

WHEN ATHENS MET JERUSALEM

An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought

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INTRODUCTION

Athens and Jerusalem

ON THE AREOPAGUS

The view from the Acropolis of twenty-first-century Athens showed a group huddled together on the ancient Mars Hill, reading in the blazing heat of the midday summer sun. I sat with forty students from the Torrey Honors Institute of Biola University reading the seventeenth chapter of Acts. The blue sky of Greece stretched over us, and it was hot, but we did not want to leave that scene or stop our conversation. Behind us on the Acropolis were the shining white ruins of the Parthenon, the temple dedicated to Athena. To our right was the marketplace where a man named Socrates asked the impertinent questions that killed him. To our left was the place where the first and perhaps some of the greatest theater ever produced saw light. Before us in the distance was the tumultuous sea that Homer pictured in his *Odyssey*.

This hill was the final goal of our trip to Europe, but not merely because of the great history and culture of Greece. We were on a pilgrimage to Athens mostly because of the sermon that was preached here by a Jewish rabbi, Saint Paul, when he brought the gospel to Greece. We came for the ancient church, still standing, that lifts up the cross in the center of the pagan marketplace. We came to sit under the highest hill in Athens, with its great chapel dedicated to Saint George the dragon slayer. We knew that Saint Paul, too, had slayed a great serpent: the idolatry of Greece. Paul's victory changed everything. We knew we were children from the marriage of two cultures. On Mars Hill, we were standing at the birthplace of our true country: Christendom.

Christianity was born out of Judaism. One cannot understand the second covenant without grasping the first. The great spiritual revelation of God to Moses and to the Jewish people is the unalterable core of Christian belief.

In God's great providence, Christianity was born at a time when Greek and Roman thought dominated the ancient world and influenced everyone and everything—including the Jews and Judaism. Christendom, the culture of Christians after Jesus' life, death and resurrection, was the product of Christians making sense of both Greek and Jewish heritages. This is the story of the Greek heritage of Christendom.

THE REALLY ANCIENT WORLD

The Greeks had a bible of sorts, a primary set of documents foundational to the way they thought. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, written down by the legendary poet Homer, gave the Greeks fixed stories about humans and gods that could be used to form a coherent view of reality. Homer's masterful and moving poems shaped the language and the direction of the culture. His religion became the basis for some of the first unifying social structures in Greece, including the rise of the great oracle at Delphi.

Homer is a hidden part of many conversations in the modern world. He lurks in the basement of ideas with his notion (shared by another early Greek writer Hesiod) that chaos may be at the bottom of everything. Homer taught human beings to fear the gods—not in the Judeo-Christian sense of awe and love, but in terms of terror. His great study of the Trojan War, the *Iliad*, begins in war and ends there. His is a hard view of reality, skeptical about progress for humans who are born into pointless struggle with gods and nature, a torment that does not even end in death.

While the oracles of the Homeric gods may have been officially silenced, the intellectual possibilities presented by Homer have not. When a modern is skeptical and hopeless about finding real goodness, truth or beauty, then he or she imitates Homer. It is a terrifying and stultifying vision. Some ancient Greeks recognized that there was a problem with merely relying on the poetic imagination to guide their society. Without denying the beauty of Homer, Greeks who loved the truth began to think about the foundations of their culture.

THE LOVE OF WISDOM AND THE WAY OF CONVERSATION

Thinking may be hard at first, but it is addictive with practice. People

created in God's image will ask questions, and questions demand answers. Answers seem to be what questions are *for*, but the Greeks soon realized that the first answers were not the end of the process. Good answers lead to better questions, and these questions keep the process of learning alive. It is possible to find a single truth, but one truth has a tendency to lead to the search for another, just as eating one honest-to-goodness potato chip generally demands a second.

People began to question the old answers, sometimes finding them satisfying and sometimes not. Crudely at the start, men like Thales tried to describe the world more rationally. These first thinkers were often dogmatic themselves, but they lacked the power to impose their thoughts on their successors. This led to an explosion of different ideas that stood in contrast to the stagnation of the Homeric view.

Sadly, philosophy was no more lucrative in ancient times than it is today. Developing a new theory of "everything" provided no pay for the first philosophers, but teaching the students of the rich did. The philosophers learned that cleverness sells, but too much contention with the establishment does not. They became Sophists, willing to sell their skills, especially in rhetoric, for money. Sophists were willing to *say* anything, but they were not willing to encourage their students to *act* on those teachings. They were daring talkers but prudent actors.

