

LESSON 2

FROM THE LAST APOSTLE TO CONSTANTINE

Acts 15:28, 29 records that the very first part of the New Testament was written in Jerusalem. It contained the authoritative apostolic interpretation of the universal salvation in Christ and defined what was acceptable Christian ethical conduct. The Apostle Paul's Epistles were written in the late fifties and early sixties of the first century. They were, in the main, the apostolic affirmation of Christian doctrine and ethical behaviour. With them the first versions of the written Gospels appeared. They were also attributed to an apostolic origin.¹

When the Apostles all died and the New Testament was not yet canonized or readily available to the churches, the questions of authority and orthodoxy became critical. Those who had known the Apostles became substitutes for them.

At this point, however, the Greek taste for speculation and reason became an important factor in the need for an up-to-date interpretation of the Christian faith. The New Testament had been written in Greek (or translated from Aramaic to Greek). Antioch, Alexandria, and even Rome used Greek in their liturgy in the Old Testament (LXX) as well as in the New Testament. Greek was the business language of the Roman Empire. Beyond that, rabbinical teaching did not appeal to the Greek mind.

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had had at least one influential voice raised in the defense of hellenizing their religion—or for judaizing Greek philosophy. That voice belonged to Philo Judaeus. He is mentioned briefly here because, in his way, Philo is a type of precursor of the early Christian writers who wrote after the death of the Apostles.

Philo Judaeus (ca. 20 B.C.—ca. A.D. 50)

Philo used the thought of Plato, Pythagoras, and the Stoics to try to reconcile Jewish and Greek thought by emphasizing the common truth apparent in both traditions. Without any concrete proof, Philo alleged that the greatest Greek thinkers had access to the laws and writings of Moses. The Greek concept of the *Logos* coupled with Plato's *demiurge* gave Philo an idea which he called the "first-born son of God," "the highest archangel," and "the high priest." However, he attributed no personality to the *Logos*, human or divine. The *Logos* for Philo is also the "spirit of wisdom," "the creative word of God." From Greek thought he chose the doctrine that man's "ideal should be to escape from the body . . . and to rise again to

Questions of _____ and
_____ became _____.

(authority, orthodoxy, critical)

Is the following statement true or false?

Following the death of the Apostles, Greek speculation and reason was highly used in interpreting the Christian Faith. _____

(true)

List two of the main ideas of Philo Judaeus (20 B.C. - A.D. 40).

(Compare your answers with the text.)

¹Matthew, John, Mark (attributed to Peter); only Luke is a "research Gospel."

God.”² It is this writer’s opinion that Philo developed his system among Jews in almost the exact same way that the more radical Gnosticism arose among Christians a few years later. No one really knows how much of Philo’s thought reached the Christian world of the first and second centuries.

Early Christian Writers

The works of a number of writers became definitive after the Apostles had passed from the scene.

Ignatius (ca. A.D. 50-111)

Ignatius was the Bishop in Antioch and later in Rome. His chief efforts were directed towards refuting and abolishing heresy. He deplored the divisive schismatics active in the Christian world of his day. He blamed most of the error of heresy on its relation to pagan philosophy.³ He died a martyr in Rome.

Polycarp (A.D. 69-155)

Polycarp, an ardent follower of Christ, was a Bishop of Smyrna and a former pupil of the Apostle John. He was arrested because he would not worship the Emperor of Rome. Polycarp wrote a number of epistles but only his *Epistle to the Philippians* remains extant. The work is his answer to their request for advice. The need for apostolic authority in critical times when the New Testament had not yet been gathered and canonized is evident in this work. Polycarp advocates a system of *apostolic succession* transmitted by the laying on of hands in special ordination.

Polycarp was offered his freedom if he would curse Christ. He replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Christ and He has done me nothing but good; how then could I curse Him, my Lord and Savior?”⁴ He was then burned alive.

Papias (ca. A.D. 70-155)

Papias, a companion and friend to Polycarp, was another pupil of the Apostle John. He commented on the Lord’s Discourses, after having inquired of those who had known Jesus exactly what were the words of the Lord. He was quoted extensively by later writers, especially Irenaeus and Eusebius.⁵ He was the Bishop of Hierapolis. In his writings he mentions a collection of the sayings of Jesus in the Hebrew language. A fragment of a papyrus found at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, near the end of the nineteenth

²Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961), p. 49.

