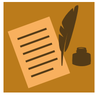
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# Greek Literature and Christian Doctrine in Early Christianity: A Difficult Co-Existence

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**Abstract:** This paper traces the complex relationship between classical literature and Christian doctrine in the first four centuries. In the earliest period of Christianity, we can identify two attitudes of Christians towards Greek literature: the hostile attitude shown by Tatian, Theophilus, and Tertullian, and the openness to Greek culture and philosophy demonstrated by Justin the Martyr, Athenagoras of Athens, and Minucius Felix. A notable change happened in the Alexandrian milieu when Clement of Alexandria and Origen started considering Greek classics the embodiment of an authentic Christian spirit. In keeping with Origen, Basil of Caesarea realized a good synthesis between Greek thought and Christian faith. Noting germs of divine revelation in ancient Greek thought, Christian authors took the tools of Greco-Roman criticism and ancient philosophy to develop their doctrine.

**Keywords:** Greek literature; Christian doctrine; learning; masters; Christian authors

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## 1. Didactic Autority: Jesus, Paul and Christian Doctrine

Although Jesus lived as a Jew and was obedient to the Torah, unlike the rabbis and other masters or preachers, he was not married. He was homeless, he owned nothing, and he moved from village to village, where he taught and established relationships with those he met. Men and women were invited to follow him and put his teaching into practice (Byrskog 1994; Normann 1967). Recognized as a rabbi,[1] he spoke in public and was surrounded by carefully chosen disciples who admitted the disruptive and founding value of his preaching. His disciples stated: "Master, we know that you are a man of integrity and you do not worry about anyone, because you do not regard the person of men, but you teach the way of God in keeping with the truth" (Mt 22:16). Jesus was the true master, who "proclaimed the Gospel of God" (κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ).[2] Several times, the Gospel of Mark offers a portrait of Jesus as a master endowed with *auctoritas*, ready to teach the truth:

> on the Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astonished at his teaching, because he taught them as one having authority.[3]

> Later on, in the second and third century AD, the two famous heads of the *Didaskaleion* in Alexandria, Clement and Origen, in contrast to the classical and Gnostic tradition, presented Jesus as the unique master (διδάσκαλος), capable of instilling the true doctrine:

> The school (διδασκαλεῖον) is this Church (ἡ ἐκκλησία ἥδε) and the only teacher (ὁ μόνος διδάσκαλος) is the bridegroom (ὁ νυμφίος), the right counsel of the good Father, the true wisdom (σοφία γνήσιος), the sanctuary of knowledge (ἁγίασμα γνώσεως).[4]

> He did not persuade people to follow him, neither as a tyrant [. . . ], nor as a pirate [. . . ], nor as a rich man [. . . ], but he acted as a teacher (ὡς διδάσκαλος) who teaches men what they should think of the God of the universe, and the cult they must render to him, as well as the moral custom they must follow.[5]

This portrait of Jesus was evident in the arts from the second half of the third century, where Christ, following the model of the ancient philosophers, was revealed as having authority (Testini 1963). Among the frescoes in the anonymous catacomb in via Anapo, along via Salaria in Rome, Christ, dressed in the clothes of a philosopher, is depicted seated and making the gesture of speaking while surrounded by the twelve apostles (Figure 1). Additionally, in the catacomb of Saint Domitilla, Christ is depicted surrounded by his apostles (Figure 2). Such representations emphasize his role as a master.

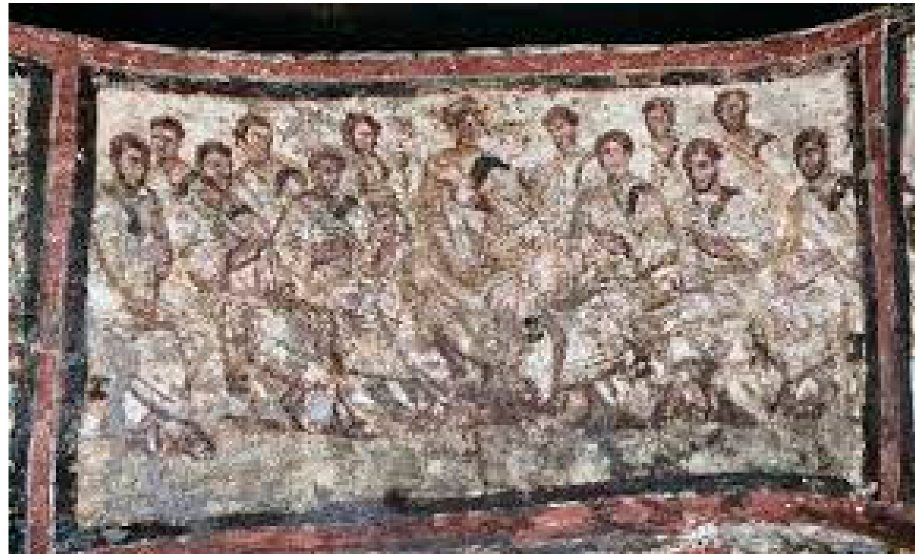

**Figure 1.** Christ with his disciples, fresco Catacomb via Anapo, Rome. Photo by the author.

**Figure 2.** Christ as a master with his disciples, catacomb of Saint Domitilla, Rome. Photo by the author.

The content of Christian faith, proclaimed by Jesus and adopted by his disciples, might seem simple at a first glance. Yet, the principles and dictates of Christianity contain profound meaning, which requires intellectual tools in order to be understood. Based on the overthrow of traditional values, the preaching of Jesus, whose famous Sermon on the Mount perfectly conveys his thought,[6] was influenced by philosophical concepts (Sachot 2007). Paul's teaching also adopted philosophical and classical concepts without disregarding the mechanisms of ancient rhetoric. On the occasion of the speech uttered in the Areopagus, the

Apostle Paul found himself in front of “very religious” (δεισιδαιμονεστέρους) Athenians who were curious to understand the “strange things” (ξενίζοντα) professed by him (Penna 2001, pp. 365–90). He decided to employ expressions and images taken from Greek philosophy, especially from Stoicism. He stated that the unknown God whom the pagans venerated was the “God who created the world and everything in it, he who is the Lord of heaven and earth” (Act. 17:24). This God also created man. In this context, Paul quoted a verse from Aratus of Soli: Τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν (“From him is our lineage”, Act. 17:28).[7] Classical culture is useful to comprehend the divine essence.[8] Moreover, what about scriptural exegesis? It must be learned and studied methodically under the tutelage of a competent master (Robertson 2016; Engberg-Pedersen 1994; Engberg-Pedersen 2000; Collins 2008). Influenced by classical literature, Christian authors operated a remarkable synthesis of Greco-Roman rhetoric and philosophy, taking various attitudes towards their Hellenistic literary and philosophical inheritance.

