

Basil the Great

The Value of Greek Literature among Other Early Church Fathers

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This content comes from the Cave's
The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education.

The Value of Greek Literature among Other Early Church Fathers Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria

THE EARLY CHURCH Fathers had mixed views regarding the classics, whether poetry or prose, mythology, drama, philosophy, or otherwise. The following selections present two of the more positive views regarding "outside" or "pagan" (non-Christian) literature that would have influenced Basil the Great. Brief explanations of each are given in italics.

For Justin Martyr (second century), philosophy is "the greatest possession" that leads human beings to God.

Justin Martyr Philosophy is, in fact, the greatest

possession, and most honorable before God, to whom it leads us and alone commends us. And these are truly holy men who have bestowed attention on philosophy. What philosophy is, however, and the reason why it has been sent down to men, have escaped the observation of most—for there would be neither Platonists, nor Stoics, nor Peripatetics, nor Theoretics (Skeptics), nor Pythagoreans, since this knowledge is one.¹

With Clement of Alexandria (second and early third century), we see a far more positive assessment of outside

literature. In short, Clement—the open-minded theologian and earnest catechist of Alexandria—values Greek and Latin literature for the truth it conveys. Philosophy, he declares, is something good. And nothing truly evil (such as demons) can produce anything good, he argues. Rather than being harmful, philosophy “is the clear image of truth, a divine gift to the Greeks.” In the past, philosophy was for the Greeks the means by which they were righteous; it was a “preparatory training” for the coming of Christ, he reasons, “just as the law was for the Hebrews.”

Clement of Alexandria Our book will not shrink from making use of what is best in philosophy and other preparatory instruction. . . . And, in truth, to speak briefly, among many small pearls there is the one. And in a great take of fish there is the beauty-fish. And by time and toil truth will gleam forth if a good helper is at hand. For most benefits are supplied from God through men.

All of us who make use of our eyes see what is presented before them. Even so, some look at objects for one reason, others for another. For instance, the cook and the shepherd do not survey the sheep in a similar manner. The one examines it to see if it is fat. The other watches to see if it is of good breed. Let a man milk the sheep’s milk if he needs sustenance. Let him shear the wool if he needs clothing. And in this way let me produce the fruit of the Greek erudition. . . .

For, like farmers who irrigate the land beforehand, so we also water with the liquid stream of Greek learning what in it is earthy, so that it may receive the spiritual seed cast into it and may be capable of easily nourishing it.

The *Stromata* [Clement’s book] will contain the truth mixed up in the teachings of philosophy, or rather covered over and hidden, as the edible part of the nut in the shell. For, in my opinion, it is fitting that the seeds of truth be kept for the cultivator of faith, and no others.

I am not unaware of what is babbled by some, who in their ignorance are frightened at every noise and say that we should occupy ourselves with what is most necessary and that which contains the faith. And that we should pass over what is beyond and superfluous, that which wears us out and pointlessly detains us

without leading us to the great end.

Others think that philosophy was introduced into life by an evil influence for the ruin of men, by an evil inventor. But I will show, throughout the whole of these *Stromata*, that evil has an evil nature and can never be the producer of anything that is good. This indicates that philosophy is in a sense a work of divine providence. . . .

Philosophy does not ruin life by being the originator of false practices and base deeds—though some have slandered it in this way, even though it is the clear image of truth, a divine gift to the Greeks. Nor does philosophy drag us away from the faith, as if we were bewitched by some deceptive art. Rather, so to speak, by the use of an ampler circuit, it achieves a common exercise demonstrative of the faith. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of doctrines, by comparison, preserves the truth from which follows knowledge. . . .

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 come to faith through demonstration. For your foot, it is said, will not stumble if you refer what is good—whether belonging to the Greeks or to us—to providence. For God is the cause of all good things—of some primarily, as with the Old and the New Testament, and of others by consequence, as with philosophy. It is possible, too, that philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, until the Lord called the Greeks. For philosophy was a schoolmaster to bring the Hellenic [Greek] mind to Christ, just as the law was for the Hebrews. Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ. . . .

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 schools that teach righteousness along with a knowledge pervaded by piety—this eclectic whole I call philosophy. . . .

These are the times of the oldest wise men and philosophers among the Greeks. And that most of them were barbarians by extraction and were trained among [non-Greek or Roman] barbarians, what need is there to say? Pythagoras is shown to have been

either a Tuscan or a Tyrian. And Antisthenes was a Phrygian. And Orpheus was an Odrysian or a Thracian. The majority also show Homer to have been an Egyptian. Thales was a Phoenician by birth, and was said to have consorted with the prophets of the Egyptians.² So did Pythagoras associate with the same persons by whom he was circumcised. He did this so that he could enter the innermost sanctuary and learn the mystic philosophy from the Egyptians. Moreover, he conversed with the chief of the Chaldeans and the Magi. And he gave a hint of the Church—now so-called—in the common hall that he maintained. And Plato does not deny that he procured all that is most excellent in philosophy from the barbarians. . . .

