.) loc 619

⁹⁴ *Fragm.*, 26:..." rectoris orbis terrarium caelique et deorum omnium dei..." as cited in Burton 1909:358

⁹⁵ *Ben.*, IV, 4. 1 as cited in Burton 1909: 361

⁹⁶ *Prov.*, 2.6 as cited Ibid

the meaning of the logos as the nature of it was debated by the Greek philosophers. Justin attributes their insights to their “[ability] to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them.”⁹⁷ This echoes certain Scripture Justin surely had in mind which claims that man is made in the image of God, and since God has impressed His laws on man’s heart and conscience,⁹⁸ man will manifest that imprint in some manner, though he may do so unconsciously. This was the point made by Chesterton, as discussed earlier, that if man were made to be redeemed by a dying and rising god, it seems that man would express that sentiment in some manner. With regard to Plato’s wisdom, however, Justin attributes his insights to a more earthly reason. He claims that Plato had been exposed to the law and writings of Moses, the Hebrew prophet of the Old Testament with whom Plato must have been acquainted from his time in Egypt.⁹⁹ Eusebius corroborates this theory in his *Preparation for the Gospel* where in the preface to Book 11, he argues:

⁹⁷ Justin Martyr *Writings of Justin Martyr Second Apology* 13 (trans. Roberts et.al) loc 1129

⁹⁸ Romans 2:14

⁹⁹ Justin Martyr *Hortatory Address to the Greeks* 14. (trans. Roberts et.al) loc 4288 Justin’s assertion is curious and deserves consideration. Plato, born in Alexandria sometime in the 5th century B.C., is thought to have traveled to Egypt after the death of his mentor and friend, Socrates. In his book, *Plato: The Man and His Work*, the renowned Plato scholar, A.E. Taylor, states that original members of Plato’s academy fled Athens for a while after Socrates’ trial and sentencing to death, and it was during that time that Plato traveled to Cyrene, Italy, and Egypt (page 4). As further evidence that the travel to Egypt might be genuine, he notes that Plato’s account of Egyptian culture in his *Laws* reflects first-hand knowledge (4). Egypt, as Justin Martyr recounts, was a place where philosophers went to study and learn of the antiquity of civilizations (*Dial Trypho* 12), and since Moses spent time in Egypt himself as a young man in the Royal household, it is not out of the realm of possibility that Plato and his philosophical predecessors encountered the writings of Moses there. Though the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, was not available until after Plato had died, and there is no evidence that Plato knew the Hebrew language, it is conceivable that Hebrew works could have been verbally translated to Plato. Plato himself infers that Solon, the Athenian statesman of the 6th century, had personal contact with wise Egyptian priests who told him of the infancy of Greek culture relative to the ancient civilizations that preceded it. (*Timaeus* page 5). Perhaps even more intriguing, the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, who wrote of his visions in the years spanning 767-686 BC conveys the Lord’s intent to send Hebrew emissaries to the Javan (the name assigned to the Greeks in the ancient world) in order to declare the glory of God and His fame (Isaiah 66:19). So it is possible that Hebraic ideas had been circulating in Greece several centuries before Plato even came on the scene. Scripture also mentions that the Javan traded with Tyre, a well-known and wealthy international trading center located off the coast of Israel in the 5th century (Ezekiel 27:13). So again it is entirely possible that the writings of Moses were circulated verbally and made their way back to the shores of Greece.

The Greeks had contributed no additional wisdom from their own resources, but only their force and elegance of language, and had borrowed all their philosophy from Barbarians, it was not improbable that they were also not unacquainted with the Hebrew Oracles...¹⁰⁰

If this were true and if this perspective were as strongly advocated for publicly as it seems to have been in the writings of Eusebius and Justin Martyr, it surely chipped away at any allegiance to Greek religion. After all, if Plato's ideas are nothing other than the Old Testament recast, it provided one less obstacle for potential Greek converts. In fact, Eusebius notes in the *Preparation* in Book 9, Chapter 6, that even "Numenius, the Pythagorean philosopher of the 2nd century A.D, writes expressly: 'For what is Plato, but Moses speaking in Attic Greek?'"¹⁰¹ So, if true, one might ask why Plato felt the need then to disguise Moses' writings. Justin has a ready answer. He contends that Plato sought to avoid what had befallen Plato's mentor, Socrates.¹⁰² Socrates, as is well known, was executed by means of the "hemlock-juice" as punishment for purportedly leading the men of 5th century Athens away from the worship of the Greek gods. Nevertheless, whether or not the source of Plato's ideas sprung from his own creative attempts to explain the phenomenon of nature and man or had been absorbed from the writings of Moses does not detract from the fact that early evangelical efforts deftly connected those ideas to the Christian religion. Let us turn now to survey Justin Martyr's particular efforts in this respect.

