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# THE GRAECO- ROMAN CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

ROMAN GARRISON





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**Roman Garrison**

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While research and writing are fulfilling and rewarding, life itself is a joy because of Evann, Jessica, and John, to whom this work is dedicated.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CP	<i>Classical Philology</i>
ETL	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSNTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PerRS	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
SR	<i>Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses</i>
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>



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## Chapter 1

### THE GRAECO-ROMAN CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

#### *Introduction*

The church today battles with the corrosive acids of contemporary culture; yet the language and images of the day (or the hour) are often employed by the church in order to make the gospel message more 'understandable' to the members of that same contemporary culture. Consequently, a strange and strained relationship has developed between Christianity and modern Western society. This problem has an ancient history.

#### *The Negative View of Graeco-Roman Mythology*

Early Christianity firmly rejected Graeco-Roman traditions about the gods, and the contemporary society regarded the Christians as a threat to popular conventions derived from mythology. It is claimed that when he was brought out for execution and the herald announced, 'Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian', the crowd of Gentiles and Jews (ἐθνῶν τε καὶ Ἰουδαίων) cried out for his death, accusing him of being 'the destroyer of our gods' (ὁ τῶν ἡμετέρων θεῶν καθαιρετής).<sup>1</sup> The historical accuracy of this report is not of central concern; rather our interest is drawn to the author's suggestion that Christianity was a danger both to the gods of the Graeco-Roman religions and even to the god of the Jews.

Similarly, in his apologetic letter to Diognetus, the writer praises his reader's interest:

...you are exceedingly zealous to learn the religion of the Christians and are asking very clear and careful questions concerning them... who is the god in whom they believe and how they worship him... [For the

1. *Mart. Pol.* 12.1-2.

Christians] do not reckon as gods those who are considered to be so by the Greeks, nor keep the superstition of the Jews...<sup>2</sup>

Again the clear implication is that Christianity's distinctive set of beliefs rejects, indeed repudiates, certain features of both Greek and Jewish religions.

As the gospel message spread through the Empire, early Christianity found the Zeus-traditions to be repugnant and the God of the Hebrew scriptures in extreme need of reformation.<sup>3</sup> The consequent theological reconstruction project required the complete removal of many ideas within the Graeco-Roman thought-world and attempts to remodel and restore the traditions about Yahweh. Our principal concern here is with the former.

Several writers in early Christianity mock or ridicule the popular mythology of the Graeco-Roman culture and its implications for the theology of that world. This criticism is perhaps most emphatic in Tatian.<sup>4</sup> There is as well reference to the tragic effect of the myths on the morality of those who hear such stories. Justin maintains that these tales were designed to corrupt the young who mistakenly believe it to be their duty to imitate the character of the gods.<sup>5</sup>

Clement of Alexandria rebukes the 'atheism' of the Greek myths, deploring their crude, even blasphemous, anthropomorphisms, and rejoices that Plato among many philosophers embraced the truth, declaring 'the one and only true God to be God'.<sup>6</sup>

Prominent in Plato's *Republic*,<sup>7</sup> this criticism of mythology is not peculiar to Christianity but is indeed a feature of Greek thought at least as early as Xenophanes and Heracleitus.<sup>8</sup> While Plato, however, was

2. *Diogn.* 1; cf. 8.1; Ignatius, *Magn.* 8.1; 10.3; Ignatius, *Phld.* 6.1; *Barn.* 4.7-8; 2 *Clem.* 2.3: '[the Jews] seemed to have God.'

3. The significance of Marcion warrants attention but cannot be the focus of this discussion. Cf. A.C. McGiffert, *The God of the Early Christians* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924): '...conversion to Christianity did not necessarily carry with it the acceptance of the God of the Jews' (p. 66).

4. J. Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), p. 75.

5. *Apology* 21; cf. Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.14.11-13. See also Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 10; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.14.

6. *Exhortation to the Greeks* 4; 6.

7. 377C-391E.

8. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 1.289; 9.193. See also Pythagoras's reported attitude in Diogenes Laertius 8.21. Cf. W. Jaeger, *Early*

concerned with the political/social influence of such views of the gods,<sup>9</sup> several others were critical of what they perceived to be 'bad theology'. A more personal statement of the problem is found in the second-century satirist Lucian who expresses his own anxiety in trying to understand the myths about the gods:

While I was a boy, when I read in Homer and Hesiod about wars and quarrels, not only of the demigods but of the gods themselves, and besides about their amours and assaults and abductions and lawsuits and banishing fathers and marrying sisters, I thought that all these things were right, and I felt an uncommon impulsion toward them.

But when I came of age, I found that the laws contradicted the poets and forbade adultery, quarreling, and theft. So I was plunged into great uncertainty, not knowing how to deal with my own case. For the gods would never have committed adultery and quarreled with each other, I thought, unless they deemed these actions right, and the lawgivers would not recommend the opposite course unless they supposed it to be advantageous. Since I was in a dilemma, I resolved to go to the men whom they call philosophers...begging them to deal with me as they would, and to show me a plain, solid path in life.<sup>10</sup>

The apostle Paul describes his own parallel 'maturing' with a similar construction: 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways' (1 Cor. 13.11). Was Paul acknowledging that as he 'grew' in faith and knowledge it was necessary to abandon ideas that had once shaped his character?

The most significant myth about God that Plato repudiated was the idea that God was a source of deception.<sup>11</sup> Plato insisted God that had no motive for wanting to deceive and that Homer was to be censured for claiming that Zeus sent a 'lying dream' to Agamemnon.<sup>12</sup>

*Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1961), p. 28: 'Disbelief in the gods of the old poets and the popular religion was as old as philosophy itself'; and pp. 48-49. Cf. also, A.H. Armstrong and R.A. Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), p. 2; T. Irwin, *Classical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 38.

9. Cf. *Euthyphro* 6A-B.

10. *Menippus* 3 (trans. A.M. Harmon). Cf. Daniélou, *Gospel Message*, p. 16.

11. Interestingly, Clement of Alexandria describes Plato as 'truth-loving', *Strom.* 1.8.

12. *Republic* 382E-383A, commenting on *Iliad* 2.1-41. Suetonius reports that the emperor Caligula considered having the works of Homer destroyed because he

Early Christianity came to embrace this Platonic theology, even affirming the *impossibility* of God's lying.<sup>13</sup> This is at least a modification, perhaps a repudiation, of the view of God found in the Hebrew scripture, including a passage which is eerily parallel to the *Iliad* story rejected by Plato:

Then Micaiah said, 'Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the left and to the right of him. And the Lord said, "Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" Then one said one thing, and another said another, until a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, "I will entice him."

"How?" the Lord asked him. He replied, "I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." Then the Lord said, "You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it." So you see, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has decreed disaster for you' (1 Kgs 22.19-23; cf. 2 Chron. 18.18-22).

Did early Christianity 'mature' in its understanding of God? Was there a willingness to give up 'childish' perceptions? Does the theology of early Christianity exhibit an apparent development consistent with Plato's programme of demythologizing?<sup>14</sup> These issues provide a framework for understanding the harsh contrast in John's Gospel between Jesus who is the 'Truth' and the devil who is regarded as 'the father of lies' and suggests the author's ambivalence towards the character of Pontius Pilate which is suggested by the latter's sophistic question 'What is truth?' (18.38).

The 'true' God is also a theme in Paul's letters. In referring to the conversion of the Thessalonian Christians, the apostle speaks of their having 'turned from idols to the true and living God' (1 Thess. 1.9). The term 'living', describing God, is fairly common in the Hebrew scripture (e.g., Deut. 5.26; 1 Sam. 17.26; Ps. 42.2; 84.2; Isa. 37.4, 17). The designation of God as 'true and living', however, is clearly intended to offer a sharp contrast to the character of idols who are by implication false<sup>15</sup>

wanted the same privilege as Plato in excluding Homer from his society, *Gaius Caligula* 34.

13. Cf. Tit. 1.2; Heb. 6:18; *Herm. Man.* 10.3; *Mart. Pol.* 14.2; Ignatius, *Rom.* 8.2; *1 Clem.* 27.2. Plato uses the term ἀδύνατον in *Republic* 381C. Cf. *Apology* 21B.

14. Cf. *Herm. Man.* 3.2.

15. Cf. Justin, *Apology* 6: 'We do proclaim ourselves atheists as regards those whom you call gods, but not with respect to the Most, True God...'