One of these teachers, Socrates, refused to play by these wicked rules. He would not limit his questions or his actions in order to fit into conventional Greek society. Socrates taught through conversation and the skillful use of questions. These questions were not just for the sake of talking but for finding a good life to live.

Socrates' daring got him killed by the religious and academic establishment, but he left behind an inspired generation of students to carry on his legacy. The greatest of these students was Plato, a writer equal to Homer in imagination and power, and one of the greatest philosophers who ever lived. Plato captured conversational learning in his dialogues. In these writings he challenged readers to interact with characters in his stories and so find a philosophical way of living. His dialogues challenged the power of the traditional Homeric despair, but did so indirectly, thus preserving Plato's life and school against the criticisms of the powerful

supporters of the old gods. Plato began to be the master of those who doubt and dare to follow their doubts to new and dangerous ideas.

Plato's best student was the philosopher Aristotle. If Plato was the master of the question, then Aristotle was the expert of the declarative sentence. Aristotle was "the master of those who know."¹ He pioneered formal logic and examined the natural world in the most systematic manner up to that point in history. He also consciously reflected on those thinkers who came before him and tried to respond to their ideas in his own writings. In this way, Aristotle was the forerunner of modern scholars who do not start their investigations as if nothing came before them but begin their own work aware of the "great conversation" they are joining. Interesting things happened in philosophy after Aristotle, but no figure matched the gigantic influence of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Eventually philosophy stagnated because it lost track of the conversation and struggled to unite the needs of all classes of people. Tyrants like Alexander the Great, Aristotle's most famous pupil, made freedom of inquiry even more difficult. Philosophy became private or fell prey to strange and irrational religion. The desire to do philosophy did not dry up, and in fact it grew in centers like Alexandria, but the quality was low. Ideas after Aristotle multiplied but did not progress. There is a great deal of water in a swamp, but it doesn't go anywhere. The man who had the answer to this stagnation was Saint Paul.

THE CULTURE OF ATHENS AND JERUSALEM

Christianity in the East and the West formed cultures that had roots both in the classical world of Greece and Rome and in the faiths of Jerusalem, Christianity and (less comfortably) Judaism. This is true in the Christian West, where both Greek and Jewish thought shaped the architectural ideas that produced the cathedrals of Paris. The parliamentary government of Britain has roots in both the democracy of Athens and the law of Moses.

It is also true in the Christian East. Eastern Christendom formed a new empire that shielded Western Europe from invasion and destruction. For one thousand years the great capital city, Constantinople, main-

¹Dante *Inferno* 4.131.

tained unbroken study of both ancient biblical and pagan texts. It honored both the “inner wisdom” of the faith and the “outer wisdom” of the Greeks and Romans. Constantinople evangelized an entire commonwealth of states that stretched from the Balkans to Russia.

This fusion of Athens and Jerusalem can be seen in the buildings and the books of cities in Britain, Ethiopia, Romania and the United States. It is no accident that the United States Supreme Court is housed in a building with biblical references carved onto a structure built in the classical style of Rome and Greece.

Athens and Jerusalem became partners very early in the history of the church. A group of Jewish disciples of Jesus were confronted by the fact of his resurrection, and they went on to preach the good news to the Roman Empire—basically the whole world in which they lived. Rome was dominated by the ideas of Greece, which in turn had been dominated by the ideas of Athens. Religion and philosophy had a Greek flavor in every part of the empire. How did the church deal with the massive intellectual and cultural heritage of this classical civilization?

One reaction was to reject “secular learning” to keep the church pure. Theology had nothing to learn from philosophy. “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” thundered Tertullian, a champion of keeping the two far apart.² A great deal as it turned out, since Tertullian’s own writings echoed Greek philosophy on nearly every page.

Judaism itself had been influenced by Greek learning. There was no “pure” stream of knowledge that did not run through Athens. The very Greek language that the early Christians used to communicate their message was soaked in centuries of classical thought. Trying to pry Athens and Jerusalem apart usually led to inconsistency and heresy.

Tertullian ended up trapped in the heresy of Montanism, which taught that Jesus was going to land the New Jerusalem in a remote backwater of the Roman Empire. Private revelations to wild prophets stood on par with Scripture. Jerusalem without Athens becomes a weird place.