Of his extant writings, two, the *Apologies* (I and II), were written to the Roman emperor Pius in the 2nd century; these defended Romans and Greeks who were being persecuted by the state for converting. A third, *A Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, was written to show the Greeks that their own historians, poets, and philosophers testified to one God as both Creator and Ruler

¹⁰⁰ Eusebius *Preparation for the Gospel* Preface 11 (trans. Gifford) p. 451

¹⁰¹ Ibid 11.10 p. 468

¹⁰² Justin Martyr *The Writings of Justin Martyr- Hortatory Address to the Greeks* 19 (trans. Roberts et.al) loc 4349

of the world. Indeed, in the very beginning of the *Address*, Justin asserts the antiquity of the Hebrew prophets who not only were the only monotheistic culture of the ancient world but existed long before the Greeks. He notes the Greek historian, Diodorus, who in his monumental universal *Bibliotheca Historia* written circa 60 B.C mentions the writings of Moses as preceding the existence of the Greeks and that he was the first of all lawgivers.¹⁰³ From there Justin asserts that their own oracle has divined that “only the Chaldeans have obtained wisdom, and the Hebrews, who worship God Himself, the self-begotten King.”¹⁰⁴ Moses came from a long line of Hebrew prophets beginning with Terah, Abraham’s father, who lived in Ur of the Chaldeans.¹⁰⁵ Justin continues with his case by noting the poet Orpheus, legendary founder of the popular Orphic mystery religion in the 6th century B.C., who seems to retract his former teachings on polytheism in a reflection addressed to his son, Museaus, where he states “And if thou former thoughts of mine hast see/Let them not rob thee of the blessed life..” and then proclaims, “And walking well in the straight certain path/Look to the one and universal King/One, self-begotten, and the only One/Of whom all things and we ourselves are sprung...”

¹⁰⁶ Justin also quotes the eminent dramatist Sophocles:

There is one God, in truth there is but one/ Who made the heavens and the broad earth beneath/ The glancing waves of ocean and the winds/ But many of mortals err in heart/ And set up for a solace in our woes/ Images of the gods in stone and wood...¹⁰⁷

Surely, Justin would not have said these things had they not been true. His listeners could have easily refuted him if their poets had not spoken in such a manner. But he does not just point to the poets but also the philosophers.

¹⁰³ Ibid 9 loc 4202

¹⁰⁴ Ibid 11 loc 4233

¹⁰⁵ Gen 11:28

¹⁰⁶ Justin Martyr *The Writings of Justin Martyr – Hortatory Address to the Greeks* 15 (trans. Roberts et.al) loc 4295

¹⁰⁷ Ibid 18 loc 4337

Pythagoras, of the ingenious Pythagorean Theorem, seems to have entertained some thoughts about the unity of God through his use of symbols and numbers. Justin explains that when Pythagoras says that unity is the first principle of all things and teaches that it is the cause of all good, he teaches that God is one and alone.¹⁰⁸ Justin quotes Pythagoras describing God as “being the regulating ingredient of all the ages...the first principle of all things, the light of heaven, and Father of all, the intelligence and animating soul of the universe, the movement of all orbits. “¹⁰⁹ This is reminiscent of the teaching of Heraclitus regarding the Logos as the unifying agent of order. Interestingly, Justin states that Pythagoras lived in Egypt for a time studying mathematics.¹¹⁰ Other information we have about Pythagoras, though scant, testifies to his time not only in Egypt but also Babylon in 6th century. Babylon conquered Jerusalem about that time, thus it is reasonable to think that Pythagoras would have had some association with Hebrews living there. Since much evidence suggests that pre-Socratic philosophers such as Pythagoras’ natural explanations of the cosmos originated from the Greeks’ discovery of Near Eastern science,¹¹¹ it lends credence to Justin’s assertion that they assimilated the ancient religious ideas of those cultures as well.

But what would cause the particular writings of the Hebrews to have been held in such esteem? Justin argues that the works of Moses which point to the person of Christ and the tenets of the Christian religion were preserved miraculously among the Jews by Divine Providence. As evidence, he relates his experience in Alexandria where he viewed the remains of 70 separate cots at the library of Alexandria; these were constructed by Ptolemy, the king of Egypt, who built

¹⁰⁸ Ibid 19 loc 4343

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Herodotus *Eclipse* 1.74.2, Pliny *Natural History* 2.53, Studied in Egypt: Diogenes Laertius 1.24, Proclus *On Euclid* 65.3-11 as cited in Whitmarsh 2015: 56

the great Alexandrian library in the 3rd century B.C. in order to separately house the 70 wise men from Jerusalem, commissioned to translate the writings of Moses from Hebrew to Greek. Ptolemy's goal apparently was to acquire a genuine and accurate translation. And when he, as Justin conveys, saw that the translation not only had the same meaning but used even the same words, he was amazed and believed the translation was divine. He thus consecrated the writings in the library.¹¹² These writings collectively became known as the Septuagint (Greek for 70), and it is hard to overestimate the significance of this first translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek as it made available God's word to the Greek speaking world. There is no reason to doubt Justin Martyr; whether the story about separating the Hebrew scholars into 70 separate rooms and Ptolemy's subsequent declaration of the translation as divine is embellished or not, it makes sense that so many Hebrew scholars were employed expressly for the reason of ensuring the validity of the translation. While Justin's apparent goal was to attribute the monotheistic remarks of the Greek poets and philosophers to exposure to some form of Hebraic writings, it is just as conceivable, at least in the case of the philosophers, to attribute their remarks to the recognition that natural phenomenon must be directed and managed by a source of order transcendent to the chaos the pantheon of Greek gods exhibited.. Of course, Scripture affirms this avenue of insight admonishing that what can be "known about God is plain...in the things that have been made. So [men] are without excuse"¹¹³ This particular text in the Book of Romans declares that although men knew of God, they did not worship Him, and claiming to be wise in their own right, their thinking became darkened as they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man..."¹¹⁴ While the observations of nature

¹¹² Justin Martyr *The Writings of Justin Martyr – Hortatory Address to the Greeks* 13 (trans. Roberts et.al) loc 4265

¹¹³ Romans 1:19-20

¹¹⁴ Ibid 21-23

undoubtedly played a major role in leading the philosophers to a transcendent deity, the possibility that Greek enlightenment actually stemmed from the Hebrews provided Justin a major gateway to proclaiming Christ and His message that “salvation is from the Jews.”¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, regardless of the origin of the philosophers’ and poets’ monotheistic views, Justin’s skill in employing these arguments in his exhortation to the Greeks should not be underestimated when contemplating the rapid rise in converts.