## 2. Masters, Culture and Some Controversies

Among the charisms in the ecclesial community, Paul included apostles, prophets, and teachers (1 Cor. 12:28) who were well active between the second and third centuries, as testified by the *Epistle of Barnabas* or by the *Shepherd of Hermas*.[9] In the third century, Origen mentioned the existence of itinerant masters in the countryside and in the cities, who were welcomed by the rich and upper class.[10] But what was the relationship between these Christian teachers, who were not officially recognized as such by the state authority, and the institutional and liturgical activity of the local churches led by the bishops? Problems of no small relevance arose around the role of the Christian master, as hinted at by Matthew’s well-known saying: “Do not call anyone master, because only one is your master” (Mt 23:10). A similar statement seems to suggest a sort of controversy around this charismatic individual (Cattaneo 1995, pp. 57–68; Rizzi 1999, pp. 177–98). In this context, it is also significant that the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* refused the title of διδάσκαλος for himself.[11] Is this a mere affirmation of modesty or is it in keeping with Matthew’s saying?[12]

But there is something more. Although Christianity did not renounce the role of teaching and although it was conscious of the importance of learning Christian content at school, in the first centuries, Christians never bothered to set up Christian schools or establish the pagan school on a new basis in keeping with Christian doctrine.[13] Only in the year 362 AD, when the emperor Julian imposed state control over teaching with an edict (*C. Theod*. 13,3,5), Christianity tried to react. In fact, Julian’s edict, also protested by pagans, induced the two Apollinares of Laodicea, the elder and the younger, to devise a Christian scholastic curriculum that was alternative to the classical one. Choosing Homer as a privileged model, they produced paraphrases of biblical books in classical forms, such as Moses in hexameters, historical books in dactylic measure or in tragic form, and the Gospels as Platonic dialogues. By adopting the literary forms of the classical tradition, the two Apollinares reworked the Holy Scriptures in order to educate students in the divine wisdom.[14] According to them, the content of the Scriptures would not be modified by adopting a new version with different meter, diction, and structure.

Between the second and the third centuries, some Christian authors pointed out the difficult role of the teacher operating in a pagan cultural milieu and questioned the participation of Christians in a school based on the classical contents, putting forward the possibility that students could withdraw from school to avoid being contaminated by deviant ethical and moral concepts.[15] A century later, Augustine of Hippo narrated this sharp contrast. The *profanae litterae* were read at school, in which the errors of the pagan heroes and the immorality of the deities of the classical pantheon were narrated to the students. But Christian teaching aimed at morality and the importance of reading and meditating on the Scriptures. How was one to conciliate such teachings with what was learned at school?

Augustine’s relationship with school is eloquent: he gave his scholastic experience an intentional meaning of martyrdom and a sinful connotation. The young Augustine,

beaten and mocked, was forced to go to school, because he was put there: *in scholam datus sum*, Augustine wrote, which means that he was "put in prison", nearly to death.[16] School education, a system that was codified for some time, saw the students forced to walk "the troublesome ways" (*aerumnas vias*), by which they were compelled to pass, "multiplying labor and sorrow upon the sons of Adam" (*multiplicato labore et dolore filiis Adam*).[17] Here, the reference to Genesis 3:16 highlights how school was dangerous. Augustine observed that he was sent to school to obtain learning, the use of which he did not understand (*quid utilitatis esset*),[18] but he learned classical texts and experienced a sinful delight in them.

This difficult relationship between classical literature and Christian doctrine was experienced by other contemporaries of Augustine. After giving up his family, friends and home to embrace asceticism, Jerome confessed that the only sacrifice he failed to make was to "give up the bookshop that I had assembled for myself in Rome with so much care and fatigue".[19] After reading Plautus and Cicero, Jerome found that when he begun to read the prophets, their style seemed barbaric and repugnant to him. Hence, his disturbing dream, in which he was condemned because he was a follower of Cicero, not of Christ (*non Christianus, sed Ciceronianus*).[20]

Despite this contrast, Christians were trained in the pagan schools of that time, where classical literature remained the basic learning. The training course was identical for all the members of the upper class, both pagan and Christian (Rappe 2001, pp. 405–32). Christians, on the other hand, developed catechetical schools within the church, which were open to anyone wishing to approach Christian doctrine (Pouderon 1998, pp. 237–69). Hand in hand, in keeping with the Roman and Jewish tradition, Christianity emphasized the role of family, a place of education and formation for religious doctrine. Christian families continued the practice of transmitting the wisdom and traditions received from one generation to the next (Rubenson 2000, pp. 110–39; Larsen and Rubenson 2018).

In light of such a context, it is understandable how the coexistence, albeit on different levels, of two educational systems (classical school and Christian catechetical school) could generate contrasts and disagreements. A certain tension arose between Christian masters and institutional activity. If pagans did not recognize the status of διδάσκαλος to the Christian teacher, Christians had to face the problem of making their identity and religious formation coexist with a classical tradition, founded on polytheism (Lugaresi 2004, pp. 788–89).

Worth noticing is the view of the pagan philosopher Celsus. He presented Christian teaching as the result of simple individuals who were unable to compete with the true intellectuals and ready to turn to the *simpliciores* (the simple) or to servants, women, and children. Where did Christian teaching take place? Not at school, but in a craft workshop, in the house of illiterate people, or in an environment reserved for women, Celsus stated.[21] Furthermore, Christian teachers were not open to dialogue; they avoided any discussion or debate with others, and they incited revolt against the fathers and true teachers. Far from understanding the value of the paradoxicality rooted in Christian doctrine, Celsus considered Christian teaching subversive and ready to undermine the system of values codified by classical *paideia*.[22]

Faced with such accusations, Origen replied by emphasizing the role of the Christian teacher as ready to engage in discussion, ready to select the texts for his students, and as not conveying the shameful and immoral content of the classical tradition. On the contrary, if there were teachers who taught and prepared students in philosophy, the Christian would not prohibit young students to learn from him, but he would consider his teaching as preparatory for learning Christian doctrine.[23]

Adopting the tones of controversy, the relationship with classical culture became fundamental.