Later on, we will address the plagiarizing of the Greek philosophers—how they took their teachings from the Hebrews. But first, as due order demands, we must now speak of the time of Moses, by which the philosophy of the Hebrews will be demonstrated beyond all contradiction to be the most ancient of all wisdom. . . .

As for the Greeks, Homer and Hesiod are much more recent than the Trojan War. And after them the lawgivers among the Greeks are far more recent, Lycurgus and Solon, and the seven wise men, and Pherecydes of Syros, and Pythagoras the Great, who lived later, about the Olympiads, as we have shown. We have also demonstrated Moses to be more ancient, not only than those called poets and wise men among the Greeks, but older than most of their gods.³

Clement of Alexandria The same God that furnished both the covenants was the one who gave to the Greeks their philosophy by which the Almighty is glorified among the Greeks. . . .

So then, from the Hellenic training, and also from that of the law, are gathered into the one kind of saved people those who accept faith. . . . But as the proclamation [of the Gospel] has come now at the right time, so also at the right time were the Law and the Prophets given to the barbarians and philosophy to the Greeks to prepare their ears for the Gospel. . . . And in general terms, we will not err in alleging that all things necessary and profitable for life came to us

from God, and that, in particular, philosophy was given to the Greeks as a covenant peculiar to them—being, as it is, a stepping-stone to the philosophy that is according to Christ.⁴

Clement of Alexandria The multitude are frightened by Greek philosophy as children are at masks, being afraid that it will lead them astray. . . . *Nevertheless*, the mature Christian takes advantage of *other* branches of learning as auxiliary preparatory exercises in order to accurately communicate the truth as far as attainable and with as little distraction as possible. He does so for defense against reasonings that plot for the extinction of the truth. He will not then be deficient in what contributes to proficiency in the curriculum of studies and the Hellenic philosophy.⁵

Clement of Alexandria How absurd, then, is it, to those who attribute disorder and wickedness to the devil, to make him the bestower of philosophy, a virtuous thing! For in this way he is all but made more benevolent to the Greeks, relative to making men good, in comparison with the divine providence and mind. . . . Philosophy is not, then, the product of vice since it makes men virtuous. It follows, then, that it is the work of God, whose activity it is solely to do good. And all things given by God are given and received well.⁶

Clement discusses how Greek literature may be used for the benefit of those Greek catechumens who are learning about Christianity for the first time.

Clement of Alexandria He who collects what is useful from Hellenic studies for the advantage of the catechumens, and particularly when they are Greeks, . . . must not abstain from erudition, like irrational animals. Rather, he must collect as many aids as possible for his student hearers. Even so, he must by no means linger over these studies, except solely for the advantage that comes from them—so that, on grasping and obtaining this, he may be able to depart for home to the true philosophy [of Christ], which is a strong cable for the soul, providing security from everything.⁷

Clement believed that even if a person has studied Greek philosophy, he or she must nevertheless turn to Christ and the Christian philosophy.

Clement of Alexandria The Lord says in explanation, I am the door of the sheep. Men must then be saved by learning the truth through Christ, even if they attain philosophy. For now that is clearly shown which was not made known to other ages, which is now revealed to the sons of men. For there was always a natural manifestation of the one almighty God, among all right-thinking men.⁸

Finally, Clement suggests that a mature Christian may peruse Greek philosophy in his spare time, consuming it not as the main meal that provides true sustenance, but for dessert, as it were.

Clement of Alexandria A mature Christian always occupies himself with the things of highest importance. But if at any time he has leisure and time for relaxation from what is of primary importance, he applies himself to Hellenic philosophy in preference to other recreation, feasting on it as a kind of dessert at supper.⁹

So ends this item. See you in **another Cave reading or item.**

NOTES

¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 2.

² One should take Clement's general point here rather than (necessarily) his identification of origins for each of these men.

³ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.1-2; 5; 7; 15; 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.5, 6, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.10. To avoid confusion, we have replaced Clement's "Gnostic" (*gnōstikos*) with "mature Christian." By "Gnostic," Clement did not mean a Gnostic Christian in the sense that Basilides and Valentinian (both criticized by Clement) were Gnostics; rather, he simply meant a Christian mature in knowledge, virtue, and the like. For more on Clement's *gnōstikos*, see *ibid.* 6.9-10; 7.1, 3, 7-8, 11-14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.38. Regarding "mature Christian," see the note for 6.10.

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