One of the more prominent philosophical insights shared by Plato in particular not only concerned the nature of God but humans’ perception of and relation to that nature as a means to informing their reality. Plato has quite a lot to say about the nature of the God who is “certainly single in form and true, both in what he does and what he says.”¹¹⁶ In his work *Republic*, Plato lays out a blueprint for a utopian city — one with a philosopher king whose highest goal should be the pursuit of the good which Plato defines as knowledge or wisdom. It is in the light of this wisdom that one can begin to discern what is genuine and true and good and what should be pursued against all else in life. Just like light reveals things and without it, one would grope in darkness, thus knowledge or wisdom reveals those traits needed for a wise ruler — truth, justice, virtue.¹¹⁷ Plato interchanges the words knowledge and good, but the essence of this good is it provides the being of all that can be seen and not seen (concrete objects and abstract ideas), but the good is “not being but something far surpassing being in rank and power.”¹¹⁸ This “not being” or eternal entity he often refers to as the Creator who “set in order the visible world”¹¹⁹ is the cause of the light that reveals the absolute standards of both concrete objects and abstract

¹¹⁵ John 4:22

¹¹⁶ Plato *Republic* 2. 382e (trans: Griffith) p. 69

¹¹⁷ Plato *Republic* 6.506c-509b (trans: Griffith) p. 213-216

¹¹⁸ Ibid 509b

¹¹⁹ Plato *Timaeus* (trans: Jowett) p. 19

ideas by which all that is changeable and becoming (earthly) is defined and measured. This concept of Plato's has been dubbed the Theory of Forms. By it, he seeks to explain how and why people seem to have a sense of an original or standard. For example, several things may be described as beautiful but what is the concept or standard of beautiful itself? What is the objective standard of beautiful that people attribute to the thing perceived as having its traits? Socrates, Plato's tutor and through whom Plato speaks in many of his works (Socrates left no writings behind), provides this analogy: when a person sees an article of clothing that belongs to a loved one, that image reminds him of the person it belongs to as it is, in a sense, an attribute of the person.¹²⁰ The person is the Form of which the clothing is the image that provokes recollection of the Form. Similarly, Socrates refers to arithmetic and geometry, two disciplines in which there are certain agreed upon assumptions that do not need justification because all agree upon them, and they are plain. Working from these assumptions or known facts, logical deductions can be made in proving a proposition; for example, the sum of angles in a triangle is 180 degrees. This known fact of the sum of the angles is the absolute standard by which propositions can be reached.¹²¹ Now Socrates attributes people's knowledge of this standard to

¹²⁰ Plato *Phaedo* 73d (trans: Tredennick) p. 122

¹²¹ Plato *Republic* 6. 510d-e (trans: Griffith) 217-218. Plato's well-known allegory of the cave further explains this Theory of Forms. In Book 7 of the *Republic*, Socrates describes a cave in which people sit, chained, so that they are not able to turn their heads but are forced to look straight ahead. They have been there since birth. Behind and above them, a fire burns. In front of the fire, but behind the chained people, are others holding up implements of all sorts of materials from people to animals to things in front of the fire so that images or shadows of these figures are cast onto the wall in front of the restrained people. Being manacled, they only see the shadowy figures. Thus, they think the truth is the shadow. They cannot know the shadow's standard much less the light that shines on the standard and causes its shadow unless they free themselves from their shackles. The light is like the sun that makes visible things to the eye. The Creator, transcendent cause of the light, directs the light onto the standard or Form whose shadow the ignorant are restricted to seeing. Plato argued that man's highest purpose was to break free from these symbolic chains keeping him ignorant, get out of the cave, and contemplate and pursue the upper realm where the transcendent Good, the Creator of the fire resides. There, Plato says one will see and know that the Creator is "...the cause of all that is right and good for everything...it produces light and light's sovereign, the sun, while in the realm of thought, it is itself sovereign, producing truth and reason unassisted." He believes that "anyone who is going to act wisely either in private life or in public life must have had a sight of this." (*Republic* 7.517c)

something our souls possessed before birth, having gone through a cycle akin to reincarnation, and recollect as a memory in life on earth.¹²² This process of recollection or recovering of knowledge is what he deems happens when people learn.¹²³ Socrates and, by extension, Plato's Theory of Forms were the ancient culture's way of explaining a concept that still baffles men, namely the objective standard of right and good to which all people throughout history seem to appeal whether it be a standard of truth, justice, beauty, or any other virtue.¹²⁴ While Justin Martyr could have pointed his potential converts to Scriptures which testify to a divine source for this perceived objective standard, whether moral or secular (math axioms), such as, "They show

