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Clement of Alexandria and the Logos

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Clement of Alexandria and the *Logos*

The word *tradition*, in its very etymology, means *to hand down* and *to hand over*. The word has positive overtones, because what is handed down or handed over is something good. It is what our ancestors who have handed down to us, through time, something that is good, something to be treasured, and something for us, in turn, to hand down to those who come after us. And so it is with what we may term our *Christian Intellectual Tradition*, *i.e.* the broad sweep of cultural and intellectual efforts made by vast numbers of individuals to articulate Christian faith and experience, to understand it, and to disseminate its good news to others.

Such efforts in articulating, understanding, and disseminating began right after the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles, as we read in the New Testament; and the historian Eusebius was the first chronicler of this early history. In the first century, men who had been taught by Christ's apostles or by disciples of the apostles preached the Gospel and founded many communities of Christians within the Hellenistic Roman world. By the time that the first century was drawing to a close, the need to articulate and write down what Christianity entailed was recognized and addressed by scholars who had converted to Christianity. History calls them *Fathers of the Church*, *fathers*, because these early scholars gave a new form of life to the Church, an intellectual life. "...it became apparent that Christian theology, if it were to survive, must justify itself philosophically..."¹ Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus are among the earliest mentioned by Eusebius. What this emerging group of scholars knew was the literature, philosophy, mythology, and cultural life of the Graeco-Roman world; by means of the latter, they shaped the understanding of Christianity.

In our own on-going search for understanding of our faith, we may find many principles by which to be guided; one in particular recommends itself to those of us for whom the first two centuries of Christianity may seem, at times, too distant. It is that there are plenty of models to inspire us, and I am claiming here that Clement of Alexandria is one of these. We can be enabled to appropriate our legacy, partly by seeing how Clement appropriated his.

Clement of Alexandria

Clement was one of the earliest Christian scholars who saw the need to construct conceptual-linguistic frameworks suitable for disseminating Christian faith, or, as he would say, Christian wisdom. Titus Flavius Clemens, which was his legal Roman name, was born, probably in Athens, in approximately 150 CE, and had the advantage of vast erudition in the philosophy, literature, history, and mythology of ancient Greece; and it was from this tradition that he selected anything from Hellenistic culture that he considered useful for his task.² He was, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “...one of the pioneers of the dialogue between faith and reason in the Christian tradition.”³ While the content of his writings is usually complex, rich, even dense in allusion and quotation, his approach is elegantly simple, viz. a blending of the new with the old. A convert, he was new to Christianity; an intellectual educated in both Athens and Alexandria, he had cultural treasures at his disposal. Such blending, though, was no mere syncretism. His decisions about the blending were guided by, were consonant with, the faith itself, as its intellectualization was emerging in the late-second and early-third centuries. These decisions were part of the faith itself, as he understood it. More specifically, his approach makes an intimate connection between the Christian and the Platonic concepts of *word* or *logos*; this connection is a singular achievement of early Christianity.

This achievement, though, was not without influential precedents. Emerging out of Judaism, Christianity was close to its spiritual origins; this is especially clear in the inspiration offered by the work of Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE - 50 CE). A Jewish Scripture scholar, Philo adopted concepts and expressions from Platonism to his

interpretation and commentary on books of the Old Testament, a new approach which brought Jewish scholarship a wider audience among the educated class in Alexandria.⁴ Clement was most at home intellectually with Platonism, which, more than any other intellectual tradition of the ancient world, provided a conceptual framework and vocabulary that would allow for the notion of an utterly transcendent and ineffable God. While encouraged by Philo's hellenization of Judaism and personally disposed by background and education to do so, Clement nonetheless would face a more daunting task in accounting for what would develop into a theology of the Trinity.

When Clement, the Greek intellectual, became Clement the Christian, he neither rejected the Bible as unsystematic nor Platonism as pagan. He might have done so; he was not blind to limitations in each tradition. According to his book *Miscellanies*, Christians, who were his readers, were both easier and more difficult to address: easier, in that they were already Christian; more difficult, in that many of them distrusted the intellectual life because they associated such efforts with pagans. Wary and fearful of paganism, especially while there were persecutions of Christians within the Empire, they thought that hearing the faith preached was not only necessary but sufficient for their spiritual well-being and for salvation. "They demand bare faith alone," he complains. Truth, though, "...is a river in which...streams flow from all sides."⁵ Neither was he overly patient with his fellow philosophers. Many of them were materialists, making material things into gods. Even the Stoics went wrong, writing that the divine nature permeated all matter. Most philosophers "...babble in high-flown language..."⁶ The traditional gods and goddesses are wicked, unholy, and licentious; the mystery religions are orgies that are "...full of deception..."⁷; the sacrifices and games are bloodthirsty and profane. Pagan worship generally is degrading of mankind.