## 3. Christian Apologetics between Classical Literature and Philosophy

Although it was rooted in the Jewish background and it initially adopted the form of the Semitic categories, Christian doctrine, when it spread in areas of Greek culture,

aspiring to a universal diffusion, had to be reformulated, making use of the linguistic and philosophical categories of Greek Hellenism.[24] In many aspects different from Greek thought, Christian doctrine needed to be presented in terms that were as familiar as possible and comprehensible to the pagan world. Especially from the middle of the second century, the relationship between Christian and Greek culture became relevant, since the latter began to give some attention, albeit marked by contempt or sufficiency, to the nascent religion. Phases of discussion and encounter were decisive for establishing a dialogue.[25]

Arising as a missionary work, in order to defend the new religion from various kinds of accusations that were formulated against it, Christian apologetics of the first centuries engaged in a discussion with Greek culture. Two prevailing attitudes towards ancient knowledge were relevant. The first one was connoted by hostility towards classical culture. The greatest representative of this intransigent current was Tatian, who rejected any statement extraneous to Christian doctrine and conceived of it as the fruit of the evil. To him and many other proponents of this view, Hellenism and Christianity had nothing in common.[26]

Tatian did not fail to evoke unedifying anecdotes about the ancient philosophers, as well as their disposition to be paid, and above all, the contradictions between one philosopher and another.[27] With great polemics, he opposed the false wisdom of the Greeks with "barbarian philosophy", namely that philosophy antecedent to Homer and the Greek sages, the real source of truth: the Holy Scriptures.[28] Around 170 AD, Tatian opened a Christian philosophical school where everyone was welcome, even "women who pursed philosophy"[29] and "wise women",[30] because the new religion wanted to have a universal dimension: "We welcome all those who want to listen to us, even old women and striplings", wrote Tatian.[31]

Ready to demonstrate the contradictions of classical philosophy and the absurdities of poets' fables, Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, also perceived classical culture as an artifice of demons, which prevented men from arriving at the truth.[32] In such a context, we must not forget Tertullian's position. He attacked the ancient philosophers, accusing them of vainglory, a lack of wisdom, not living according to moral and ethical doctrines, and especially, showing a stupid curiosity (*stupida curiositas*), which prompted them to deal with idle questions, far from the truth.[33] Different was the research carried out by Christians, based on *simplicitas* and illuminated by Christ' revelation. After the coming of Christ, there was no longer any need for *curiositas*, and, after the Gospel, there was no longer any need for research. Christianity was the true doctrine.[34] Tertullian wrote several statements about the incompatibility between classical culture and Christianity. For instance, in his *Apology*, he claimed: "What is therefore similar between a philosopher and a Christian, between a disciple of Greece and a disciple of heaven, between an operator of words and one of deeds, between a builder and a destroyer, between a flatterer and a restorer of the truth, between he who is a thief and he who is its guardian?".[35] The same concept was expressed in the *Prescriptions against the heretics* with a sentence destined to become famous: "What do Athens and Jerusalem have in common, then? The Academy and the Church?".[36]

In truth, this hostile attitude towards the classical tradition was discrepant from practice. Although the contradictions of the ancient philosophers were pointed out by the Christian authors, it was not possible to do so without them: the polemic was made with the same tools and with the same categories of thought. Tatian himself, when he had to explain his doctrine on God, the world and man, could not fail to evoke ancient philosophical doctrines. His description of God as a spirit, although close to the Gospel of John, was influenced by Stoicism. When he described the condition of the soul, which, due to sin, lost the wings made up of the perfect spirit, he evoked the image of the wings of the soul, as described in Plato's *Phaedrus*.[37]

After noticing the discrepancy of the pagan poets, Theophilus also adduced some of their passages in support of the prophets' statements. He mentioned some ancient philosophers in his question about the uniqueness of God and the resurrection of the

body.[38] In the *Exhortation to the Greeks*, the author called "Pseudo-Justin" first presented Homer as a disseminator of the genealogies and the stories of the gods, then he mentioned him in support of the monotheistic conception of God and the resurrection of the body.[39]

On the other hand, the second prevailing attitude towards ancient knowledge was a conciliatory trend that noticed the values of Greek culture, believing that in Greek knowledge, there were sparks of truth suitable for the knowledge of God. Paul's statement, πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε ("Examine everything with prudence, keep what is good"; 1Thess 5:21), seemed to inspire these Christian authors: Minucius Felix, Athenagoras, and Justin the Martyr (Gómez 2023).

Some verses of Homer could be mentioned in support of monotheism, eschatology, or the immortality of the soul.[40] Homer and the Bible also shared the analogy of some stories and narrations (for example, the story of the flood). This closeness drew the attention of Christians, and while making it easier for them to take up Homeric verses, it posed a problem: how should they interpret these analogies? The proposed solution was that the Greek poets, and, in particular, Homer, knew the Bible. Hence, it is important to demonstrate on the Christian side that the biblical authors were antecedents to the Greek ones. It is the well-known commonplace of *furta Graecorum* (Pépin 1955, pp. 105–22).

The same complex attitude was shown towards philosophy. In the only biblical passage where the word "philosophy" appears (Col 2:8), Paul invites the faithful not to let themselves be deceived by it and by the empty deceptions inspired by the human tradition. This position had good representatives in some Christian apologetics: from Hermia to Tatian and from Tertullian to the Pseudo-Justin of the *Exhortation to the Greeks*. Such authors who rejected a dialogue with philosophical culture, noticing the correspondence of certain concepts between ancient philosophy and Christianity, accused Platonism of having plundered other cultures (in particular of having drawn from Moses, who was considered a prophet before Plato; see Morlet 2014; Karamanolis 2021; Droge 1989, pp. 1–11; Ridings 1995, pp. 36–196). In these writers—as already in the Gospels or in the Pauline epistolary–the adoption of classical philosophy was evident. The theoretical assumption, based on the rejection of philosophy, was discrepant from practice. Moreover, there were some questions dealt with by Greek philosophers for which the Ancient and the New Testament writings lacked any food for thought. For that reason, Christian intellectuals drew on Greek philosophy (Zachhuber 2020).

