

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Only Complete Truth*

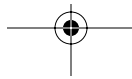


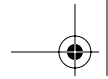
TERTULLIAN, THAT TOUGHEST AND MOST uncompromising of early church fathers, asked a question that is still with us today: What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? That is to say, is there—indeed, should there be—a meeting ground between the Judeo-Christian strain that proceeds out of Jerusalem and the humanistic Greco-Roman strain that proceeds out of Athens? For Tertullian, the answer to his question was simple: nothing.

Despite Tertullian's scornful dismissal of Athens, Christian thinkers for the past two millennia have continued to ponder his question. Can the basic tenets and chief embodiments of both Christianity and humanism be combined in a way that pays homage both to the glory of God and the dignity of man,<sup>1</sup> the truths of Christ and the wisdom of the ancients? What business does a Christian have devoting time and energy to works written by pagans who lacked the light of the Christian, or even the Jewish, reve-

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<sup>1</sup>True to the legacy of the great literature that I will be discussing in this book, I will be using traditional English grammar throughout. That is to say, I will use *he* and *his* as gender-inclusive pronouns and *man*, *men* and *mankind* to refer collectively to the human race.





lation? Are not all the really important answers to be found in the Bible and the sacred tradition? Have not the pagan writers of the ancient world been so superseded by Christianity as to be irrelevant as sources of wisdom in the life of the believer?

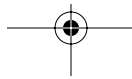
Many Christians, particularly evangelicals like myself, are prone to claim that the Bible is the ultimate source of truth. But that is not technically true. Christ, not the Bible, is the ultimate source of truth; the Bible is but the most perfect and reliable embodiment of that truth which resides in Christ alone. Indeed, in the Gospel of John, Christ tells his disciples that he is the truth (14:6). The distinction here is vital. If it is the living Messiah and not a single book that is the source of truth, then it is possible for that truth (albeit in a lesser, fragmented form) to appear throughout the imaginative literature of the ancient pre-Christian world.

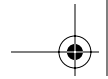
We have all been programmed by our Creator with a desire to seek and yearn after the God who is truth. If it is true, as Paul teaches in Acts 17:26-28, that we were all made in his image, that he is not far from us, that in him we live and move and have our being, then it must also be true that those timeless works of ancient Greece and Rome that record the musings of humanity's greatest seekers and yearners will contain traces, remnants and intimations of that wisdom which made us.

Truth is limited neither to the Scriptures nor to the sacred tradition; the Bible, though it tells us all we need to know to find salvation in and through Jesus Christ, does not attempt or purport to be an encyclopedia of all knowledge and wisdom. It can lead us to Christ and can instruct us in the rudiments of our faith, but it cannot answer all our questions nor can it satisfy all our deepest desires and yearnings for truth, beauty and understanding. God speaks to us in many other ways and through many other media. Though the Scriptures must ever act as the touchstone against which all such communications are to be measured, we must not allow puritan suspicion of the moral value and doctrinal status of humanistic pursuits to prevent us from accessing these messages from our Creator.

### CHRIST OVER CULTURE

There was a time when many of Christendom's wisest philosophers and theologians were eager to access such messages. In the heyday of medieval





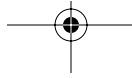
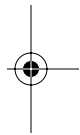
Catholicism, lovers of Christ such as Thomas Aquinas could move smoothly, almost effortlessly, from the ethics and metaphysics of the pagan Aristotle to the spiritual revelations of Christ and the church. For Aquinas, Aristotle was more than just an authority to be acknowledged; he was a source of human truth and even (to a lesser extent) divine wisdom. The Greco-Roman understanding of virtue was, in its purest form, not antithetical to but prophetic of the biblical Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. As H. Richard Niebuhr has shown in his illuminating study *Christ and Culture* (1951), the Roman Catholic church has a strong tradition of viewing Christ and Christianity as representing the culmination and fulfillment of both the Old Testament law and the highest wisdom of the ancients—Christ over culture, to use Niebuhr’s memorable phrase.

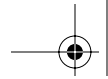
Unfortunately, the Catholic synthesis of Christianity and pagan humanism did not survive well the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, I would argue that much Christian (especially evangelical) suspicion surrounding the study of the Greeks and Romans can be traced back to the father of Reformed theology: Martin Luther.

