

ON PHILOSOPHY

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (c. 150–c. 200)

Clement of Alexandria was probably born in Athens, but he spent most of his life teaching “Christian philosophy” at Alexandria. Clement recognized that many Greek philosophers had taught much that was true—and from whom could they have received these truths except from God, the source of all truth?

152 ... 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 [develop an] acquaintance with them.... So 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 5
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....

155 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. 10
“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.¹ 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 15
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 you, and it will shield you with a crown of pleasure.”² For when you have strengthened wisdom 20

¹Proverbs 3:23

²Proverbs 4:8–9

The Writings of Clement of Alexandria, translated by William Wilson (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1867), 360, 366, 374, 379–80, 404–5 [modernized].

with a cope by philosophy, and with right expenditure, you will 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....

5 **IS⁷** 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....

10 **IS⁹** Some, who think themselves naturally gifted, do not wish to touch either philosophy or logic; nay, more, they do not wish to learn natural science. They demand bare faith alone, as if they wished, without bestowing any care on the vine, straightway to gather clusters from the first.... I call him truly learned who brings everything to bear on the truth, so that from geometry, music, grammar, and philosophy itself, culling what is useful, he guards the faith against assault.... And he who brings everything to bear on a right life, procuring examples from
15 the Greeks and barbarians, this man is an experienced searcher after truth... And how necessary is it for him who desires to be partaker of the power of God to treat of intellectual subjects by philosophizing!...

20 **IS¹⁶** ...The Hellenic philosophy then, according to some, apprehended the truth accidentally, dimly, partially; as others will have it, was set a-going by the devil. Several suppose that certain powers, descending from heaven, inspired the whole of philosophy. But if the Hellenic philosophy comprehends not the whole extent of the truth, and besides is destitute of strength to perform the commandments of the Lord, yet it prepares the way for the truly royal teaching; training in some way or other, and molding the character, and fitting him who
25 believes in Providence for the reception of the truth.