



Philosophy and Christian Faith

Clement of Alexandria

Chapter II.—Objection to the Number of Extracts from Philosophical Writings in These Books Anticipated and Answered.

In reference to these commentaries, which contain as the exigencies of the case demand, the Hellenic opinions, I say thus much to those who are fond of finding fault. First, even if philosophy were useless, if the demonstration of its uselessness does good, it is yet useful. Then those cannot condemn the Greeks, who have only a mere hearsay knowledge of their opinions, and have not entered into a minute investigation in each department, in order to acquaintance with them. For the refutation, which is based on experience, is entirely trustworthy. For the knowledge of what is condemned is found the most complete demonstration. Many things, then, though not contributing to the final result, equip the artist. And otherwise erudition commends him, who sets forth the most essential doctrines so as to produce persuasion in his hearers, engendering admiration in those who are taught, and leads them to the truth. And such persuasion is convincing, by which those that love learning admit the truth; so that philosophy does not ruin life by being the originator of false practices and base deeds, although some have calumniated it, though it be the clear image of truth, a divine gift to the Greeks; nor does it drag us away from the faith, as if we were bewitched by some delusive art, but rather, so to speak, by the use of an ampler circuit, obtains a common exercise demonstrative of the faith. Further, the juxtaposition of doctrines, by comparison, saves the truth, from which follows knowledge.

Philosophy came into existence, not on its own account, but for the advantages reaped by us from knowledge, we receiving a firm persuasion of true perception, through the knowledge of things comprehended by the mind. For I do not mention that the Stromata, forming a body of varied erudition, wish artfully to conceal the seeds of knowledge. As, then, he who is fond of hunting captures the game after seeking, tracking, scenting, hunting it down with dogs; so truth, when sought and got with toil, appears a delicious thing. Why, then, you will ask, did you think it fit that such an arrangement should be adopted in your memoranda? Because there is great danger in divulging the secret of the true philosophy to those, whose delight it is unsparingly to speak against everything, not justly; and who shout forth all kinds of names and words indecorously, deceiving themselves and beguiling those who adhere to them. “For the Hebrews seek signs,” as the apostle says, “and the Greeks seek after wisdom.

Chapter V.—Philosophy the Handmaid of Theology.

Accordingly, before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration. “For thy foot,” it is said, “will not stumble, if thou refer what is good, whether belonging to the Greeks or to us, to Providence.” For God is the cause of all good things; but of some primarily, as of the Old and the New Testament; and of others by consequence, as philosophy. Perchance, too, philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring “the Hellenic mind,” as the law, the Hebrews, “to Christ.” Philosophy, therefore, was a

preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ.

“Now,” says Solomon, “defend wisdom, and it will exalt thee, and it will shield thee with a crown of pleasure.” For when thou hast strengthened wisdom with a cope by philosophy, and with right expenditure, thou wilt preserve it unassailable by sophists. The way of truth is therefore one. But into it, as into a perennial river, streams flow from all sides. It has been therefore said by inspiration: “Hear, my son, and receive my words; that thine may be the many ways of life. For I teach thee the ways of wisdom; that the fountains fail thee not,”¹⁸⁵⁶ which gush forth from the earth itself. Not only did He enumerate several ways of salvation for any one righteous man, but He added many other ways of many righteous, speaking thus: “The paths of the righteous shine like the light.” The commandments and the modes of preparatory training are to be regarded as the ways and appliances of life.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children, as a hen her chickens!”¹⁸⁵⁸ And Jerusalem is, when interpreted, “a vision of peace.” He therefore shows prophetically, that those who peacefully contemplate sacred things are in manifold ways trained to their calling. What then? He “would,” and could not. How often, and where? Twice; by 306th the prophets, and by the advent. The expression, then, “How often,” shows wisdom to be manifold; every mode of quantity and quality, it by all means saves some, both in time and in eternity. “For the Spirit of the Lord fills the earth.”¹⁸⁵⁹ And if any should violently say that the reference is to the Hellenic culture, when it is said, “Give not heed to an evil woman; for honey drops from the lips of a harlot,” let him hear what follows: “who lubricates thy throat for the time.” But philosophy does not flatter. Who, then, does He allude to as having committed fornication? He adds expressly, “For the feet of folly lead those who use her, after death, to Hades. But her steps are not supported.” Therefore remove thy way far from silly pleasure. “Stand not at the doors of her house, that thou yield not thy life to others.” And He testifies, “Then shall thou repent in old age, when the flesh of thy body is consumed.” For this is the end of foolish pleasure. Such, indeed, is the case. And when He says, “Be not much with a strange woman,”¹⁸⁶⁰ He admonishes us to use indeed, but not to linger and spend time with, secular culture. For what was bestowed on each generation advantageously, and at seasonable times, is a preliminary training for the word of the Lord. “For already some men, ensnared by the charms of handmaidens, have despised their consort philosophy, and have grown old, some of them in music, some in geometry, others in grammar, the most in rhetoric.” “But as the encyclical branches of study contribute to philosophy, which is their mistress; so also philosophy itself co-operates for the acquisition of wisdom. For philosophy is the study of wisdom, and wisdom is the knowledge of things divine and human; and their causes.” Wisdom is therefore queen of philosophy, as philosophy is of preparatory culture. For if philosophy “professes control of the tongue, and the belly, and the parts below the belly, it is to be chosen on its own account. But it appears more worthy of respect and pre-eminence, if cultivated for the honour and knowledge of God.” And Scripture will afford a testimony to what has been said in what follows. Sarah was at one time barren, being Abraham’s wife. Sarah having no child, assigned her maid, by name Hagar, the Egyptian, to Abraham, in order to get children. Wisdom, therefore, who dwells with the man of faith (and Abraham was reckoned faithful and righteous), was still barren and without child in that generation, not having brought forth to Abraham aught allied to virtue. And she, as was proper, thought that he, being now in the time of progress, should have intercourse with secular culture first (by Egyptian the world is designated figuratively); and afterwards should approach to her according to divine providence, and beget Isaac.”