Let me begin with a caveat. The debt of gratitude we owe Luther is immense, and we deviate from him at our peril. He helped to restore theology to its biblical Pauline roots and to render the gospel of salvation by grace through faith more accessible and vital than it had been for some time. Still, Luther also helped set in motion an attitude toward pre-Christian thought that led in part to the dissolution of the Thomistic synthesis.

In his well-known debate with Erasmus (one of Niebuhr’s prime exemplars of Christ over culture) on the freedom of the will, Luther demonstrated a resistance to learning anything of spiritual and theological value from pagan philosophy and mythology. Holding fast to an extreme version of the doctrine of total depravity, Luther denies to unregenerate pagan man any ability to apprehend portions of Christ’s truth or even to seek after those portions:

The whole world, human reason itself, indeed free choice itself, is obliged to confess that it never knew Christ nor heard of him before the gospel came into the world. And if it did not know him, much less did it seek after him, or even could seek after him or make any endeavor to come to him. Yet Christ is the way, the truth, the life, and salvation. . . . Furthermore, when





Christ is called the way, the truth, and the life, and that antithetically, so that whatever is not Christ is not the way but error, not the truth but a lie, not the life but death, then it necessarily follows that free choice, since it is neither Christ nor in Christ, is included in the error, the lie, and the death. . . . Outside of Christ there is nothing but Satan, apart from grace nothing but wrath, apart from light only darkness, apart from the way only error, apart from the truth only a lie, apart from life only death.<sup>2</sup>

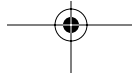
Though I heartily acknowledge that Christ is the only way and that no one could have invented by his own reason the full glory of the gospel, it does not necessarily follow that the pagans were totally incapable of seeking after that way (Acts 17:27, as I suggested above, states just the opposite: that the pagans *did* seek and groan). Yes, Christ alone is truth, but this does not mean that all non-Christian religions and philosophies are totally devoid of truth. Yes, Christ is the light of the world, but does that imply that outside that light all is utter darkness? Were we not all created in God's image, and though we are all fallen from our original state, does not a spark of divine fire remain in each of us?

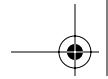
I would surmise that most believers, evangelical or otherwise, would answer yes to that last question and would grant the possibility that pre-Christian and non-Christian pagans are capable of perceiving, at least in embryonic form, some of the truths revealed in Christ. Perhaps even Luther himself would admit it if pressed. In terms of his education and knowledge, we must remember, Luther was a classical humanist; *The Bondage of the Will* boasts no less than two dozen carefully chosen and subtly used references from such pagan writers as Cicero, Horace, Virgil, Cato, Ovid and Homer. Still, the mindset and the worldview that underlie the passage quoted above persist with many believers; there is an itch to label darkness and light clearly and to put them in eternally opposing camps.

Of course, to be fair to Luther, the dualistic mindset demonstrated in the passage above was by no means invented by the father of the Reformation. Tertullian would have applauded a theological paradigm that sharply distinguished darkness from light, truth from error, grace from wrath.

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<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 33 of Luther's Works, ed. Philip Watson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1972), pp. 281-82.



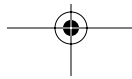


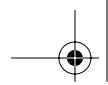
Saint Jerome, who gave us the Vulgate, would also have praised this approach and would have resisted the notion that the pagan writers could teach Christians anything of spiritual value. Even Augustine himself—who, before his conversion, was a follower of the dualistic Manicheans—would most likely have positioned himself closer to Luther than Aquinas—despite the fact that he, like Luther, was an accomplished classicist and for several years a Neoplatonist.

Throughout the Middle Ages many schools of monasticism, especially those of an ascetic or anti-intellectual bent, carried on Tertullian's suspicion of all things pagan and his desire for a "pure" Christianity purged of classical elements. In many ways, this tradition is best summed up in a late medieval work, the *Imitation of Christ* (1426), which profoundly influenced Catholics and Reformers alike. Its author is generally considered to have been Thomas à Kempis, who, like Luther after him, was a strict Augustinian monk of a somewhat legalistic bent. The dualistic elements we often encounter in Luther are not, therefore, to be attributed solely to the Reformation but also to a certain strain of medieval Catholicism that Luther, the ex-Augustinian monk, was never quite able to shake off.