Sometimes the church went to the other extreme and worshiped Athens. Persecution made this rare, but it was still a problem. Origen, one

²Tertullian *Prescription Against Heretics* 7.

of the greatest Christian thinkers of the early church, often pinned his understanding of Scripture more on his Neo-Platonic philosophy than on the biblical text. His literary analysis of the text of Genesis often found hidden spiritual meanings invisible to anyone not brought up on Neo-Platonic philosophy. This excessive devotion to Plato caused Origen to develop a defective view of Christ and his nature. Jerusalem could not be reduced to a suburb of Athens without endangering the faith.

Mainstream Christians, such as Augustine in the West and Basil in the East, found a middle way. Jerusalem gave the basic, rational, religious truth on which to build an understanding of the world. It was the starting place for wisdom. Athens gave the technical language and categories to help define and extend this truth. Jerusalem gave the world truth; Athens gave it a valid way to express that truth. Out of this creative harmony came the classical Christian civilizations that shaped most of the world in which we live.

ATHENS AND JERUSALEM SEPARATE

For centuries these two cities, Athens and Jerusalem, provided the boundaries for intellectual and cultural growth. They formed one new kingdom. Tensions between the rationalism of Athens and the faith of Jerusalem always existed, but each recognized the contributions made by the other. Eventually, however, the citizens of both cities grew restless.

One product of classical Christian civilization was modern science. Secular, scientific answers seemed to make religious truth and boundaries not only unnecessary but stifling. Athens began to pull away from Jerusalem. In the process, what was best in the old Greek and Roman tradition was also discarded. The moderation and humility so prized by the ancients was forgotten. Science would answer all questions and solve all problems. The old classical Christian civilization began to crumble.

Others have noted the decline of this classical Christian culture.³ The sort of society that produced John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas or C. S. Lewis no longer exists. Christians on the right and on the left have foolishly taken joy in the destruction.

³See Phillip Johnson, *Reason in the Balance* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

Some Christians have moved to Athens while keeping a summer home in Jerusalem. For them, the rationalism of Athens, by now reduced mainly to science, dictates the nature of reality. Jerusalem provides these accommodating Christians with personal peace, as religion is seen as a vacation from the harsh realities of a Neo-Darwinian world. They allow for a shadowy divine providence to be unseen behind it all.

Jerusalem is allowed this marginal existence as long as it promises never to interfere with science. Statements such as “God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) are reduced to “spiritual” truths with no physical content. Even some Christian colleges are dominated by this spirit. Religion is kept firmly in line, and faculty members are petrified of their Athenian masters. Jerusalem, like many vacation homes, is filled with yesterday’s furniture. No one lives there; they just hang out there on weekends and holidays.

Other Christians have condemned Athens and left it to burn. They do not mourn the death of classical Christian culture. These pious souls have locked themselves inside Jerusalem and are not coming out until the war is over. Armed with Bible verses, they glare over the walls and leave the rest of the world alone. When the world returns the favor, they complain that the truth is being ignored.

I once spoke in a church about the sinful hatred many Christians have for Athens. After my talk, an older person came up to me and said that this hatred was a sign of revival! In her view, Christianity should be all about feeling and never about thinking. Thinking, she thought, leads to doubting, and doubting is a way of life in apostate Athens.

Such faithful Christian folk try to avoid reasoning altogether, only to end up reasoning badly. Any attempt to understand the Bible requires reason. Christians often go on for years after their conversion with a fully functioning mind but no guidance on how to use it. They have questions. They try not to reason them out, so they simply reason without training. Trapped within these walls, an inbred Jerusalem becomes a bit crazy.

STUDYING ATHENS WHILE LIVING IN JERUSALEM

Christians must recapture the middle way of Augustine and Chrysostom. Athens and Jerusalem are not two cities, but two districts in one city: the

city of God.⁴ There are hopeful signs that such a revival can happen. Sales of classical tales have reached bestseller lists in the Christian community. Christian day schools and a few colleges have seized on the classical model. A progressive conservatism that preserves the best of the past while using modern tools has a growing number of supporters. When allowed to coexist, Athens and Jerusalem create a cultural explosion. They have done so in the past and will do so again, if an attempt at revival is made soon.

Christians must act quickly, for Athens and Jerusalem are dying and each needs the other to thrive. Athens has been sacked by secular barbarians who chain rationalism to materialistic science. Science can do useful things, but it knows nothing about truth, goodness and beauty. Science cannot subsume virtue to its limited methods, so it must deny the existence of virtue if scientists wish to control all knowledge.