¹²² Plato *Phaedo* 69e (trans. Tredennick) p.116-117 In the *Phaedo*, in which Socrates provides a dissertation on the nature and activity of the soul, Socrates refers to an "old legend" which reveals that souls do reside with God. This legend is the Orphic Doctrine, a mystery religion similar to the Elysian mysteries referenced earlier. Like the Elysian mysteries, the doctrine concerns purifying the soul so as to obtain blessing in the present life and after death. The Orphic Doctrine reflected a recognition of sin which, of course, is a central tenet in the Christian religion and the reason man is separated from God and in need of redemption by Him (Romans 6:23). The core story of these mysteries involves the son of Zeus, Zagreus, being slain and then devoured by the wicked earth-born Titans. Zeus punishes the Titans who are turned to the ash from which the human race springs. Humans thus have the rebellious spirit of the Titans along with the godly one of Zagreus. They are composed of both the "carnal and the spiritual." Along with the carnal aspect, 'they inherit the guilt of the Titans, their 'deeds unrighteous' and are doomed to 'suffer the suffering' and do penance for their 'ancient sin.'" (Compagno tablet, b, Timpone Grande tablet; Pindar, Fr. 106, and Weil's commentary, p. 36 as cited in Norlin 1908:92-93) This penance involves successive lives on earth in which the soul, occupying a new body each time, may prove itself worthy to rejoin the gods at some indefinite point. Living a righteous life and undergoing the rites of the religion were the golden ticket to heaven. This tradition certainly aligned with Socrates' definition of the philosophic life and there being no higher endeavor in life than ensuring the soul's final resting with the "good and wise God." (*Phaedo* 80a trans. Tredennick p.132).

¹²³ Ibid 74e-76a p.125

¹²⁴ In the first four chapters of his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis provides excellent insight to the notion that all people know of some standard by which actions should be judged. Readers familiar with his work will recall that he defends the concept of an intelligent and loving God by the very fact that we humans are all aware of an objective law of morality that compels us to behave in a certain way, many times regardless of whether it benefits us or even that of society. Lewis proves the existence of this standard as he lays out his claims in the first few chapters of the book, but it can be evidenced in the everyday exchange between people from infancy. These exchanges manifest an appeal to some standard that we all expect everyone else to know about. For example, Lewis notes that we use phrases such as "that's not fair" or "you promised" or "leave him alone; he has not done anything to you" etc. These all involve an appeal to another to adhere to some unspoken standard of morality that holds humans accountable. He refutes the objections that these appeals are merely instinct or mere habits of social convention as there are plenty of instances where people choose sometimes to forego what normally would be deemed good. For example, generally sexual impulses are beneficial not only for pleasure but for procreation, both good in God's eyes, but they are not always appropriate to act on in certain situations or there might be times where a mother's love and care for her own child might be suppressed in order to care for another. It is clear that most feel compelled by something to act in a certain way. Unlike the laws of nature, however, we can either choose to obey this impulse or deny it.

that the work of [God's] law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them,"¹²⁵ he actually chooses, again, to cite a more earthly source for Plato's conjectures — Moses' writings.

In his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Justin argues that Plato's Theory of Forms originated through a misconception of God's instructions to Moses regarding the pattern of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was the tent the Hebrews constructed for God to dwell in among them after they left Egypt and wandered for 40 years before entering Canaan, their promised land, according to Book of Exodus. God had showed Moses the pattern of the tabernacle when he gave him the law on Mt. Sinai.¹²⁶ He admonished Moses to be sure to model the sanctuary after the pattern shown to him, including all of its implements.¹²⁷ Justin informs the Greeks that Plato, reading the passages and not having suitable insight, thought that form or standard had a separate existence before "that which the senses perceive."¹²⁸ Furthermore, Justin notes that Plato misconstrued the account of creation in Genesis. Where God says "in the beginning He [God] created the heavens and the earth"¹²⁹ but then in the next verse says, "the earth was formless and void,"¹³⁰ Justin argues that Plato thought created earth was the pre-existent earth. The "formless" earth was the one that God fashioned which we perceive by the senses. Additionally, Justin suggests that Plato misconstrued the creation of man. In chapter 1 of Genesis, God creates man in his own image. He blesses him. Scripture gives an account of God's other creations and then conveys that He rested on the seventh day.¹³¹ Subsequently, in chapter 2, God creates man from the dust

¹²⁵ Rom 2:15

¹²⁶ Ex 24:12-Ex 25:9

¹²⁷ Ex 25:9

¹²⁸ Justin Martyr *Exhortation to the Greeks* 29 (trans. Roberts et.al) loc 4544

¹²⁹ Gen 1:1

¹³⁰ Gen 1:2

¹³¹ Gen 1:26-28

of the earth and breathes life into his nostrils.¹³² It is conceivable, if Plato had indeed read the Hebraic writings, that he could have taken the man made of dust as the one that is visible to the senses, construing the reference of man being created earlier in the passage as the pattern or standard. Plato's own inquiries spoken through Timaeus reflect such thinking: "The work of the Creator, whenever he looks to the unchangeable and fashions the form and nature of his work after an unchangeable pattern, must necessarily be made fair and perfect..."¹³³ A final point to be made in defense of Justin's claims that Plato plagiarized from Moses is that Plato does speak often of adhering to the "old tradition"¹³⁴ and believing "wise men;" both infer sources much older and more learned than he. While Plato could be referring to Homer or Hesiod, Greece's premier poets, who had existed several hundred years before him, he tends to disparage their works, calling into question not only the truthfulness of their epics involving the Greek gods but also expressing concern about their immoral behavior (adultery, patricide, deception, etc.) and its effect on the education of children.¹³⁵ Additionally, in the *Timaeus*, Plato writes that the Creator is good, and the reason He made the world was because He wished for all things to be similar to Himself:

This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world, as we shall do well in believing on the testimony of wise men: God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable.¹³⁶

Plato's admonition seemingly echoes the language of Genesis which often resounds with "...and God saw that everything He had made and behold it was very good."¹³⁷ While any claims regarding the source of Plato's concepts are debatable, Justin surely convinced some, if not many