What then shall we say if we would restore the medieval bridge from Homer, Plato and Virgil to Christ, the Bible and the church? Shall we say that Christianity is not the only truth? Certainly not! But let us also not say that Christianity is the only truth. Let us say instead that Christianity is the only *complete* truth. The distinction here is vital. By saying that Christianity is the only complete truth, we leave open the possibility that other philosophies, religions and cultures have hit on certain aspects of the truth. The Christian need not reject the poetry of Homer, the teachings of Plato, or the myths of the pagans as one hundred percent false, as an amalgamation of darkness and lies (as Luther strongly suggests), but may affirm those moments when Plato and Homer leap past their human limitations and catch a glimpse of the true glory of the triune God.

I reject the all-or-nothing, darkness-or-light dualism that Luther at times embraced. But I also reject the modern relativist position that truth is like a hill and there are many ways around it. Yes, truth is like a hill, but the truth that stands atop that hill is Christ and him crucified. To arrive at the truth of Christ, the people of the world have pursued many, many dif-





ferent routes. Some have only scaled the bottom rim of the hill; others have made it halfway. But many have reached the top and experienced the unspeakable joy that comes only when the truth they have sought all their lives is revealed to them.

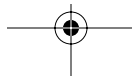
Such is the case with the Magi. The Magi were not Jews, and they were obviously not Christians. Most likely they were Zoroastrians whose main vehicle for discovering God's nature and uncovering his plans was the stars. These astrologers, bereft of the Old Testament, ignorant of the Law and the Prophets, were yet able to identify the divine significance of the star of Bethlehem. They sought after God—the true God—with all that was available to them, and they opened their hearts to the possibility that their journey would draw them to a higher truth than the one in which they were raised. They did not know what that truth would be, and yet as they were (like Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch) God-fearing men with a sensitivity to God's spirit, they knew that when they finally encountered it, they would recognize it. The path they trod to Bethlehem may have led them geographically west, but their journey's true spiritual direction was north, up the hill of truth. At the top they found Christ, the goal not only of their Yuletide journey, but of their lifelong yearning for God.

It is to such pagan seekers that Paul refers, I believe, in the second chapter of Romans:

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves:

Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another. (Romans 2:14-15)

If we are to accept these verses in a manner that is in any way literal, we must confess that unregenerate pagans have an inborn capacity for grasping light and truth that was not totally depraved by the Fall. Indeed, though the pagan poets and philosophers of Greece and Rome did not have all the answers (they couldn't, as they lacked the special revelation found only in Jesus), they knew how to ask the right questions—questions that build within the readers of their works a desire to know the higher truths about themselves and their Creator. Such is the case with Virgil,





whose *Aeneid* was so Christian in its themes and virtues that Virgil was considered by many medieval theologians and laymen to be a proto-Christian. Even more, his Fourth Eclogue, with its Isaiah-like celebration of the coming of a divine child who would bring peace and order to the earth, was interpreted by most as a pagan prophecy of Christ.

Thus, in the twenty-second canto of the *Purgatorio*, Dante introduces us to Statius, a first-century pagan poet whom he portrays as having converted to Christianity late in life. Statius ascribes both his early yearnings for Christ and his final conversion not to the Christian martyrs and theologians, but to Virgil. In an ecstatic, magic moment in which pagan past reaches out to Christian present and the two embrace, Statius exclaims:

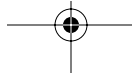
You [Virgil] were the lamp that led me from that night.  
You led me forth to drink Parnassian waters;  
then on the road to God you shed your light.  
When you declared [in the Fourth Eclogue], “A new birth has been given.  
Justice returns, and the first age of man.  
And a new progeny descends from Heaven”—  
you were as one who leads through the dark track  
holding the light behind—useless to you,  
precious to those who followed at your back.  
Through you I flowered to song and to belief.<sup>3</sup>

Statius goes on to say that when he first heard the gospel preached, he hearkened to it immediately, for it agreed so well with what he had read in Virgil.