Athens, the rational mind, does not by itself have the resources it needs to deal with the most important things. The ancient Greeks knew this, which was why so many of them were eager to embrace Christianity. We are learning the same lesson again, the hard way. The fashionable cynicism called postmodernism is merely the tired realization that rationalism without faith ends up destroying its own foundations.

Jerusalem, too, is sick. Its inbred residents, who cannot even do the sort of classical theology that produced their own creeds, sit in their ghetto talking only to themselves. Ironically, her ruling class is often composed of absentee landlords. They live in Athens and only show up in Jerusalem to collect their tithes. These rulers reject the creeds, since Athens has rejected both the religion and the classical thought behind them, but cannot substitute much of anything in their place. So the church offers the spectacle of evangelicals who believe the Bible contains errors and Anglican bishops who do not believe in God.

Neither secular nor Christian culture has modern or postmodern answers. Real accommodation between Jerusalem and a scientific or postmodern Athens is impossible. Some contemporary theologians try to dialogue with postmodernity, but this is impossible without denying

⁴Augustine *City of God* 1.pref.

their Christian heritage. The creeds are written in elegant and precise Greek. They make bold assertions about God and reality. The early Christians could do this because they believed their ideas were true. Move very far from those ideas as the mainstream church has understood them, and basic orthodoxy and Christian identity come into question. To be truly Christian, after all, was to believe some things and not to believe others. That very idea, however, makes conversation with those who deny logic in their religion impossible.

It is an odd world. The rationalists believe that Christian doctrines are false. The postmodernists think that all doctrines have only an “inner” or personal truth. Christians are too afraid of losing to engage in the discourse, so Athens cannot hear what Jerusalem has to say.

Yet they are like a married couple that begins to look alike after many years of marriage. The very shape of theological discourse has a Greek tone. Jerusalem cannot praise the nature of the Holy Trinity without echoing the language of pagan philosophers. Athens has discovered that it cannot go it alone either. Science without God, intellect without theology, is rapidly becoming anti-knowledge. If you cannot know *the* truth, then even small “truths” can be called into question. Athens and Jerusalem cannot live apart.

Any hope of reviving Christian cultures must begin by understanding what they are and from whence they come. At one time every educated person was familiar with both Greek and Christian foundational ideas, but no longer. The renewed study of the ancients, both Greek and Christian, is vital for any new beginning for classical civilization.

Knowledge of ancient Athens is vital for Christians. Some see it as the starting place for the flowering of new classical Christian civilizations. Human reason, unscarred by an irrational desire to rid itself of Christianity, will flourish. As Christians move toward the classical model, they must also be aware of the mistakes and dangers along the path. We cannot just reclaim the Academy, we must remake it. Modern Athens is not what it once was.

Ancient Athens has been harmed by modernity every bit as much as ancient Jerusalem. The irony is that secularists have no more use for old books and writers than the most anti-intellectual Christians. One can

graduate with an advanced degree from elite colleges in the United States without having read a single classical author, or at least with any care.

As humans have remodeled and destroyed ancient Athens, they have also sacked Jerusalem. It was, after all, a man hostile to both classical and Christian ideas who, while sitting by a lake in Switzerland, developed the ideological formula that has captured the times. He knew that fallen human beings were interested in personal peace, often at any cost. He understood that contemporary people were driven by economic desires and believed that the promise of a place to call one's own could be an adequate substitute for religion. This philosophy would gain appeal in democratic, capitalistic, totalitarian and socialistic societies. Lenin summed up the spirit of his age in 1917 with his revolutionary call to reduce human happiness to "Peace, Bread, and Land."⁵

Classical and Christian thinkers did not agree, knowing that goodness is often better than peace bought at the price of allowing evil. They knew that the quest for truth was more important than personal affluence. Whether in the monastic community or in compassionate capitalism, they knew it was the truth, not wealth, that would set humans free. Finally, classical and Christian humanists believed that "stuff" could not satisfy if there was no beauty. Mere consumption or production was not enough. There were standards of beauty to which every civilization should aspire. Classical Christian civilizations answered this age with a cry for "the good, the true and the beautiful."

Christians are not alone in this longing. Every human is created in the divine image and can become like God by his mercy. The image of God in every human being longs for him to return home. We are all homesick. Though far from home, a few gifted souls know what they are missing. The longing for the good, the true and the beautiful leads to love. This love is the way of wisdom. The love of wisdom was not exclusive to ancient Greece, but Greeks first recognized what it was and pursued it continuously. When English speakers use the word *philosophy*, which is derived from Greek and means "love of wisdom," they honor that heritage.

⁵April 1917.