Whatever the limitations of each tradition, Clement viewed them both as part of God's total revelation, and we see his best work in the three major works that have generated the most commentary through the centuries. *Exhortation to the Greeks* (*Protreptikos pros Ellenes*) was written for Greeks whom he hoped to convert to Christianity or who had asked to be baptized; *Pedagogue* (*Paidagogos*) named Christ

as the Divine Teacher and extracted moral lessons from the Bible. Its original purpose was the instruction of catechumens and the recently-baptized in Alexandria.⁸ *Miscellanies (Stromateis)* was intended for fellow Christians whose faith would be strengthened, as Clement believed, by familiarity with Platonism. These books were written while Clement was director of the catechetical school in Alexandria, sometime between 190 and 202 CE. His books, as Robert Casey has established, are among “...the first Christian writings that assume the existence of an educated Christian public.”⁹

Clement approached his task with an unswerving conviction that God is the ultimate source of all reality and all truths, and that, wherever and whenever knowledge, wisdom, or truths emerge, these must have their origin in Him. Like the sower of seed in the Gospel, God “rained down the Word” on all persons. To his fellow Christians he insists that faith alone is not enough. If some of God’s wisdom exists among other peoples in other places, we are morally bound to seek out those truths, precisely because they are God’s. No one race or people has all of God’s truths, and we must bring everything to bear on our search for truth, culling whatever is useful for guarding the faith.¹⁰ This advice to his readers to remain open to truth is advice that he himself follows in appropriating his past. His descriptions of Christ as *logos* constitute the best example of this appropriation of his dual legacy.

The Logos

The primary meaning for *logos* is *word*, and its use as a metaphysical principle extends back into the pre-Socratic past, in the surviving fragments of Heraclitus (ca 535 - 475 BCE). Greek and Roman Stoicism refined and expanded the word to account for the reasonability of the cosmos, and it was the Stoic influence on Middle Platonism which accounts for the adoption of the concept of *logos* in Platonism of this period (2nd c. BCE to 3rd c. CE).¹¹

Intellectually at home in both ancient and Middle Platonism, Clement took up the question of explaining Christ to Greek catechumens, without lapsing into polytheism; his question was posed in the Prologue to John’s Gospel. His special challenge: *The*

Word was with God...the Word was God. His question was analogous to that of Philo before him, viz. how to explain how Wisdom is God and yet is an attribute of God. Like Philo, he saw Middle Platonism as offering the best approach to some degree of clarification. Unlike the work of Philo, what he decided to teach about Christ, and what found its way into his three major works would, in time, influence the doctrine of the Trinity.

If we view, with Clement, the *Logos* in a timeless realm, in the absence of a cosmos, *Logos* refers to ideas and plans for creating the cosmos and its human inhabitants in the mind of God. God, because He is One and Simple, is not separated from his ideas and plans; thus the *Logos* is God, because God cannot be said to have parts. This perspective appears in Clement's *Exhortation*. *Logos* is the pre-existent reasonability according to which God created all things; it was "...before the morning star"... it is "...the divine beginning of all things..."¹² The *Logos* was present at, and necessary to, the creation and governance of the world. Clement has the *Logos* saying, "Give ear, ye myriad peoples...the whole race of men I call, I who was their Creator by the Father's will."¹³ His Greek readers were well prepared by philosophy to accept the universe as orderly and reasonable. They were ready to accept that the One emanates the Word, inaugurating the cosmos and everything therein; but, urging his readers forward, Clement here gives the One a new name, i.e. God. The One emanated all things and keeps them in existence; God created all things and keeps them in existence. The One emanated the Word; God gave the world Christ. While both God and the One are metaphysically necessary to their respective systems, God alone is worthy of worship, while the One is not. Platonism was right but not right enough.