Some apologists of the second century called themselves "philosophers"[41] and presented Christianity as the true philosophy and adopted an open attitude towards ancient philosophical thought. They were inspired by the models of Greek philosophy to elaborate the Christian revelation theologically (Droge 1987, pp. 303–19). They explained some Christian doctrines in a fashion counteracting Gnostic speculations, offering an answer to the criticism proposed by educated pagans. Although it was considered an imperfect knowledge, Platonism appeared as the most successful attempt at knowledge of the truth, which was sufficient to establish a connection with Christian doctrine.[42]

This attitude is evident in the thought of the apologist Justin. Moved by the desire to explain the Christian faith in a rational fashion, Justin was the first Christian philosopher open to teaching:

> Since I returned to the city of Romans for the second time, I have lived above the baths of Myrtinus, and I know of no other meeting place [scil. of Christians] if not this. If someone wanted to come and to see me, I made him part of the talk of truth.[43]
>
> Furthermore, in other houses, there were διδάσκαλοι, who imparted Christian teachings to those who wanted to learn them. However, it is under discussion how such a figure between the second and the third centuries could be harmonized with the process of the hierarchization and organization of the Church around the institutional figure of the bishop.[44]

According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Justin, well placed in the cultural context of the time, did not escape public debates.[45] When the Cynic philosopher Crescens publicly attacked Christians, Justin did not hesitate to answer the accusations, in keeping with the philosophical method of ἐρωτάσεις καὶ ἀποκρίσεις.[46] Stimulated by the anti-Christian propaganda, the Christian teachers did not escape dialogue, and similar episodes of contestation on the part of the orator, direct or indirect, must have been frequent in the cultural milieu of that time (Rizzi 2019, pp. 131–32).

Justin considered "philosophy as to be the greatest good, the most precious good in relation to God, because it is the only possibility we have of reaching him and uniting ourselves with him".[47] Not the contrast, but the coincidence between faith and reason allows us to reach the knowledge of God. In the *Dialogue with Tryphon*, written in Ephesus in 160 AD, Justin traces, against a Platonic background, his intellectual itinerary, well inserted in the social, cultural, and philosophical climate of the second century (Joly 1973, pp. 11–74). When the Jew Tryphon asked him what his philosophy was, Justin described his encounter with and disappointment with the main philosophical schools of the time. Stoicism, which shared many concepts with Christianity, nourished an excessive trust in man, and for this reason, it was not able to grasp the metaphysical truth. Aristotle's followers did not follow the fundamental principles of their master, but they considered philosophy a disinterested search for truth. One of them asked Justin for a fee for his intellectual services. Pythagorean philosophy would have liked to introduce him to the studies of astronomy, music, and geometry, but Justin, not knowing these disciplines thoroughly and not wanting to invest more time in learning them, chose not to embrace this path.[48]

He thought he could find the most accomplished example in Platonism, as the archetypal world of the ideas and the knowledge of the incorporeal realities aroused in him the hope of being able to see God. But an encounter with an old man demolished the Platonic theories on the immortality of the soul and on the transmigration from one body to another (the doctrine of metempsychosis).[49] However, although Platonic philosophy was not able to know God, how was it possible to find the truth? The old man revealed the main road to Justin: the prophets were the only ones who proclaimed God, not through human research but due to divine revelation.[50]

The final revelation is represented not by the various philosophies but by that philosophy sent by God to men: Christianism. Justin writes:

> Most people have missed what philosophy was and why it was sent to men; otherwise, there would have been neither Platonists, nor Stoics, nor Theoreticians, nor Pythagoreans, because philosophical knowledge is unique. Therefore, I want to explain to you how it has become multi-headed. It happened that the followers of those who first embraced philosophy and, for this reason, became famous followed them, not in the search for truth, but only because they were impressed by their fortitude, their temperance and by the novelty of their speeches. Each of them believed that only what he learned from his master to be true, so that they themselves, who transmitted these teachings and other similar ones to their successors, began to be called by the name of those who had the authorship of the doctrine.[51]

Christian doctrine contains the truth announced by the prophets. But Justin's intellectual journey did not lead him to repudiate what he learned from the various philosophical schools. On the contrary, he accepted what was good in classical culture and adopted it for the purpose of understanding the principles of faith. This vision is strictly associated with the doctrine of the Λόγος σπερματικός, which is of Stoic origin and is a cornerstone of Justin's thought (Holte 1958, pp. 109–68). According to Justin, the Logos instilled the seeds of truth, even before his incarnation. However, although the action of the Logos was at work before the incarnation, this dispensation remained partial and obscure: "All the right principles that philosophers and legislators have discovered and expressed well, they owe to whatever of the Word they have found and contemplated in part (κατὰ μέρος)".[52]

What Greek philosophers theorized belongs to the Christians, as well.[53] However, there is an element to keep in mind as Justin points out: the revelation formulated in the ancient world is a partial revelation: "The authors were able to perceive the truth obscurely thanks to the sowing of the Word that had been implanted in them. But it is one thing to possess a semen (σπέρμα), and a likeness proportionate to one's capacity, and it is another thing to possess reality itself".[54]

Inspired by a "part of the Logos", the Greeks had a partial knowledge of the truth, while the Christians received the Logos itself. However, according to Justin, Greek philosophers, although they partially participated in the Logos, prepared the proclamation of the Gospel (Hillar 2012, pp. 138–69). Thus, a fruitful dialogue was opened between ancient culture and Christianity, and it might find fertile ground in Alexandria.

## 4. The Alexandrian School and Its Relevance

In Alexandria, against the cultural and philosophical background of the second and third centuries, the activity and presence of ancient philosophers was well attested. Despite the scarcity of the historical sources, the philosophical school of Ammonius Saccas was relevant for the formation of another great philosopher, Plotinus. In the *Life of Plotinus*, Porphyry narrates that Plotinus devoted himself to philosophy from the age of twenty-eight after being attracted by the philosophical teaching of Ammonius, under whose guidance he deepened his philosophical thought.[55] The intense activity of philosophers in Alexandria in the second century is well demonstrated by the *Oration to the Alexandrians*, held in the theatre of Alexandria by Dio Chrysostom.[56] In this text, the orator evokes the existence of three categories of philosophers: (1) those who did not wish to appear in public; (2) those who wanted to show the depth of their philosophical discussions only in front of a well-formed audience capable of appreciating their value; and (3) those who had the courage to speak in the theatre, but only to pronounce a few sentences (they were ready to leave the stage as soon as the crowd started to rumble). To these three categories of philosophers, Dio added the intellectuals, the learned people, and those who engaged in the composition and editing of epideictic oratory and poems.[57]

