

Athens and Jerusalem

Tertullian of Carthage

Tertullian was a Christian author, living in Carthage, North Africa, during a time when Christians were being subject to intense persecution for their faith at the hands of Roman authorities. His position on the relationship of faith to reason is one that decidedly downplays the importance of reason. “I believe it because it is absurd” (*credo quia absurdum*), he is reported to have said. In this passage from one of his many influential writings, he asks what does Athens (philosophical reason) have to do with Jerusalem (religious faith)?

These are the doctrines of men and of demons produced for itching ears of the spirit of this world’s wisdom: this the Lord called foolishness, and chose the foolish things of the world to confound even philosophy itself. For (philosophy) it is which is the material of the world’s wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and the dispensation of God.

Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy. From this source came the Aeons, and I know not what infinite forms, and the trinity of man in the system of Valentinus, who was of Plato’s school. From the same source came Marcion’s better god, with all his tranquility; he came of the Stoics. Then, again, the opinion that the soul dies is held by the Epicureans; while the denial of the restoration of the body is taken from the aggregate school of all the philosophers; also, when matter is made equal to God, then you have the teaching of Zeno; and when any doctrine is alleged touching a god of fire, then Heraclitus comes in.

The same subject-matter is discussed over and over again by the heretics and the philosophers; the same arguments are involved. Where does evil come from? Why is it permitted? What is the origin of man? And in what way does he come? Besides the question which Valentinus has very lately proposed—Where does God come from? Which he settles with the answer: From enthymesis and ectroma. Unhappy Aristotle! Who invented for these men dialectics, the art of building up and pulling down; an art so evasive in its propositions, so far-fetched in its conjectures, so harsh, in its arguments, so productive of contentions—embarrassing even to itself, retracting everything, and really treating of nothing! From where do those

Tertullian. “Prescription Against Heresies.” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 3. Trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1889. Translation updated. Introduction by Michael S. Russo.

fables and endless genealogies and unprofitable questions and words which spread like a cancer spring?

From all these, when the apostle would restrain us, he expressly names philosophy as that which he would have us be on our guard against. Writing to the Colossians, he says, "See that no one beguile you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, and contrary to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost." He had been at Athens, and had in his interviews (with its philosophers) become acquainted with that human wisdom which pretends to know the truth, while it only corrupts it, and is itself divided into its own manifold heresies, by the variety of its mutually repugnant sects.

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our fundamental faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.