This identification of God and the *Logos*, however, is only part of his task. Clearly, New Testament references to Father and Spirit abound, and some account of this distinction must be offered. The Johannine formulation occupies Clement most; not only is the Word God; the Word is just as clearly said to be with God. Focusing thus on understanding Christ, Clement returns to Plato, to the dialogue *Parmenides*, which provides some degree, albeit small, of resolution. Plato's doctrine of the Forms

allows for two kinds of unity: a simple unity (one and nothing but one) and complex unity (one and many). “Loosely speaking, we may distinguish these as the unity of the pinpoint and the unity of the spider’s web...A one is either a bare unity which can be nothing but one, or a universal whole which unites all things.” It is best understood as a reciprocity or relation. “For Clement, what John is trying to say is that the relationship of the logos to God joins these two relations. The word is God and in relation to God...Son is in father and father in son.”¹⁴

Clement now feels free to write that Christ is the *Logos*. The significance of Christ being the Logos is that Christ is the self-revelation of God/ the One, a self-revelation that cannot disrupt the divine simplicity. God and His self-revelation must be one. “What then is the purpose of this instrument, the Word of God, the Lord, and the New Song....to reveal God to foolish men...”¹⁵ The Word is what God wishes us to know about Himself; it is God speaking about Himself. Christ is all that we can bear to know about God. “The Word is our true teacher...the whole world has by this time become an Athens and a Greece through the Word.”¹⁶ While God has communicated something of Himself in his universe, His self-revelation in Christ, as recorded in Scripture, is the completeness of truth for human understanding.

Accordingly, Clement has to modify the conventional definition of truth: truth is not a characteristic of a successful statement; rather, it is whatever we should know, as well as whatever path in life’s journey that we should take, in order to, in Clement’s words, “...become God, since God so wills.”¹⁷ Truth is defined in terms of the human destiny of being assimilated into God’s life, a destiny that Clement calls the *true gnosis* (knowledge). Furthermore, true to the Platonist move to hypostasize, Clement knows that truth is a Person. The Logos is what we should know; it is the path in life’s journey that we should take. Being assimilated to Christ, the Christian is assimilated to truth. In a Platonist world-view, each being is not only an emanate from the One but must also return to the One. To a Christian, each person returns to his creator, a return that is shaped by his knowledge and his moral choices.

Such assimilation of persons to the One through the Word proceeds on dual tracks; like all Platonists, Clement makes the intellectual and the moral coterminous. Resisting what he sees as an anti-intellectualism among some Christians of his day, Clement embraces knowledge from any source; all reality and all knowledge come from God. Embracing the great gifts of knowledge and truth, we embrace the Giftgiver; an intellectual life is one more moral obligation. His primary reason for an open-ended search for knowledge is given clearly: all human knowledge is necessary for the understanding of Scripture and for guarding the faith. “I call him truly learned who brings everything to bear on the truth...he brings everything to bear on a right life...”.¹⁸ The more he knows, the better able he is “...to distinguish expressions which are ambiguous, and which in the Testaments are used synonymously.” Clement names this open-ended search for knowledge *philosophy*; not a specific discipline or subject matter, philosophy is the process itself of seeking knowledge wherever it may be found. It is not “...a pottering about the arts or learning many things...”¹⁹ Since all knowledge is God’s own, the search for knowledge is part of one’s search for God. To reject a search for knowledge is to reject part of God’s Word.

Not all human knowledge, though, is equally suited for reading Scripture, guarding the faith, or seeking God. All sects contain a germ of truth, just as there are both high notes and low notes in music. Though different, and though they produce harmony when taken together, a culling process is a necessary part of one’s search for a wisdom that produces such harmony. Clement identifies the Word as the touchstone. We can know the One only by knowing the Word. Partial knowledge or faulty knowledge can be made complete only by knowing Christ through Scripture and judging all things by His teaching and life. Knowing Christ is the culling process. If this world is like a vineyard, writes Clement, philosophizing in the light of Christ is the fence and wall of that vineyard.²⁰

This search for wisdom or philosophizing in the light of Christ has a counterpart in Plato, and Clement draws analogies and cites precedents frequently. Throughout the dialogues, Plato envisions mankind as on a journey, making an ascent from this material, incomplete world, a cave in which we are prisoners, to a transcendent

world of Forms, Forms being the perfection of whatever may be experienced in this material world. Ascending in wisdom, or insight into the Forms, a person ascends also in virtue. Clement transcribes the Platonic journey to the Forms as the ascent of the Christian to God. “Like will be dear to like...and that therefore he that would be dear to God must...become such as He is...It is incumbent to reach the unaccomplished end, obeying the commands—that is, God—and living according to them...”²¹ For Plato, the goal is wisdom; to Clement, that wisdom is a Person.