¹³² Gen 2: 7

¹³³ Plato *Timaeus* (trans. Jowett) p. 20

¹³⁴ Justin Martyr *Exhortation to the Greeks* 25 (trans. Roberts et.al) loc 4445

¹³⁵ Plato *Republic* 2.377d-378d (trans. Griffith) p. 62-63

¹³⁶ Plato *Timaeus* (trans. Jowett) p. 19

¹³⁷ Gen 1:31

wondering about the hullabaloo the Christian religion was creating, that Plato's works pointed to the Hebrew God whose Son, His followers claimed, had come as the ultimate Form of Him:

“And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”¹³⁸ Plato, of all people, would have understood Jesus' words, “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father.”¹³⁹

While Plato's writings intimate that the Creator is invisible and unknowable,¹⁴⁰ he reasons this Father is good since his creation reflects order and beauty, and since He, as the causal intelligence, fashioned images of Himself,¹⁴¹ and copies of heavenly things, he could not have helped infusing his living creatures with intelligence or soul.¹⁴² In fact, Plato deemed that God permeated the cosmos with a soul — a world soul as he called it.¹⁴³ A fascinating conjecture Plato puts forth is that this world soul is physically manifested in the shape of a celestial X.¹⁴⁴ In the *Timaeus*, Plato describes two visible celestial circles which cross forming an X that scholars have interpreted to be Plato's observation of the intersection of the path of the planets with the Milky Way. This is only visible at certain times of the year in certain places by means of the zodiacal light, a phenomenon that illuminates the sky shortly before dawn.¹⁴⁵ According to Plato, the Creator or cosmic soul is invisible, but he fashioned this X as a manifestation or visible image of the world soul.¹⁴⁶ This figure was well-known in the early centuries of the Roman

¹³⁸ John 1:14

¹³⁹ John 14:9

¹⁴⁰ Plato *Timaeus* (trans. Jowett) p. 18

¹⁴¹ Gen 1:26 “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.”

¹⁴² Plato *Timaeus* (trans. Jowett) p. 18-20

¹⁴³ Ibid p.20

¹⁴⁴ Plato *Timaeus* (trans. Jowett) p.25

¹⁴⁵ Latura 2012: 883

¹⁴⁶ Plato *Timaeus* 3, p. 23-24 as cited in Latura 2012: 882 See Fig. 1

Empire as evidenced by the fact that the shape is seen on Roman coins.¹⁴⁷ What is immediately discernible is that the X, turned on its side, takes on the shape of a cross.

Fig. 1 –Plato’s visible cosmic soul



Fig. 2 Roman coins 1st – 3rd centuries



In this *First Apology*, Justin argues in the *Timaeus* is a foreshadowing of the Christian cross.¹⁴⁸

The cross, of course, stands at the center of the Christian faith. As Justin would have surely

¹⁴⁷ Latura 2012: 884 See Fig. 2

conveyed, the cross is the “...power of God to [those] who are being saved.”¹⁴⁹ It is the symbol of God’s final act of redeeming mankind. Justin’s correlation of Plato’s celestial cross with the one Jesus hung on would surely have been intriguing and perhaps even convincing to some. Given the fact the image was on their own coins, it might have even seemed miraculous. And if that was not enough for the potential believer, history records that it was this sign that secured victory for Constantine I and Rome in 312 AD. In his *Church History*, Eusebius relates Constantine found himself up against a formidable enemy in the summer of 312 AD, and in a pivotal decision, placed himself and his army under the protection of the Christian God. Eusebius claims that Constantine was given a vision of two Greek letters, the Chi (X) and the Rho (P), which in English are CH, the first two letters of CHRIST. Accompanying the vision in which the letters were superimposed as seen below, Constantine heard these words: “In hoc signes vinces” (In this sign conquer).¹⁵⁰ Note in the figure below, the chi resembles Plato’s world soul. Justin would not have been surprised

Fig.3 The Chi-Rho symbol



¹⁴⁸ Justin Martyr *The Writings of Justin Martyr First Apology* 60 (trans. Roberts et.al) loc 782

¹⁴⁹ 1 Cor 1:18

¹⁵⁰ Eusebius *The Church History* 9 (trans. Maier) p.304-307. Eusebius conveys that Constantine had this symbol (Fig. 3) emblazoned on the military standards or flags which were carried into battle. He was victorious just as Christ had promised. As is well-known, Constantine ended all persecution of Christians and proclaimed Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

at Eusebius' testimony that this was the impetus for Christianity becoming the official Roman religion. Just as God apparently left many signposts of His nature and purpose hinting at the coming Messiah for the Hebrews in their Tanakh (Old Testament), He seems to have left similar clues in the Greek culture for those with "...eyes to see and ears to hear."¹⁵¹

The word "messiah" in its generic form, devoid of any cultural contexts, is basically defined as leader or savior of a particular cause. While the Christians claim Jesus to be the Hebrew Messiah foreshadowed in the Old Testament, the Greeks might have, in terms of at least the leader definition, identified Socrates as their messiah. Socrates, as has been mentioned, was the tutor and revered counselor of Plato. Considering that every philosopher subsequent to Plato references Plato's writings which feature Socrates' philosophy and that the majority of ancient Church Fathers from Justin Martyr down through St. Augustine reference Plato, it is not hyperbole to claim that Socrates was a sort of Greek messiah. His ideas even continue to permeate our modern world. After all, who has not heard of the Socratic method? The modus operandi of deductive reasoning is Socrates' penetrating questions ad nauseum. As Socrates affirmed, "The unexamined life is not worth living."¹⁵²

In Justin's *Second Apology*, he compares Socrates to Jesus. The most obvious comparison when one delves into the life of Socrates is that both he and Jesus were killed due to a perceived insurgency — against truth. Their crime involved moving men to search for truth by asking questions. A quick glance through the New Testament reveals Jesus asked many more questions than he answered; the dialogues of Plato and thus Socrates are nothing more than an extended series of questions aimed at getting to the truth of a matter. The purpose of Jesus'