The passage is a famous one, and it demonstrates as well as any illustration how man, though he cannot save himself, can of his own free will move himself and others toward God. In the lovely testimony of Statius, Virgil emerges as almost a Christ figure, one who sacrifices himself for others and devotes his life to uncovering truths that are useless to him but will provide light and guidance for those who come after. He is a bearer of good news, not of the full gospel of Christ, but of a lesser gospel that yet points to the greater: a candle that directs our eye to the moon, a moon that directs our soul to the sun. Cannot such a man be included, even if only

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<sup>3</sup>Dante, *The Purgatorio*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Mentor, 1957), pp. 226-27.





partially, in Isaiah's messianic blessing: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace" (Isaiah 52:7).

### THE UNKNOWN GOD MADE KNOWN

All well and good, the critic might say, but why should we take Dante's word on this? Where is the biblical precedent for such an embrace of the pagan and the mythic as a potential starting point for the journey toward Christian faith? I have already highlighted the Magi as a case study and also mentioned Cornelius (Acts 10) and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8)—all pagans who actively sought God and truth long before he revealed to them his way of salvation. To these examples we might add Paul's speech before the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17). In this thrilling, bridge-building speech, Paul begins his proclamation of Christ's resurrection—the heart of the gospel as it is taught and disseminated in Acts—by complimenting the Athenians on their building of an altar to an unknown god. Rather than expose their pagan idolatry as a simple species of darkness and depravity, Paul exhorts his audience of stoics and epicureans to follow their limited light to its ultimate source in the resurrected Christ: "Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you" (Acts 17:23).

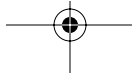
The God of the universe, Paul teaches the Athenians, created the heavens and the earth. More than that, he

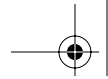
hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. (Acts 17:26-28)

Both the phrases "for we are also his offspring" and "in him we live and move and have our being" are quoted by Paul from the works of two pagan poets: Aratus and Epimenides, respectively. Paul is not merely using a clever advertising ploy to catch the attention of potential customers. The way he integrates these two pagan passages, which he clearly had memo-





rized, into his sermon strongly suggests that he regarded them as pagan glimpses of truth into a mystery that would not be revealed fully until Christ. Indeed, Paul's use of these pagan verses, along with the line of continuity he draws from the altar to the unknown God to the God known in Christ, parallels his treatment of Old Testament characters, events and verses as types of a greater revelation to come. Certainly his discovery of a Christian teaching on law and grace in the juxtaposition of Hagar-Ishmael-Mount Sinai-Jerusalem and Sarah-Isaac-heavenly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:21-31) is no less strange and wonderful than his discovery of a premonition of God's intimate closeness in Christ in the poetry of two "lawless" Gentiles.

But Paul is not our only authority for believing that pagan myths and poetry can contain real seeds of Christian truth; there is also Christ himself. In the twelfth chapter of John's Gospel, Christ is informed shortly before the Last Supper by Andrew and Philip that some Greeks had come to Jerusalem for the feast and wished to speak with him. Jesus responds to their request by saying:

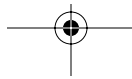
The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified.

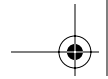
Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honor. (John 12:23-26)

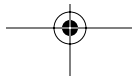
These words were surely meant by Jesus to be carried by Andrew and Philip back to the Greeks. The matter of the Greeks is not mentioned again in the Gospel; thus, if these words were not meant as a direct reply to the inquiring Greeks, then we must conclude: (1) that Jesus, though he certainly heard his disciples' request, is ignoring them and thus snubbing the Greeks; (2) that John has lost narrative control of his Gospel or shares with Jesus in the snub. Neither of these conclusions is satisfactory, and I conclude that the passage quoted above is meant in some way to be a message to the Greeks.

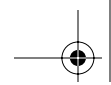




But who are these Greeks? Though I cannot prove it, I suspect that these Greeks, who are obviously interested in both the religious rites of the Jews and in the teachings and person of Jesus, are initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries. For as long as a thousand years before Christ, the city of Eleusis near Athens had harbored one of the oldest religious cults in Greece, a cult that practiced rites so secret that to this day we know little of what went on at their ceremonies. Still, nearly all scholars agree that their worship was centered at least in part around the myth of Persephone, the daughter of the earth goddess Demeter, and her abduction by Hades. According to the myth, Persephone was eventually reunited with her mother, but at a high cost: the girl could spend only two-thirds of the year with her mother; the other third she would live with Hades in the underworld. The etiological upshot of this ancient “deal” was the seasonal cycle of the year. When Persephone returned to Hades, Demeter became desolate and the crops began to die; during the winter months they lay buried like Persephone in the cold earth. In the spring, however, when Persephone returned to her mother, all of nature was reborn. At Eleusis they tended the shrine of Demeter, and it is believed that part of their ceremony included the viewing of a ripe ear of corn or grain. At the heart, therefore, of the Eleusinian mysteries was a faith in the rebirth of spring, a firm hope that life could spring out of death and that we, perhaps, could share in that new life.