Christ as Logos and Truth is further developed in Clement’s second significant work, *Paedagogus (The Teacher)*. Not only is the Logos the Way; it is our heavenly guide, our paedagogue. His aim is to “...improve the soul...” Those “...who are diseased in soul require a pedagogue to cure our maladies...and then a teacher, to train and guide the soul to all requisite knowledge when it is made able to admit the revelation of the Word.”²² In *Exhortation*, Clement has established a basis for this intimacy of paedagogue and student. Christ is an image of the One; analogously, man is to be an image of Christ. He writes: “And an image of the Word is the true man, that is, the mind in man, who on this account is said to have been created ‘in the ‘image’ of God, and ‘in His likeness,’ because through his understanding heart he is made like the divine Word or Reason, and so reasonable.”²³ This claim involving images is a clear application of Platonism, i.e. that every reality is an image of a perfect Form existing in a transcendent realm. For the Christian, though, there has to be a moral perfectibility that depends on human reason, whether *reason* is defined as faculty or as quality.

The challenging moral expectations within Christianity are advanced gently in *Exhortation*. His strategy is music. “How in the world is it that you have given credence to worthless legends, imagining brute beasts to be enchanted by music...” The Greeks should be listening instead to “...new music, with its eternal strain that bears the name of God. This is a new Song...” Christ is the new minstrel, God’s own. “But far different is my minstrel, for He has come to bring to a speedy end the bitter slavery of the daemons that lord it over us. He is the new, the heavenly minstrel.”²⁴ His is a mighty song, for it once “...composed the entire creation into melodious

order, and tuned into concert the discord of the elements, that the whole universe might be in harmony with it.” But, the Word accounts for more than cosmic order; He has “...tamed the most intractable of all wild beasts, man.” Just as He has given harmony to the cosmos, He has also arranged “...the little world of man too, body and soul together; and on this many-voiced instrument of the universe He makes music to God, and sings to the human instrument.”²⁵ To the extent that men listen to his new song, to that extent there is an end to the corruption of sin, death is vanquished, and disobedient sons are reconciled to God. Obedience has become harmony. Like Plato, Clement identifies three dimensions to the human soul, i.e. the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. As Plato had done, he associates moral development with a harmonization of the disparate elements within the soul and between the soul and body. The Logos is the source of mind in man, and so Christian virtue is the harmony achieved by each soul.

The Logos, then, as a synthesis of Christian thought and Platonism, is richly layered. It is the Wisdom according to which the universe was created and by which it is harmonized; it is Christ, the self-revelation of God; it is Christ, in whose image the Christian life should be lived; it is the only way to God; it is Truth that must be known; it is the standard by means of which falsehoods are to be culled out of worldly knowledge. The Logos is the accounting of whatever reasonability there is in the universe. If we do not see reasonability, the fault is our own. The Word is the source of harmony in human affairs. If there is no harmony, the fault again is our own. Nothing good emerges in human affairs unless through the Word.

Conclusion

It is appropriate to call Clement the first Christian philosopher. He was convinced that faith must be appropriated intellectually, at a time when many Christians were distrustful of the intellectualization of their faith. His conviction found a solid basis, though, on a deeper belief in God as the source and rational accounting of all knowledge; further, it anticipated Anselm’s famous dictum eight centuries later, *fides quaerens intellectum*, *faith seeking understanding*. Similarly, Clement, following

Plato's lead, made the intellectual and moral quests in human existence coterminous. The intellectual life is necessary but not sufficient; it is necessary, in that the life of the mind distinguishes man and so must be necessary on man's journey to God. Few of his contemporaries would have argued that it was sufficient for human well-being. What was extraordinary was his perspective that moral striving, also, was necessary but not sufficient. Moral striving is insufficient to the extent that it is unenlightened, or has lost sight of its responsibility to be a human reflection of Him Who is Truth, or has rejected the mandate *Be ye perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect*. For these reasons, the intellectual and moral quests, though singly they are not sufficient for complete human well-being, are sufficient when together. While the lofty goal called *perfection* in the New Testament can only be a gift, man is to work as if it were attainable by his own efforts; the goal must be a motivation; it must serve as a criterion with which to evaluate how well our human quest, out of the cave, is proceeding.