¹⁵¹ Prov 20:12

¹⁵² Plato *Apology* 38a The Last Days of Socrates p.70

questions was to prompt his listeners to discern the truth of His identity.¹⁵³ The purpose of Socrates' questions was in a similar vein, not related, of course, to himself but rather to the truth in general whether it be of a philosophical or temporal nature. When one reads his *Apology* or defense given at his trial in which his accusers blame him for leading the youth of Athens away from the gods, it quickly becomes clear that Socrates was doing no such thing. After all, he argues in his defense, the fact that he follows and obeys a supernatural prompting to find truth means he must believe in supernatural beings thus he cannot be an atheist.¹⁵⁴ He continues his defense in noting that philosophers such as Anaxagoras and Clazomenae professed that "the sun is a stone and the moon a mass of earth" in direct contradiction to the "general belief of all mankind"¹⁵⁵ that the sun and moon were gods. Thus, he infers that any ideas the youth had along these lines did not necessarily come from him. Socrates asserts that the problem Meletus, his accuser, and others in the city have besides their jealousy of his wisdom was that he moved the youth to cling to the truth. This pursuit of truth had gotten Socrates into trouble before. He cites a time when, as an elected member of the Council, he was the only one who stood up to a proposed unconstitutional act that resulted in condemning an innocent person.¹⁵⁶ The problem, he ascertains, is that he exhorts people to examine themselves.¹⁵⁷ The chief purpose of life is the pursuit of goodness for the welfare of the soul; it is to discover the truth and go where it leads.¹⁵⁸ This aim, he claims, is what offends. Even as he ends his defense, he infers that it is not he that is on trial but truth itself, and it is this truth that will convict his accusers at some point.¹⁵⁹ Those familiar with Scripture can see the clear correlation with the plight of Jesus. Like Socrates,

¹⁵³ Matthew 16:13-16, Mark 8:27-29, Luke 9:18-20

¹⁵⁴ Plato *Apology* 27b, 29a (trans. Tredennick) *Last Days of Socrates* p.59, p.61

¹⁵⁵ Ibid 26a p.57

¹⁵⁶ Ibid 30d-33a p.64-65

¹⁵⁷ Ibid 38a p.72

¹⁵⁸ Ibid 30a p.62; Plato *Republic* 394d (trans. Griffith) p. 83

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 38b p.73

Jesus' crime was offending others with notions of truth. Like Socrates accusers, those offended by Jesus chose to eliminate Him. Who can forget Pilate's answer to Jesus' testimony of bearing witness to the truth — *Quid est veritas?*¹⁶⁰ While Justin capitalizes on these similarities, he does perhaps embellish them:

[Socrates] cast out from the state both Homer and the rest of the poets, and taught men to reject the wicked demons and those who did the things which the poets related; and he exhorted them to become acquainted with the God who was to them unknown, by means of the investigation of reason...¹⁶¹

Socrates does not outright deny the gods' existence, saying at one point in his defense that if "bastard" children of the gods (such as heroes and demigods of mythology) are supernatural beings, who would blame him for worshipping the gods rather than the children?¹⁶² In other works such as Plato's *Euthydemus*, he refers to them as his "lords and ancestors"¹⁶³ implying that perhaps they were more or less flesh and blood people whose deeds endowed them with godlike status. How widespread this perspective of the gods was cannot be determined, but Euhemerus, a Greek mythographer, known for a popular utopian work in the 3rd century BC, called *Hiera Anagraphe*, does speak of the gods as great men who were deified after death.¹⁶⁴ So the view certainly must have had some traction. Though Plato, as mentioned, conveys concerns about the stories of the gods and their negative affect on culture, he is careful to not completely disparage them, perhaps wisely so given the fate of Socrates and the charge of atheism. When he does mention them, it is typically in terms of giving tradition its due and placating those who might claim them as part of their genealogy¹⁶⁵ such as the Caesars who claimed the famous Trojan

¹⁶⁰ John 18: 37-38

¹⁶¹ Justin Martyr *The Writings of Justin Martyr Second Apology* 10 (trans: Roberts et.al) loc 1081

¹⁶² Plato *Apology* 27a *The Last Days of Socrates* p.58

¹⁶³ Plato *Euthydemus* (trans. Jowett) *Plato Complete Works* p.588

¹⁶⁴ Britannica, 2020

¹⁶⁵ Plato *Timaeus* Sec 1 (trans. Jowett) p. 5

Prince Aeneas of Virgil's epic *Aeneid*, the son of the goddess Venus, as their ancestor.¹⁶⁶

Regardless of Plato's view of the gods and society's at large, which varied considerably between awe and ambivalence, Justin prudently focused on the point of similarity—the Father or Creator or Cosmic Soul or Logos that transcended the gods. The fact that this similarity so closely aligned with Socrates' perspective surely would have influenced many to consider the Christian religion as the whole of something Socrates only knew in part. Notably, renowned 20th century Plato scholar, A.E. Taylor, remarked:

Under all the real differences due to the Christian's belief in the historical reality of the God-man, the ideal of Socrates and the Christian ideal are fundamentally identical. The central thought in both cases is that man is born a creature of temporality and mutability into a temporal and mutable environment. But, in virtue of the fact that there is a something "divine" in him, he cannot but aspire to a good which is above time and mutability, and thus the right life is from first to last a process by which the merely secular and temporal self is re-made in the likeness of the eternal.¹⁶⁷

Undoubtedly, the Greeks and their illustrious icons provided much fodder for Justin as he labored to share the gospel.