If I am right and the Greeks of John’s Gospel were members of this ancient cult—a cult well known throughout the Near East—then Jesus’ reply would have carried special significance for them. This mini-parable of the grain of wheat is a unique one in the Gospels; it has no parallel in Christ’s other parables or in his predictions of his death and resurrection. To me it is clear that Jesus constructed this brief but provocative parable specifically for these Greeks as an attempt to communicate with them directly, to build a bridge from myth to doctrine. It is possible that Jesus is doing here the same thing Paul does in his speech before the Areopagus: proclaiming himself as the embodiment of what they have until now worshiped in ignorance. By means of their own rational and emotional yearnings, these Greeks, along with the other initiates of Eleusis, had achieved a higher spiritual understanding: namely, that life can come only through death and





that salvation consists somehow in sharing this divine surrendering and recapturing of life. Having come this far, the Greeks needed only to be nudged by Jesus into a saving knowledge of the one who is more than a dying god or goddess: one who is, in fact, God dying.

I admit that this is all conjecture, but I find it telling that Jesus would express the central truth of his mission on earth—the crucifixion and resurrection—in the form of a parable that sums up so succinctly the heart of the Eleusinian mysteries. In the same way, John’s discussion of the Logos in his prologue, regardless of whether it was inspired by Greek or Hebrew thought, is a representation of God, Christ and the universe that would speak strongly to a Platonist who was seeking after God. Just so, I would argue that Augustine’s movement from Platonic philosopher to Christian bishop (documented so movingly in his *Confessions*) involved not a rejection of Plato but a growth from him: not a breach but an expansion. I imagine Augustine studying diligently all night, his books lit by a small candle that served him well until day broke—when the sunlight streamed in and the candle faded in the glory.

### SEARCHING THE CLASSICS

Three centuries after Luther engaged in his titanic struggle with Erasmus, a British Anglican named John Henry Newman ended his own internal spiritual struggle by converting to Catholicism and in the process embracing Aquinas’s Christ-over-culture ethos. That he did so was a great blessing for educators like myself who yearn to glean wisdom of both temporal and eternal worth from the works of Greece and Rome. In Dublin in 1852, Newman delivered a series of nine discourses intended to set the tone for a proposed Catholic university in Ireland. These discourses represent, to my mind, the finest modern attempt to unite the twin legacies of Athens and Jerusalem. Though the university was never built, the discourses were published as *The Idea of a University*, and in this form they continue to beckon believers in the Christian revelation to consider the legacy of the ancients.

In his third discourse, Newman takes us on a vivid whirlwind tour through a slightly scattered, intensely concentrated catalogue of the many ways the triune God of the Bible has revealed himself to mankind. “As in





the human frame,” he asserts, “there is a living principle, acting upon it and through it by means of volition, so, behind the veil of the visible universe, there is an invisible, intelligent Being, acting on and through it, as and when He will.”<sup>4</sup> Having established this as his grounding metaphor, Newman goes on to list the diverse areas of human accomplishment (pagan, Jewish and Christian) where the invisible God has been rendered visible.

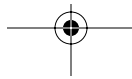
He begins with a vast, sweeping brushstroke that serves as the stage and backdrop of his Christian-humanist canvas:

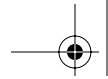
Man, with his motives and works, his languages, his propagation, his diffusion, is from Him. Agriculture, medicine, and the arts of life, are His gifts. Society, laws, governments, He is their sanction. The pageant of earthly royalty has the semblance and the benediction of the Eternal King. Peace and civilization, commerce and adventure, wars when just, conquest when humane and necessary, have His co-operation, and His blessing upon them. The course of events, the revolution of empires, the rise and fall of states, the periods and eras, the progresses and the retrogressions of the world’s history, not indeed the incidental sin, over-abundant as it is, but the great outlines and results of human affairs, are from His disposition.<sup>5</sup>