What were the places suitable for the teaching of philosophers? First, the school, or, alternatively, the *domus*, where the philosopher could act as adviser to the elites. Second, the conference room (the ἀκροατήριον) or other public spaces where individuals could attend conferences or public readings of texts and compositions. Finally, the theatre, a place of entertainment connected to the public, political, and cultural debate, where declamations and the reading of poetry took place. According to Dio, the philosopher's activity was important because he had the task of making citizens better and directing them towards virtue.[58] The same position can be traced in Maximus of Tyre, according to whom philosophical teaching, by adopting various forms and exploiting different places and occasions without disregarding the contribution of rhetoric, could reach the truth.[59] Philosophy was a *habitus*, a *modus vivendi*, which could lead the soul to virtue, but what guided the soul was teaching.[60] So, not only the school but also the theatre or public spaces could be functional, because it was important to convey the edifying role of virtue. Philosophy broadened its audience and could be known and appreciated, not only by scholars or students but also by all kinds of people.[61]

In this cultural milieu, where philosophers and philosophy played a primary role in the teaching of time, flourished the *Didaskaleion* of Alexandria, a Christian catechetical school, with which Origen was officially adopted by the church, led by Bishop Demetrius.[62] Here, as Eusebius handed down in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, the discussion and the study of Scripture were taught.[63]

The typically Alexandrian attitude of dealing with sacred texts and topics was linked to discussion. In fact, Eusebius, in presenting the first master of the *Didaskaleion*, Pantaenus, who contributed to the development of the Alexandrian school, specifies that he distinguished himself from everyone, and he was trained according to the Stoic philosophi-

cal method (οἷα καὶ ἀπὸ φιλοσόφου ἀγωγῆς τῶν καλουμένων Στωϊκῶν ὡρμημένον).[64] Thus, in the *Didaskaleion*, classical literature and philosophy were employed.

According to Clement, who was Pantaenus' successor at the school, philosophy was a gift given by God to open the way to Christ, while continuing to be a plagiarism of the Greeks, and it was preparatory for the acquisition of the truth from Scripture. Clement added to the scriptural references quotations from Homer, Plato, or other ancient authors in order to show their agreement. Knowing God is true life and true wisdom in the biblical and philosophical meaning. In such a context, it was also possible to resemantize pagan culture, operating a synthesis of knowledge of which God himself was the guarantor.[65] Taking up Matthew's saying, according to which it is not possible to call anyone a master (Mt 23:10), Clement believed that this qualification belonged only to Christ. He alone possesses the true knowledge, and he is able to pass it on.[66] Moreover, according to Clement, the Revelation could be divided into three stages: philosophy for the Greeks, Law for the Jews, and Incarnation for all men.[67] The Christian διδάσκαλος was such only because he was given the grace to participate in the true teaching dispensed by Christ. To the divine Word, the only possible pedagogue, must tend both the ethical ideal, in order to reach the ideal of "becoming like God" (ὁμοίωσις θεοῦ), and the theoretical gnostic ideal, which leads to the divine contemplation through γνῶσις (Rizzi 2002, pp. 60–65).

## 5. Origen and His Model of Philosophical and Spiritual Teaching

This close relationship between faith and pagan culture found its development in Origen, whose teaching activity first in the Alexandrian *Didaskaleion* and then in the school of Caesarea in Palestine—which he founded—was worthy of noticing.[68] The *Address of Thanksgiving*, held in 238 AD by a student of Origen (ascribed to Gregory Thaumaturgus),[69] not only offers the deep gratitude and admiration felt by the student towards his master but traces the peculiar aspects of Origen's methodology. At the outset, the student evokes how for eight years, that is, since he finished his training curriculum, he no longer had the opportunity to give or write speeches, nor to hear them from others, whether written or private readings or controversies and public panegyrics.[70] The cultural and literary activity of the Greco-Roman world is evoked here, where the λόγια occupied a notable place. Thus, in rethinking his training after some time, the young man recognized the intervention of Providence, which favoured the first approach to the Logos and to Origen. The "divine pedagogue" (ὁ θεῖος παιδαγωγός),[71] the guardian angel, acted secretly in his life.[72] It was this guardian angel that suggested to one of his teachers, who gave him Latin lessons and knew the law, the idea of directing him to the study of the Roman law. Gregorius agreed more to please him than out of real interest.[73]

In retrospect, Gregory saw a "prophetic" meaning in the statement of this master, according to whom the law was considered a "viaticum" (ἐφόδιον) useful for any career.[74] The term ἐφόδιον is important. From the original meaning of provision for the journey, it changes to indicate in a metaphorical meaning the moral and cultural baggage that helps to face the journey of life. The word strikes the student: he will embark on a journey, which from Berytus, a notable center of ancient law studies, will take him to the nearby city of Caesarea in Palestine, where Origen was teaching. Origen is presented as a divine man, who differed from the ancient philosophers, as he incarnated a concrete expression of the divine Logos.[75]

Considered as a unique master, capable of fully understanding the human and divine science, Origen was able to instill the love of knowledge in his students:

> They approached him pierced by his words like an arrow—there was in them a mixture of sweet grace, persuasion and force of constraint. However, we were still uncertain and thoughtful, not yet completely convinced to dedicate all our strength to philosophy, but equally incapable, I do not know how, of leaving again, always as if we were attracted towards him by his words, as if they were a necessary constraint.[76]

At the basis of this relationship between Origen and his students there was friendship (φιλία): "In fact, he stung us with the sting of the friendship, difficult to reject, acute and penetrating".[77] This special relationship between the master and his disciple saw the attachment not only to the master but also to his most complete expression, philosophy, because they were one thing.[78]

Origen's study plan was modelled on that of the pagan schools, with the fourfold distinction of philosophy in logic, physics, ethics, and metaphysics (Riggi 1987, pp. 211–27). He adopted the same philosophical language and the same intellectual tools. But, if the disciplines imparted were the same, the aim was different.[79] Gregory underlines the differences between Origen's approach and that of contemporary philosophers. While the philosophers confined themselves to words, Origen started from the facts and he offered concrete examples of what he proposed: in him emerged a full correspondence between πράγματα (facts) and ἀρετή (virtue).[80]

He pushed his students in the same direction, addressing them to critically examine and apply virtue in their life: "He was the first to exhort me with the speeches to philosophize, having preceded the exhortation in words with deeds".[81] Origen's methodology was different from philosophical methodology, where there was no coherence between doctrine and life.