³Ibid., p. 53.

⁴Henry H. Halley, *Halley’s Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1965), p. 763.

⁵A. H. Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1906), p. 237.

The abolition of heresy was a chief aim of

(Ignatius)

UNDERLINE the best answers.

One, all, none of the writings of Polycarp has, have survived.

(one, has)

century "may be a remnant of such an earlier work."⁶ His work implies that the Greek Gospels must be a translation of earlier materials which were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic.

Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165)

The early writer of most interest to this study on the relation of philosophy to Christian thought is Justin Martyr. He was born at Nablus (ancient Shechem) about the time the Apostle John died. He spoke Greek and was a student of the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics many years before he became a Christian. Even after he became a Christian he always wore the "pullium," or the philosopher's cloak. He affirmed that the only viable philosophy was the Christian faith. Justin Martyr thought that the "Divine Logos" (whether the Logos of Philo or of the Apostle John or some other is not clear) "had enlightened thinkers like Socrates to see the errors of paganism," and that "the logical conclusion of such enlightenment was Christianity."⁷

Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 230)

Some leading Christian thinkers denounced Greek philosophy altogether. Tertullian held that philosophical thought and speculation were the roots of all heresy in the Christian world. He had studied Plato and Greek literature as well as Roman law. When he was converted to Christianity he made a deep study of the Bible and of the Church Fathers and spoke with authority on theology and Church history. He so rejected the Hellenistic influences on the Christian faith that he began to write exclusively in Latin. His works began a significant change from the use of Greek to the use of Latin as the chief language of the Church Fathers. He valued faith above reason and is credited with the statement about the incarnation of Christ, "It is certain because it is impossible."⁸ In protest against the secularizing of the Church, he became a Montanist (A.D. 200). For the highly educated Tertullian, worldly wisdom divorced from faith in Jesus Christ was meaningless.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 216)

In an attempt to defend the faith against the ancient beliefs of Greece and Rome, Clement of Alexandria took the opposite position. He had been an ardent student of philosophy and literature when he began to study the Bible seriously. When he converted to Christianity, he tried to do for Christianity what Philo had done for Judaism using Greek philosophy. Clement really "regarded Christianity as a system of philosophy, which had advanced beyond the Greeks, and for which the Greeks had been a preparation."⁹

⁶Albert E. Avey, p. 54.

⁷Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 13.

⁸Albert E. Avey, p. 58.

⁹Ibid.

Is the following statement true or false?

The work of Papias indicates that the Gospels were written originally in Greek. _____

(false)

The Christian faith is the only viable philosophy was the position of _____.

(Justin Martyr)

Tertullian denounced Greek _____ altogether.

(philosophy)

Tertullian valued _____ above _____.

(faith, reason)

The idea that Christianity was a system of philosophy that had advanced beyond the Greeks, but for which the Greeks had been a preparation, was the position of _____.

(Clement)

Origen (185-254)

Clement's most brilliant pupil was Origen, who used Plato to help him interpret the entire Christian faith. He was also influenced by his own studies of the Scriptures. He published a *hexapla* of the Old Testament Scriptures—six versions in parallel columns; and he wrote many commentaries on the Bible.

Rivals to Christian Thought

Not all the philosophers were sympathetic to Christian thought.

Plotinus (204-270)

Origen came into contact and conflict with Plotinus, the brilliant pupil of Ammonius Saccus who organized the thought of Neo-Platonism. Plotinus taught that God is the Ultimate Reality, so lofty that He cannot be described. God is the One, the Infinite Cause. From God, all things *emanate*. Things may be observed on a scale of reality—the steps down from God being mind (*nous*), soul (life), and matter.¹⁰ The human soul is part of World Soul—a part mind and a part sensory being—stretched from both directions. “The fall of man” occurs when he is willing to descend into pure sensory being. The salvation of man occurs when he can get into communion with God and identify with Him in mystic union. Plotinus’ mysticism became a strong rival for Christianity and produced much opposition to Christ.