Chapter 3 Clement of Alexandria

Approximately fifteen years before Justin Martyr would earn the designation of his surname and perish for the faith, Clement of Alexandria was born (150-215 AD); he would carry on the torch of Justin's zeal in proclaiming the logos to be the word made flesh and the one whom the philosophers and poets had unknowingly signposted. Born Titus Flavius Clemens in Athens, Clement would convert, as Justin did, after a search for truth that took him on a journey through Egypt, Syria, and Palestine; along with Justin, he is regarded as an important Church

¹⁶⁶ Virgil *Aeneid* 1.344 (trans. Fagles) p.57

¹⁶⁷ Taylor 1926:191-192

Father and the founder of Christian literature.¹⁶⁸ And along with Justin, he sought to build a bridge between Greek culture and the tenets of Christianity. In fact, he went beyond Justin's assertion that whatever was shown to be true in Greek philosophical and poetry work was the logos manifesting Himself; Clement boldly claimed that just as the law of Moses and the prophets were given to the barbarians to prepare them to receive the gospel, so "...philosophy to the Greeks to fit their ears for the gospel."¹⁶⁹ He maintained that God used the Greek philosophers as a means of "justifying" the Greeks in the sense that their musings served as revelations providing a "stepping stone" to the "race of the saved."¹⁷⁰ Thus, Clement made conversion seem a natural progression, an important perspective in allaying Greek objections to abandoning their cherished mysteries and other cultural identities.

Those extant writings of Clement which focus on teaching how God used the philosophers and poets to "fit [Greek] ears for the gospel" are mainly three: *The Exhortation to the Heathen*, *The Instructor* or *Paedagogus*, and *The Miscellanies* or *Stromata*. While his writings do mirror many of the connections previously discussed, there are a few that I want to highlight as they add valuable support, and there are a few that appear unique to him that I feel are worth briefly exploring. First off, he strongly echoes Justin's assertion that the Greek philosophers, including Plato, had been exposed to barbarian [Hebrew] philosophy and that of the Babylonians and Egyptians. In Chapter 15 of the *Stromata*, he goes into great detail about the connections between the pre-Socratic philosophers from Thales to Pythagoras and barbarian prophets. One notable claim Clement makes concerns Pythagoras who "held converse with the

¹⁶⁸ Clement *The Stromata* Introductory note loc 14

¹⁶⁹ Clement *The Stromata* 6.6.44 as cited in Muckle 1951: 80. Clement often identified Jews as barbarians and the Old Testament as "barbarian philosophy."

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

chief of the Chaldeans and the *Magi* [emphasis mine].”¹⁷¹ In addition to the connections Justin establishes between the philosophers and the barbarians, Clement references the ancient Roman King Numa Pompilius (753-673 BC), the legendary king who succeeded Romulus. Clement alleges that in establishing the rituals of the city, he forbade any images of God, persuaded that it was impious to do so, and so for the first 170 years of Rome’s existence, there were no images or statues of the Divine Being built. Plutarch a Roman historian (46-119 AD), corroborates this in his work *Parallel Lives*.¹⁷²

In the matter of the Greek gods, Clement substantiates that these were likely once men. He notes that Herodotus, the renowned historian of antiquity, relates that Hercules, a student of physics, received from Atlas, a Phrygian (Turk), columns of the universe, meaning he received knowledge of the heavenly bodies.¹⁷³ He attributes all of the arts —music, science medicine—to those cultures far older than Greece, and interestingly he even remarks on the Greek god of healing, Asclepius, whom he says received his knowledge from Apis, an Egyptian. The last words of Socrates before succumbing to the judgment of the deadly Hemlock juice involved suggesting to his friend, Crito, that “a cock ought to be offered to Asclepius.”¹⁷⁴ These revelations are part of a long and detailed diatribe in Chapter 2 of Clement’s *Exhortation to the Greeks* in which he exposes the shameful rituals of many of the Greek gods and declares that the gods are either reflections of human sentiments and inclinations or deified dead men. He recounts the many different records of gods named Zeus in various part of Greece, one whose father is even called Cronus of the poet Hesiod’s poem and another whose father is called

¹⁷¹ Clement *The Stromata* 1.15 (trans. Overett) p. 40

¹⁷² Ibid p. 42; Plutarch *The Parallel Lives* 1.1 published in Vol. 1 of Loeb Classical Library edition 1914 p.307

¹⁷³ Clement *The Stromata* 1.15 (trans. Overett) p. 44

¹⁷⁴ Plato *Phaedo* 118 *The Last Days of Socrates* (trans. Tredennick) p. 183

Aether.¹⁷⁵ In fact, a hymn by Callimachus, the Cretan, sings of Zeus' tomb as being located on that island: "...for a tomb, O Prince, did the Cretans Fashion for thee."¹⁷⁶ Perhaps the Cretans are unjustly slandered for being liars as Epimenides' claimed they were and unfairly connected to the liar's paradox which still confounds today. Nonetheless, the rapid rise of converts lends evidence that Clement's exhortations surely played a part in convincing many to set aside such childish notions as Scripture admonishes.¹⁷⁷

Before we conclude, let us take a brief look at a few sentiments in Homer's Trojan war epic, *The Illiad*, that attest not only to a Divine spark but to the idea of the good promulgated by Plato. Though philosophers moved men on an intellectual level to contemplate the good and to seek it, myths connected with men emotionally at a gut level. The gospels themselves are full of Jesus' parables which is not surprising since most would agree that people process truths more fully through story. Thus, it makes sense that God would have inspired the poets in their storytelling, as Clement argues¹⁷⁸ and even as Socrates concludes when upon being questioned, the poets cannot even explain the sublime messages brimming in the passages of their own poems.¹⁷⁹ Plato defined the good as a transcendent standard that wise men seek to know and understand. Socrates defended that standard with his life. Scripture defines the good in this manner: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."¹⁸⁰ What Plato expounded partly, the Church Fathers, with Scripture in hand, explicated fully. Homer's myth, *The Illiad*, a well-known story and one of the oldest extant works of the Western literary canon, provides a

¹⁷⁵ Clement *Exhortation to the Greeks* 2.24P (trans. Butterworth) p. 57

¹⁷⁶ Callimachus, Hymn to Zeus 8-9 as cited in ibid 2.32P p.79. "This claim of the Cretans to possess the tomb of Zeus is said to have earned them their traditional reputation as liars."