In the ancient world, as emerged in Justin, embracing a philosophy meant following the doctrine of that master, following the master himself, and evaluating other doctrines on the basis of that particular philosophical conception. It followed that truth was not the result of a critical process but of a chance.[82] This statement would also explain the divisions and disputes between ancient philosophers. They were caused by the blind attachment to the doctrine, which each one stumbled upon by chance at the beginning, when he was still inexperienced, and from which he was no longer able to detach himself, just as one cannot get out, once inside, from a swamp, from an impenetrable forest, or from a labyrinth.[83] This coincidence not only contradicts the concept of teaching as man's participation in the plan of the divine economy, but it also denies the claim of every philosophy to be that one which leads to the truth (Lugaresi 2004, pp. 800–1). The "philosophical ways" are many, none exhaustive, none complete. For his part, however, Origen pointed out the centrality of the role of the teacher, but his role was functional and subordinated to the development of a critical exercise, in keeping with the Logos. The master, endowed with complete knowledge and judging "from above", could explain to his disciples the errors they contained, choosing in each what was useful and what was not. Origen did not privilege any philosophical doctrine, not even the Platonic one. He wanted the students to know all the philosophical doctrines, because the various philosophies developed critical thinking.[84]

In chapter XIII of the *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen*, Gregory Thaumaturgus underlines that they must not limit themselves to the knowledge of a single philosophy. In fact, the human word is capable with its sophisms of penetrating and stamping itself on the human spirit with the authority of a magician who subjugates the souls, making them accomplices of their own lies. The soul, seduced and softened by the word, is no longer capable of exercising its own judgment and carrying out critical research.[85]

Faced with the uncritical attitude of young students inclined to embrace any teaching, even that which is false, Origen exhorted them to make themselves capable of critical and conscious choices.[86] It is understandable how Origen's pedagogical approach was aimed at proposing to his students a strong and patient love of research and at forming a critical conscience in them, capable of making them receive the words of truth.[87] Therefore, he insisted on the need for an in-depth examination of the contents, and he exhorted them to approach the "sacred economy of the universe".[88]

With the exception of atheism, that philosophy which denied providence and the existence of divinity, all ancient culture, Greek or barbarous, in prose or poetry, and the works of all philosophers, could be read. Origen gave full value to all the ancient cultural heritage: physiology, geometry, and astronomy were holy sciences.[89] Origen adopted the

dialectical method and the teaching of all the sciences towards the cultivation of the entire person, so that person's intellectual capacities were in accordance with his rational nature. In light of such a context, classical learning, the liberal arts, and philosophy were useful; they became evil if they were misused (Trigg 2001, pp. 27–52).

However, the learning of philosophy was aimed at understanding the divine mysteries, so that the students were able to acquire the understanding of the word of the Logos, enclosed in the sacred Scriptures, and to conform their lives to it. This philosophical knowledge was the way that led to the last true step of Origen's teaching: theology (Crouzel 1987, pp. 203–9). No longer philosophy, but theology, understood as allegorical exegesis and as a careful study of Scripture, the source of divine wisdom, was at the center of Origen's teaching.[90] Origen directed the studies of his students towards the pursuit of the good things of the soul: God himself.[91] In this different concept of wisdom also lay the distinction between the teaching of Origen and that of Plotinus. Although both focused on the technicalities of philosophical teaching, which specialized in the literary forms of commentary and monographs, Origen's landing point was represented by Scripture, whereas Plotinus still moved within a Platonic horizon aimed at discovering the intelligible world, placed outside the human experience.[92]

In this way, Origen made heaven accessible, declares Gregory the Thaumaturgus, and to better highlight the value of Origen's teaching, the author compares the school of Origen to paradise: going to the school of Origen meant participating already on earth in the school of salvation (*schola salutis*).[93] At the center of his teaching were dedication to Scripture, prayer, and mystical conversations. Such a methodology was adopted by Basil of Caesarea in the fourth century.

## 6. After Origen: Basil of Caesarea and His Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature

Although having drawn ideas and expressions from the pagan cultural world, especially from Plato and from Plutarch's *De audiendis poetis* and *De educandis pueris*,[94] Basil of Caesarea in his *Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*, composed between the years 370 and 375 (Moffatt 1972, pp. 74–86), summarized the essential characteristics of Christian *paideia*, ready to grasp from classical culture what useful offerings it had.[95] This treatise must be considered a *propaideusis* for those youths who will take their places within society and the church. With a metaphor taken from the world of nature, Basil suggests behaving like bees, which, unlike other animals who limit themselves to enjoying the scents and colors of the flowers, can also draw honey from them. Those who approach classical culture must do the same. They must not only draw delight and pleasure from it but also utility for the soul.[96]

When critically received, the fruitful teachings of the pagan classics are presented by Basil as indispensable provisions, the ἐφόδια. The Greek word ἐφόδιον evokes the speech of thanksgiving for Origen. In keeping with the use of classical and Christian tradition, Basil accepts the expression of Bias of Priene, who advised his son to obtain the virtue of wisdom as an ἐφόδιον for old age.[97] According to Basil, the ἐφόδια are the ethical-religious contents and the values of the teachings scattered in the pagan writings that can be used as propedeutics in view of achieving a straight Christian life.[98]

When trying to persuade young people in the way of studying pagan authors, Basil adopted several metaphors and analogies. Like painters preparing the surface of pictorial material with certain treatments to make it suitable for accepting color, students will be able to understand the divine mysteries once they have been initiated into classical literature.[99] The ethical behavior offered by classical *paideia* is also well exemplified by Basil. The patience of Pericles in the face of outrages, of Euclid in the face of threats, and of Socrates in the face of accusations, as well as the virtue shown by them in these difficult circumstances, are useful teachings. Whoever has known these models will more easily

learn the evangelical precepts.[100] The description of their reaction shows that the teachings of Christianity coincide with the attitude of some men in classical literature.