The Bible teaches us in great detail how to read and interpret the history of Israel; it is left to us to read and interpret the histories of the other great nations. If we make no attempt to assess the glories and brutalities of ancient Egypt, then we have misunderstand, at least in part, both Moses (the traditional author of Genesis) and the Exodus. Unless we strive to understand the rise and fall of the four great empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome (i.e., the four metals of the giant in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar), we fail to grasp how God works through history. To neglect the study of Rome is to strip Paul’s statement that God sent his Son in “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4) of half its meaning. How can we hope to understand ourselves if we do not know our own history? And if we do not know where we came from in the historical realm, how can we know where we came from in the spiritual realm? If our study of the great pagan historians and political scientists (Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, Polybius, Ci-

<sup>4</sup>Cardinal Newman, Discourse III in *The Idea of a University*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Confucian, 1981), p. 55.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 57-58.





cero, Livy) can point us toward some of the truths that lie behind these questions, that same study can help us gain a clearer perception of the nature of mankind and the divine purposes that undergirded our creation.

But we mustn't stop there. Once our meditations on pagan history, combined with our reading of the Bible, have helped us sketch out the broad historical picture in which God has worked out his plan, our focus must narrow to the works of those great poets, philosophers and statesmen whose dreams and visions lifted them above their time and culture. Here, too, Newman trusted fully that whatever truths lay buried in these works were compatible with and even identical to the truth of Christ:

To Him must be ascribed the rich endowments of the intellect, the irradiation of genius, the imagination of the poet, the sagacity of the politician, the wisdom (as Scripture calls it), which now rears and decorates the Temple, now manifests itself in proverb or parable. The old saws of nations, the majestic precepts of philosophy, the luminous maxims of law, the oracles of individual wisdom, the traditionary rules of truth, justice, and religion, even though imbedded in the corruption, or alloyed with the pride, of the world, betoken His original agency, and His long-suffering presence. Even when there is habitual rebellion against Him, or profound far-spreading social depravity, still the undercurrent, or the heroic outburst, of natural virtue, as well as the yearnings of the heart after what it has not, and its presentiment of its true remedies, are to be ascribed to the Author of all good.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that our world and our humanity are fallen, God's hand can still be discerned in the laws and the wisdom that keep the former in motion and the latter in check. Each nation has its torah and its book of proverbs, and, though only the biblical manifestations of these essential elements carry complete authority, traces of God's truth and presence are to be found in all of them. All our works and our ideals are blackened over by the stain of sin, and yet now and again throughout history the light of Christ has broken through in the lines of a poem, the maxims of a philosopher, or the decisions of a lawgiver. Those ancient virtues that the humanist seeks to imitate, those classical deeds of heroism that would incite him to noble action, all find their ultimate source

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 58.





in the original agency of the author of all good.

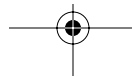
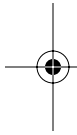
But we must not end our search for wisdom here. From the poetry and philosophy of the ancient world we must advance to a deeper study of their theology, prophecy and religion:

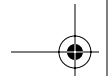
Anticipations or reminiscences of His glory haunt the mind of the self-sufficient sage, and of the pagan devotee; His writing is upon the wall, whether of the Indian fane, or of the porticoes of Greece. He introduces Himself, He all but concurs, according to His good pleasure, and in His selected season, in the issues of unbelief, superstition, and false worship, and He changes the character of acts by His overruling operation. He condescends, though He gives no sanction, to the altars and shrines of imposture, and He makes His own fiat the substitute for its sorceries. He speaks amid the incantations of Balaam, raises Samuel's spirit in the witch's cavern, prophesies of the Messiah by the tongue of the Sibyl, forces Python to recognize His ministers, and baptizes by the hand of the misbeliever. He is with the heathen dramatist in his denunciations of injustice and tyranny, and his auguries of divine vengeance upon crime. Even on the unseemly legends of a popular mythology He casts His shadow, and is dimly discerned in the ode or epic, as in troubled water or in fantastic dreams.<sup>7</sup>