While Neo-Platonism based salvation on mystic experience and meditation, Gnosticism advocated the possession of superhuman knowledge for salvation and claimed such important thinkers as Tatian. Although Greek philosophy appeared to be a part of Gnosticism, it was a curious mixture of Judaism, Near Eastern religions, semi-popular philosophy and Christianity.¹¹

In the third century, Manichaeism superseded Gnosticism to a great degree. Its founder, Mani (215-275), projected a mixture of Persian and Christian thought using the “primeval struggle between darkness and light, good and evil.” He said that the only hope of man lies in an ascetic life which withdraws from all contact with matter. Manichaeism spread through Asia and Europe and was influential until the Reformation—mainly because of its influence on monasticism. The influences of mysticism, esoteric or exclusive knowledge, and asceticism are still with us in modified but powerful forms. They all contribute to heretical practice when they appear in strength.

These and other variances from the Bible based on speculation, ignorance and antagonism led to much confusion. Not least among them was the controversy over the nature of Jesus Christ and the validity of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 61.

¹¹Colin Brown, pp. 13, 14.

Origen used _____ to help him interpret the entire Christian faith.

(Plato)

The thought of Neo-Platonism was organized by _____.

(Plotinus)

The possession of superhuman knowledge for salvation was known as _____.

(Gnosticism)

Manichaeism stressed the _____ life.

(ascetic)

When Constantine the Great conquered Rome, his commitment to Christianity (A.D. 313) not only caused him to stop the Roman persecution of Christians but also caused him much anxiety over the apparent confusion among Christian leaders. He called an Ecumenical Council at Nicea in A.D. 325. The Secretary of the Nicene Council, Eusebius (260-340), made the keynote address. The issue was precisely the status of Jesus in the Trinity. When Eusebius examined the writings of the Greeks and the Hebrews with regard to their value for Christianity, he advocated the Hebrew sources over the Greek, but defended the Christians for going beyond the Jews in new principles and practices.

Arius (ca. 280-336)

Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, launched the great controversy over the Person of Jesus Christ by claiming that He was of like (*homoiousios*) nature, but not identical (*homoousios*) in nature to the Father in the Trinity. Arius wanted to maintain a monotheism that he thought was impossible if Jesus were equal to the Father. He was declared an heretic at Nicea and again at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Athanasius (298-373) was the defender of trinitarian views and Arius' most fervent adversary at Nicea.

Conclusion

The above is an account of the way current Greek philosophy and Christian thought evolved side by side after the Apostles' deaths. This is but a touch of the history of those times laced with anarchy, persecution, martyrdom and intense effort to systematize religious thought. The period merits much more notice than can be given to it here. At the most convenient opportunity, the average Christian will want to continue his reading on this period. It is certainly evident that Greek thought did much to shape Christian doctrine during the period.

The Council at Nicea (A.D. 325) was called by

(Constantine)

UNDERLINE the correct answer.

Athanasius, Arius was condemned as a heretic at
Nicea.

(Arius)

Greek thought helped to shape Christian

(doctrine)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. What became critical when the Apostles all died?

2. Name two ideas projected by Philo Judaeus (20 B.C.-A.D. 40)

3. What were the chief efforts of Ignatius?

4. What writing of Polycarp remains extant?

5. Identify Papias (A.D. 70-155).

6. What was Justin Martyr's conclusion about philosophy?

7. How did Tertullian view Greek philosophy?

8. What did Tertullian value most?

9. How did Clement of Alexandria see Greek philosophy?

10. What Greek philosopher did Origen use to interpret the Christian faith?

11. Identify the following: Plotinus, Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism.

12. What was the outcome of the Ecumenical Council at Nicea (A.D. 325)?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 7-16 and 119 in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following questions:

1. Name two famous men who thought that philosophy might lead men to true religion.
2. Discuss the difference in the opinions of Justin Martyr and Tertullian.
3. What was the Apostle Paul's opinion of philosophy? Cite texts to support your point.
4. Why should one study the history of philosophy?
5. Explain the "Way of Negation." Who is famous for the use of this method?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. Write a statement of what you anticipated upon your study of philosophy and religion. What do you think of the value of the philosophy of religion?
2. How much of your faith is really challenged by scientific affirmations such as "the eternity of matter" and the "authentic proof of the evolution of the species"?
3. Explain the term "Apostolic Authority." Where is Apostolic Authority to be found in these days?

Seminar Discussion

1. Of what value is "Apostolic Authority" for Christian faith?
2. What do we use to establish authority equal to "Apostolic Authority" now that the Apostles and all who knew them have died?
3. Of what authority is the Bible for our faith? Is it infallible? How?