No less relevant is the contribution offered by philosophy. In his *Address to Young Men on the Right use of Greek literature*, using a well-known Platonic image, this Cappadocian Father exhorts young people to avoid the tyranny of the body by freeing the soul, and he invites them, comparing Plato to Paul, to make the body an auxiliary of philosophy.[101] It follows that the classical disciplines and philosophy are useful for the study and the understanding of the Holy Scriptures.[102]

As in the case of Origen's education, Basil's treatise also underlines the importance of making a critical judgment in the minds of young people, capable of making critical choices. The frequent reference to a critical attitude in the reading and in the study of classical literature is motivated by the innate tendency to ἀκρασία in the youthful soul, deeply impressionable due to its malleability. After exhorting the young people not to let themselves be dragged anywhere by the illustrious masters of pagan culture, giving them the helm of their own conscience, Basil specifies that young people must not accept everything indiscriminately with uncritical judgment, as a pilot entrusts himself randomly to the winds: otherwise, they would be dragged at random, like ships without ballast.[103]

The acquisition of critical judgment goes hand-in-hand with the attainment of virtue (Naldini 1984, p. 44). In fact, reconnecting with the doctrine of ancient philosophers, Basil affirms the task of true wisdom, which is to guide the soul to virtue and self-knowledge in order to contemplate the reflection of the divine intelligence in itself.[104] Such a conception implies, as in the *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen*,[105] the importance assigned to the agreement between words and deeds, between theory and life. Unlike the ancient philosophers who limit the praise of virtue to words and writings without the implication of a lived experience, there must be a concordance between words (λόγια) and deeds (ἔργα).[106] Thus, the journey of the perfection, which leads to God, is accomplished. After having learned human knowledge and the divine mysteries, the individual will find in himself the wisdom of the Creator.

This educational system, theorized by Basil, was exemplified in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Oration* 43, composed in the year 382, when Gregory described his grief and veneration during the funeral of Basil. Here, Gregory stressed that two ways were known to Basil and him: the first of greater value (ἡ μὲν πρώτη καὶ τιμιωτέρα), leading to their sacred buildings and the teachers there (ἥ τε πρὸς τοὺς ἱεροὺς ἡμῶν οἴκους καὶ τοὺς ἐκεῖσε διδασκάλους φέρουσα); the second of smaller consequence (ἡ δὲ δευτέρα καὶ οὐ τοῦ ἴσου λόγου), leading to secular instructors (ἡ πρὸς τοὺς ἔξωθεν παιδευτάς).[107] According to him, classical literature and philosophy must be accepted and could be used by young Christians in order to shape their critical thinking (Lugaresi 2004, pp. 826–27; Demoen 1993). To explain the issues of Christian doctrine to educated people was possible only when the preacher shared their educational background. Christianity needed to cope with Greek philosophy.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

Classical literature and ancient philosophy became indispensable baggage for self-knowledge and for knowing God in ancient Christianity. Moreover, the Delphic maxim of "know thyself", well known thanks to Socratic and Platonic philosophy, entered the Christian cultural horizon with Origen.[108] Separating itself from material and bodily realities, the soul must take care of itself and practice virtue. It must be ready to scrutinize itself. Thus, the faithful will be able to contemplate themselves as in a mirror to discover the roots of evil and the source of good. For this reason, students were encouraged to examine themselves carefully because the precept "know thyself" was the first step in order to reach God.[109] But how did this happen? By opening their minds up to classical culture and ancient philosophy. By reconnecting with the doctrine of ancient philosophers, perceived as an essential treasure in view of understanding the Holy Scriptures, ancient

Christianity highlighted the task of true wisdom. This task consisted of guiding the soul to self-knowledge to the point of contemplating in itself the reflection of the divine image, following an ineffable path that leads to divinization.[110] Only by using pagan culture in a critical and wise fashion could the faithful find in themselves the image of God.

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## Notes

1 Mk 9:5; 10:51.
2 Mk 1:14.
3 Mk 1:21–22.
4 Clem. Alex., *Paed*. 3,12,98.
5 Or., *C. Cels*. 1,30.
6 Mt. 5–7.
7 The expression is taken from the work *Phaenomena* of the Greek poet Aratus of Soli (5), who introduces the kinship of mankind with the deity (τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος εἰμέν). These words are also evoked in similar manner by the Stoic Cleanthes, in his famous *Hymn to Zeus* 4, and in the second century by Theophilus of Antioch (*Ad Aut*. 2,8).
8 Hier., *Ep*. 53,6–7.
9 For an overview see Cattaneo (1997, pp. 79–92).
10 Or., *C. Cels*. 3,9.
11 *Ep. Barn*. 1,8; 4,9.
12 About these two different positions see Prigent (1971, pp. 27–30); 75 n. 5; Neymeyr (1989, pp. 169–73).
13 For more details see Lugaresi (2004, p. 783).
14 Socr., *HE* 3,16,8,27. See also Pack (1987, pp. 185–263, esp. 253–60); Speck (1997, pp. 362–69); Markschies (2002, 97–120, esp. 109–10); Nesselrath (1999, pp. 79–100); Faulkner (2020).
15 Tert., *De idol*. 10; Or., *C. Cels*. 3,58. See also Cecconi (2011, pp. 225–43, esp. pp. 232–35). For the role of rhetoric in the formation of youngs see Pernot (2006–2007); Quiroga (2009, 2013); Torres (2013).
16 Aug., *Conf*. 1,9,14. Augustine's relationship with the school is discussed in Giannarelli (2001, pp. 9–23).
17 See note 16 above.
18 See note 16 above.
19 Hier., *Ep*. 22,30.
20 See note 19 above.
21 Or., *C. Cels*. 3,55. As is well known, Celsus' text has only been preserved thanks to the quotations Origen inserted into his apologetic treatise *Contra Celsum*.
22 Or., *C. Cels*. 3,58.
23 Or., *C. Cels*. 3,51–52; 3,58. See also Lugaresi (2004, pp. 790–93); Fernández (2004).
24 For a detailed research on this topic see Gnilka (1984–1993).
25 For a discussion see Cantalamessa (1976, pp. 142–69); Hagendahl (1988); Simonetti (2001, pp. 14–27); Jaeger (1966).
26 See Laurin (1954); Pellegrino (1947). On the concept of apology see Edwards (2008); Osborn (2000); Jacobsen (2009); Young (1999).
27 Tat., *Orat*. 3.
28 Tat., *Orat*. 29,2; 31,1–6; 36–41.
29 Tat., *Orat*. 33,2
30 Tat., *Orat*. 33,4
31 Tat., *Orat*. 32,1.
32 Theoph., *Ad Aut*. 2,8,1–9.
33 Tert., *Apol*. 46,10–15; *Anim*. 3,1; *Ad Nat*. 2,4,19.
34 Tert., *Praescr*. 7.
35 Tert., *Apol*. 46,18.