Wherever man has sought with his entire being to perceive the truths of his Creator, God is there. He does not always approve, but he is always present. And at times he speaks through the mouth of the pagan: to announce the coming of the Messiah (the Fourth Eclogue of Virgil), to denounce injustice and cycles of vengeance (the *Antigone* of Sophocles and the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus), to attest to the hidden nature of sin and the need for a scapegoat (the *Oedipus* of Sophocles), to prepare the heart for the arrival of a God-Man who will suffer (the legends of Heracles and the myths of Adonis) and who will expose the impotent legalism of the Pharisee (the *Bacchae* of Euripides), and to warn us against wrath and instruct us in what it means to be human (the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer). Though the fullness of deity is found only in Christ and the fullness of his revelation in the Bible alone, the shadow of the Almighty yet hovers and broods over the yearnings of the pre-Christian world.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 58-59.



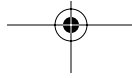


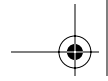
May we have eyes to catch glimpses of God's presence and glory in the forms and rituals of pagan antiquity.

In the chapters that follow, I seek to live up to Newman's high call by exploring how the faith and discernment of Christian readers can be enhanced by vigorous interaction with the central literary masterpieces of the ancient world. Rather than attempt to encompass the full Greco-Roman legacy (as does Newman in his broad overview), I shall confine myself to the epic and dramatic poetry of Homer, Virgil and the Greek tragedians. Thus, although elements of Greco-Roman philosophy, theology, history, politics and ethics will appear occasionally in this work, the focus will remain firmly on the epics and the tragedies. The book will be broken into three sections: part one will examine Homer's two great epics; part two will take up the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; part three will consider the origin, plan and contents of Virgil's Roman epic, the *Aeneid*. I will not discuss the works of the supreme proto-Christian Plato, not because he is not vital but because he wrote nonfiction prose rather than fictional poetry and because, in any case, he demands an entire book to himself. The modern Christian is as likely to dismiss the epics of Homer or the plays of Sophocles as sources of truth on account of their pagan origin as he is to dismiss them on account of their being fictional and poetic. By keeping my focus firmly on epic and dramatic literature, I hope to explode (or at least shake) these ingrained modernist, post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment prejudices.

In the chapters themselves, the poetry of Homer, Virgil and the tragedians will be considered from two distinct but overlapping perspectives: (1) as literary works possessing their own separate integrity within the context of the cultures and the poets that produced them; (2) as proto-Christian works of almost prophetic power that point the way to Christ and glimmer with a faint but true light. Not all the works considered point specifically to Jesus as the dying and rising God (most point instead to a virtue, ethos or dilemma that finds its full flowering and expression in Christianity), but I will treat each work as a source of inspired wisdom from which Christians can learn and profit as they might from a devotional work like *The Imitation of Christ* or *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Though capsule plot summaries will be included in each chapter, and





though this book can be read profitably on its own, it is my hope that readers will study it alongside the actual works of Homer, Virgil and the tragedians. To facilitate this study, I have included a bibliographical essay in which I point out some key resources that the nonspecialist should find helpful. Indeed, it is my further hope that parents and teachers will use this book as a companion and guide as they lead their children and students on a thrilling odyssey through the enduring masterpieces of the ancient world.

I have dedicated this book to my parents, Tom and Angie Markos, both of whom were born to Greek immigrants and both of whom helped to keep alive in me my Greek heritage. While my father taught me my love of mythology and ancient Greek history, my mother taught me to love all aspects of Greek culture—especially dance. Because of their influence, I can claim to carry the legacy of classical Greece not only in my head (as a student and product of Western civilization) but in my heart and blood as well.

I would also like to acknowledge and celebrate the growing number of classical Christian schools and Christian homeschoolers who have been instrumental in reviving the legacy of the Greek and Roman classics. Thomas Cahill has argued that it was the Irish monks who helped to preserve the pagan classics; it is my belief that the classical schools and homeschoolers will play a decisive role in preserving the classics through a potential new dark age. Indeed, the excellent illustrations at the head of each chapter were made by a young woman, Jennifer Barton, who was homeschooled throughout high school. In addition to being one of the best English majors I have taught at Houston Baptist University and one of the finest Christian women I have had the privilege to mentor, Jennifer embodies the full flowering of her parents' efforts to provide her with a full education in body, soul, mind and spirit. If our Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman culture is to be preserved, it will be students like Jennifer who will do the preserving. I wish her and her peers Godspeed!