This integrative vision seemed to come easily to this pioneer of the Christian Intellectual Tradition. Clement had access to, and affection for, over five hundred years of scholarship generated by Plato. He lived in a cosmopolitan city with a proud history of libraries, museums, and schools. Director of a catechetical school, he had opportunities for scholarship, research, and influence enjoyed by few. Yet, Christianity did not take to intellectualizing quickly or easily; many feared it as "pagan". Even more frightening were the official persecutions; the Edict of Milan was still over a hundred years in the future. The persecutions of Christians in the African Province during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (193-211) shut down the catechetical school. In 202 Clement left Alexandria for Cappadocia, then for Palestine, where he worked for Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem. Because Alexander referred to Clement in the past tense as "...the holy Clement, my master and benefactor..."²⁶ it is a safe assumption that Clement continued his work for the Church until his death, sometime between 211 and 215.

Despite the challenges of his world and circumstances, Clement is, I am claiming, a model for Christian educators whose work must aim at fostering integrative and

contemplative habits of thinking. The intellectual legacy that he enthusiastically embraced spanned over five hundred years; ours, over two thousand. There is far more on our plates, then. Also, at his time in history, the centrifugal movement of disciplines separating out from one another, losing the ability to speak to one another, had not yet occurred. Our task is to re-introduce the disciplines to one another, using whatever insights from epistemology and ethics that we can muster. His integrative vision was shaped by his faith. We, in a far more secular world, will remain Christian only if our faith is also formative. In this task we have a worthy exemplar in Clement of Alexandria.

¹ Casey, "Clement of Alexandria and the Beginning of Christian Platonism," *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Jan. 1925): 39-101. More recently, Pope John Paul II agreed, writing in *Fides et Ratio*:

Men and women have at their disposal an array of resources for generating greater knowledge of truth so that their lives may be ever more human. Among these is philosophy, which is directly concerned with asking the question of life's meaning and sketching an answer to it. Philosophy emerges, then, as one of the noblest of human tasks." (1998)

² For instance, we have some indication of his vast erudition through the labors of historian Adolf von Harnack, in *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums* (Book IV, Chapter II). Translated and edited by James Moffatt (G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1908.)

The writings of Clement disclose the amazingly broad scope of his knowledge of both classical and Biblical literature. On page after page of his treatises are copious citations of all kinds of literature. According to the tabulations of [Stählin], Clement cites some 359 classical and other non-Christian writers, 70 Biblical writings (including Old Testament apocrypha), and 36 patristic and New Testament apocryphal writings, including those of heretics. The total number of citations is about 8000, more than a third of which come from pagan writers. Furthermore, the statistics reveal that he quotes from New Testament writings almost twice as often as from the Old Testament.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Church Fathers, From Clement of Rome to Augustine*, Ignatius Press, 2008.

⁴ Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.26.

⁵ *Miscellanies (Stromateis)*, Book 1, Chapter 9.

⁶ *Exhortation (Protreptikos)*, Chapter VI, p.153.

⁷ *Exhortation*, passim Ch. II - IV.

⁸ Van den Hoek, p.66.

⁹ Casey, p.59

¹⁰ Clement argues that both Moses and Plato were part of God's plan to prepare mankind for Christ. The Mosaic Law "...was a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we should be justified by faith." (*Stromateis*, Book 1, Ch.26). Philosophy also, Plato especially, was part of God's plan: "...philosophy more especially was given to the Greeks, as a covenant peculiar to them— being, as it is, a stepping-stone to the philosophy which is according to Christ.." (*Stromateis*, Book VI, Ch.8). As one might expect, however, there were still some who were wary of blending philosophy with the faith, some even accusing Plato of plagiarizing Moses. See Ciholas, "Plato: the Attic Moses? Some Patristic Reactions to Platonic Philosophy."

¹¹ Neo-Platonism did not emerge until the *Enneads* of Plotinus, later in the third century C.E., introducing the hierarchy of beings, a hierarchy in which the Logos is inferior to the One. It is possible that this basic difference

between Middle Platonism and Neo-Platonism helps to account for the great Trinitarian debate that made the Council of Nicaea necessary in the fourth century.

¹² *Exhortation*, ch.1, pp.14,17.

¹³ *Ibid*, Ch.XII, p.257

¹⁴ Osborn, pp.116-117; 133.

¹⁵ *Exhortation*, I, p.14

¹⁶ Osborn, p. 239.

¹⁷ *Paedagogus*, III, 1.

¹⁸ *Miscellanies*, Book 1, Ch.9

¹⁹ *Ibid*, Ch.19

²⁰ *Ibid*, Ch.20

²¹ *Ibid*, Book II, Ch.22

²² *Paedagogus*, I, 1

²³ *Exhortation*, X, 215

²⁴ *Ibid*, I, pp.5-9

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp.11-13

²⁶ Eusebius, History, 6.14.9

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