¹⁷⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:11

¹⁷⁸ Clement *The Stromata* 5.3 (trans. Overett) p.293-294

¹⁷⁹ Plato *Apology* 22e (trans. Tredennick) p. 51

¹⁸⁰ Micah 6:8

glimpse into the possibility of Divine inspiration, an instance of Justin's "spermatic logos," which having been noted by modern scholars, most certainly was evident to the early evangelists as well. Its two major characters, Hector and Achilles, are battle weary soldiers; each, for a brief moment in time, uniquely manifests God's definition of good in an age and culture whose fighting men acted and fought instinctively by a valued code of honor whose goal of victory superseded all else. Where the Romans valued duty as the highest ideal, the Greeks valued honor. Both Hector and Achilles, contrary to their Greek society's dictates, are shown to contemplate notions that arguably align more with modern Western ideals whose origins are Biblical in nature.

In a climactic scene of anguish and sober reflection, Hector, a Trojan prince contemplates humbling himself before the fierce Greek army and the mighty Greek warrior, Achilles, and — surrendering.¹⁸¹ John Hampsey notes in "The Idea of the Good," that as Hector faces the prospect of fighting the more formidable Achilles, whose outcome would determine the ultimate victory between the Trojans and Greeks, he muses throwing to the wind all his age reflects — courage, strength, pride, and honor.¹⁸² Hector's thoughts come on the heels of tender and intimate scenes in which he shows a great love and concern for both his wife and child and parents all who plead for him to forsake the death Achilles' challenge portends and stay within the walls of Troy to protect and defend them.¹⁸³ As Hector ponders the right thing to do irrespective of his own personal honor, he reflects on giving back Helen whom his brother, Paris, had stolen from her Greek husband. Previous to his musing, in fact, Hector had confronted and chided them both for their sin to which they admitted and for which Troy will soon be destroyed

¹⁸¹ Homer, *The Illiad* 22.1 (trans. Fitzgerald), p. 115-59 as cited in Hampsey 2016: 287-288

¹⁸² Ibid

¹⁸³ Homer *Illiad* 22.393 (trans. Pope) p. 645-646; 6.123-124 p.204-205

by the vengeful Greeks.¹⁸⁴ The good as defined by Scripture in this situation would be for him and by extension, Troy, to admit offense, give Helen back, and in an act of humility, beg for mercy from the Greeks. Unthinkable. But perhaps a fleeting notion of the seed of the logos in his breast. As history shows, he succumbed instead to the ideals of the heroic age in which he lived and thus perished as did all that he treasured.

Achilles also displays thoughts and actions that seem to foretell a time in which the good would be clearly defined in the light of Scripture. Arguably, *The Illiad* is a story of one man's wrath and the trail of death it carves. Though the legendary Trojan War (circa 1194-1184 BC) spanned ten years, Homer's story covers just a few weeks in the final year. These few weeks focus on the wrath of Achilles, stirred up by a number of perceived injustices ranging from the theft of his concubine by a superior to the death of his beloved friend at the hands of his enemy, Hector. Achilles' vengeful response brings much death and destruction to not only Hector and the Trojans but to his own Greek comrades. His final act of retribution defies all social conventions of the day. He infamously drags the broken and dead body of Hector behind his chariot around and around the walls of Troy in view of Hector's horrified family until it is no longer recognizable.¹⁸⁵ Achilles has fed his wrath and exacted revenge. But he does not find peace. Only when he comes face-to-face with Hector's father, King Priam, whom Achilles finally allows to redeem the body of his son, and extends the father mercy is Achilles freed from his own wrath. In a remarkable scene, Achilles and Priam mourn their losses together and for a brief moment a flicker of some distant hope is lit.¹⁸⁶ There is significance in this moment. As Louis Markos, author of *From Achilles to Christ*, reflects, "...just as Christ's mercy turns aside

¹⁸⁴ Ibid 6.199-120 p. 198-199

¹⁸⁵ Homer *The Illiad* 22.401 (trans. Pope) p. 659

¹⁸⁶ Ibid 24.444 p.730-731

God's judgment, so Achilles, the agent of divine wrath in *The Illiad*, is also the one whose mercy stems and exhausts that wrath."¹⁸⁷ Homer ends his epic with a twelve-day truce between the enemies that allows for the burial and mourning of Hector. Other poems would tell of the Trojan horse and the victory of the Greeks. Whether conscious or not, Homer communicated a message that resounds loudly all through Scripture—that of God's mercy and forgiveness as the path to peace. Scripture boldly claims this path is a person: "I am the way, the truth, and the life..."¹⁸⁸ and history records many in those early centuries discovered Him and the arguable truth of Paul's words delivered on the Areopagus so many years ago—He is near.

¹⁸⁷ Markos 2007: loc 877

¹⁸⁸ John 14:6

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