And Philo interprets Hagar to mean “sojourning.” For it is said in connection with this, “Be not much with a strange woman.” Sarah he interprets to mean “my principedom.” He, then, who has received previous training is at liberty to approach to wisdom, which is supreme, from which grows up the race of Israel. These things show that that wisdom can be acquired through instruction, to which Abraham attained, passing from the contemplation of heavenly things to the faith and righteousness which are according to God. And Isaac is shown to mean “self-taught;” wherefore also he is discovered to be a type of Christ. He was the husband of one wife Rebecca, which they translate “Patience.” And Jacob is said to have consorted with several,

his name being interpreted “Exerciser.” And exercises are engaged in by means of many and various dogmas. Whence, also, he who is really “endowed with the power of seeing” is called Israel, 1866 having much experience, and being fit for exercise.

Something else may also have been shown by the three patriarchs, namely, that the sure seal of knowledge is composed of nature, of education, and exercise.

You may have also another image of what has been said, in Tamar sitting by the way, and presenting the appearance of a harlot, on whom the studious Judas (whose name is interpreted “powerful”), who left nothing unexamined and uninvestigated, looked; and turned aside to her, preserving his profession towards God. Wherefore also, when Sarah was jealous at Hagar being preferred to her, Abraham, as choosing only what was profitable in secular philosophy, said, “Behold, thy maid is in thine hands: deal with her as it pleases thee;” manifestly meaning, “I embrace secular culture as youthful, and a handmaid; but thy knowledge I honour and reverence as true wife.” And Sarah afflicted her; which is equivalent to corrected and admonished her. It has therefore been well said, “My son, despise not thou the correction of God; nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him. For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.” And the foresaid Scriptures, when examined in other places, will be seen to exhibit other mysteries. We merely therefore assert here, that philosophy is characterized by investigation into truth and the nature of things (this is the truth of which the Lord Himself said, “I am the truth”); and that, again, the preparatory training for rest in Christ exercises the mind, rouses the intelligence, and begets an inquiring shrewdness, by means of the true philosophy, which the initiated possess, having found it, or rather received it, from the truth itself.

Chapter VII.—The Eclectic Philosophy Paves the Way for Divine Virtue.

The Greek preparatory culture, therefore, with philosophy itself, is shown to have come down from God to men, not with a definite direction but in the way in which showers fall down on the good land, and on the dunghill, and on the houses. And similarly both the grass and the wheat sprout; and the figs and any other reckless trees grow on sepulchres. And things that grow, appear as a type of truths. For they enjoy the same influence of the rain. But they have not the same grace as those which spring up in rich soil, inasmuch as they are withered or plucked up. And here we are aided by the parable of the sower, which the Lord interpreted. For the husbandman of the soil which is among men is one; He who from the beginning, from the foundation of the world, sowed nutritious seeds; He who in each age rained down the Lord, the Word. But the times and places which received [such gifts], created the differences which exist. Further, the husbandman sows not only wheat (of which there are many varieties), but also other seeds—barley, and beans, and peas, and vetches, and vegetable and flower seeds. And to the same husbandry belongs both planting and the operations necessary in the nurseries, and gardens, and orchards, and the planning and rearing of all sorts of trees.

In like manner, not only the care of sheep, but the care of herds, and breeding of horses, and dogs, and bee-craft, all arts, and to speak comprehensively, the care of flocks and the rearing of animals, differ from each other more or less, but are all useful for life. And philosophy—I do not mean the Stoic, or the Platonic, or the Epicurean, or the Aristotelian, but whatever has been well said by each of those sects, which teach righteousness along with a science pervaded by piety,—this eclectic whole I call philosophy. 1876 But such conclusions of human reasonings, as men have cut away and falsified, I would never call divine.

And now we must look also at this, that if ever those who know not how to do well, live well; 1877 for they have lighted on well-doing. Some, too, have aimed well at the word of truth through understanding. “But Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith.” It is therefore of no advantage to them after the end of life, even if they do good works now, if they have not faith. Wherefore also the Scriptures 1879 were translated into the language of the Greeks, in order that they might never be able to allege the excuse of ignorance, inasmuch as they are able to hear also what we have in our hands, if they only wish. One speaks in one way of the truth, in another way the truth interprets itself. The guessing at truth is one thing, and truth

itself is another. Resemblance is one thing, the thing itself is another. And the one results from learning and practice, the other from power and faith. For the teaching of piety is a gift, but faith is grace. “For by doing the will of God we know the will of God.” “Open, then,” says the Scripture, “the gates of righteousness; and I will enter in, and confess to the Lord.” But the paths to righteousness (since God saves in many ways, for He is good) are many and various, and lead to the Lord’s way and gate. And if you ask the royal and true entrance, you will hear, “This is the gate of the Lord, the righteous shall enter in by it.” While there are many gates open, that in righteousness is in Christ, by which all the blessed enter, and direct their steps in the sanctity of knowledge. Now Clemens, in his Epistle to the Corinthians, while expounding the differences of those who are approved according to the Church, says expressly, “One may be a believer; one may be powerful in uttering knowledge; one may be wise in discriminating between words; one may be terrible in deeds.”

Clement of Alexandria. “Stromata.” *The Nicene and Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. II. Ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1889.

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