[36] Tert., *Praescr*. 7,9.
[37] Tat., *Orat*. 4; 20. For Plato, see Plat., *Phaedr*. 246ss.
[38] Theoph., *Ad Aut*. 2,38. See also Nyström (2018).
[39] Ps.-Just., *Exh*. 2; 17; 24; 28. See also Simonetti (2001, pp. 30–36).
[40] Hom., *Il*. 2,204; 16,856; 23,71.
[41] See, for instance, the *incipit* of Aristides of Athens' *Apology*: «... All-powerful Cæsar Titus Hadrianus Antoninus, venerable and merciful, from Marcianus Aristides, an Athenian philosopher».
[42] For the relationship between Christianism and Platonism see von Ivánka (1992, pp. 7–68); De Vogel (1993).
[43] *Acts of Justin* 3,3.
[44] For a discussion see Rizzi (2002, p. 47).
[45] Eus., *HE* 4,16,1.
[46] Eus., *HE* 4,16,5–6.
[47] Just., *Dial*. 2,1.
[48] Just., *Dial*. 2.
[49] Just., *Dial*. 3–6.
[50] Just., *Dial*. 7.
[51] Just., *Dial*. 2,2.
[52] Just., *II Apol*. 10,2.
[53] Just., *II Apol*. 13,4.
[54] Just., *II Apol*. 13,5–6.
[55] Porph., *Vit. Plot*. 3.
[56] Dio Chrys., *Or*. 32 Keil.
[57] Dio Chrys., *Or*. 32,8–10. See also Rizzi (2013, pp. 107–9).
[58] Dio Chrys., *Or*. 32,8–11.
[59] Max. Tyr., *Diss*. 1,2–7.
[60] Max. Tyr., *Diss*. 1,8.
[61] For a detailed overview see Rizzi (2019, pp. 133–35); Rizzi (2013, pp. 109–10).
[62] On the debate about the origin of the catechetical school in Alexandria, see Bardy (1937, pp. 65–90); Bardy (1942, pp. 80–109); Van den Hoek (1997, pp. 59–87); Van den Broek (1995, pp. 39–47); Prinzivalli (2003, pp. 911–37).
[63] Eus., *HE* 5,10,1 ἐξ ἀρχαίου ἔθους διδασκαλείου τῶν ἱερῶν λόγων παρ' αὐτοῖς συνεστῶτος· ὃ καὶ εἰς ἡμᾶς παρατείνεται καὶ πρὸς τῶν ἐν λόγῳ καὶ τῇ περὶ τὰ θεῖα σπουδῇ δυνατῶν συγκροτεῖσθαι παρειλήφαμεν.
[64] Eus., *HE* 5,10,1.
[65] See Clem. Alex., *Str*. 1,5,30,1–2; 1,7,37,1–6; 1,20, 97–99. See also Brontesi (1972, pp. 279–80).
[66] Clem. Alex., *Str*. 4,162,5.
[67] Clem. Alex., *Str*. 6,67,1.
[68] See Crouzel (1970, pp. 15–27). Origen was condemned as a heretic in a sixth-century synod, convened by the Emperor Justinian.
[69] The authorship of the *Encomium* is controversial and debated. Both the manuscript tradition and ancient Christian historiography, starting with the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea, indicate Gregory Thaumaturgus as the author of the work. However, Pierre Nautin questioned this identification. According to Nautin, the erroneous attribution to Gregory Thaumaturgus was provoked by Eusebius (Nautin 1977, pp. 81–86, 183–96). See also Rizzi (2002, pp. 82–85).
[70] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 1,3.
[71] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 5,57.
[72] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 4,43–46.
[73] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 5,58–59.
[74] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 5,60.
[75] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 6,84.
[76] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 6,78.
[77] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 6,81.
[78] See note 75 above.
[79] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 8,109–114; 9,115–26; 11,133–14,173.
[80] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 11,133–136.
[81] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 11,135.

[82] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 13,156–157.
[83] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 14,158–161; 14,166–169. See also Lugaresi (2004, pp. 801–2).
[84] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 13,151–155.
[85] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 13,154–156.
[86] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 7,105–107.
[87] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 6,83–86.
[88] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 8,111.
[89] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 13,151–152.
[90] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 14,165. See also Stenger (2022, pp. 57–98).
[91] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 11,142–146.
[92] See Rizzi (2013, p. 112). Also, in the letter to Gregory Thaumaturgus (*Ep*. 1,8–13), Origen affirms that it is possible to draw from Greek philosophy and classical culture what was useful for an adequate introduction to Christianity, or rather, to better interpret Scripture.
[93] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 15,183–16,184. See also Rizzi (2002, pp. 52–55).
[94] For the influence of Plutarch in Basil of Caesarea see Valgiglio (1975, pp. 67–86).
[95] About this writing see Naldini (1984, pp. 26–60).
[96] Bas. Caes., *Or. ad adol*. 4,8–11. See also Gómez (2018).
[97] Diog. Laert. 1,5,88.
[98] For a discussion on the Greek term ἐφόδιον see Naldini (1984, pp. 41–42).
[99] Bas. Caes., *Or. ad adol*. 2,9.
[100] Bas. Caes., *Or. ad adol*. 7,1–9.
[101] Bas. Caes., *Or. ad adol*. 9.
[102] See Naldini (1984, pp. 43–44).
[103] Bas. Caes., *Or. ad adol*. 8,5.
[104] Bas. Caes., *Or. ad adol*. 3,3: 5,16. See also Naldini (1984, pp. 45–49).
[105] For some analogies in these two writings see Naldini (1976, pp. 297–318).
[106] Bas. Caes., *Or. ad adol*. 6,1–7. See also Lugaresi (2004, pp. 804–13).
[107] Greg. Naz., *Or*. 43,21.
[108] Greg. Thaum., *Or. Pan*. 11,141–144.
[109] For a detailed analysis on the Delphic maxim of "know thyself" in classical and Christian tradition see Courcelle (1974, pp. 97–101).
[110] Bas. Caes., *Or. ad adol*. 3,3; 5,16. See also Naldini (1984, pp. 54–57).

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