

WHEN ATHENS MET JERUSALEM

An Introduction to Classical and Christian Thought

JOHN MARK REYNOLDS



CONTENTS

Preface / 9

Acknowledgments / 11

Introduction: *Athens and Jerusalem* / 13

1 BUILDING ATHENS: *Philosophy Before Socrates* / 23

2 THE DEATH OF A GOOD MAN / 55

3 THE IDEAL PHILOSOPHER: *Plato and His Teachings* / 69

4 FOLLOW THE LOGOS WHEREVER IT LEADS: *What Is a Dialogue?* / 88

5 IN LOVE WITH THE GOOD / 123

6 THE CITY IN WORDS: *On Justice* / 150

7 THE LIKELY STORY: *The Timaeus* / 174

8 BREAKING WITH THE MASTER: *Aristotle and the “Other” Path* / 185

9 THE MIDDLE WAY: *Aristotle’s Ethics* / 203

10 PREPARING THE WAY FOR CHRIST: *Hellenistic Philosophy* / 221

11 A POSTSCRIPT: *Where Do We Go from Here?* / 246

Reading List / 255

Index / 259

PREFACE

CHRISTIANS ARE NOT IN HEAVEN YET, but we do live in Christ's kingdom: Christendom.

Christendom was born, in part, out of the intellectual influence of Greco-Roman and Jewish thought. Greco-Roman thought developed over eight centuries of intellectual history. The story of Greek philosophy and how it helped prepare the way for Christendom has not recently been told from a Christian perspective in a sympathetic and accessible manner. *When Athens Met Jerusalem* tells this story of Greco-Roman intellectual preparation for the coming of the Christ.

When the apostle Paul stood on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:16-34), he faced a listening audience prepared by centuries of discussion. Because Paul understood the intellectual baggage and issues of his day, he was able to impact and change the direction of that discussion. Paul changed the Greek and Roman intellectual world that day.

Anybody who lives in a place with a Christian heritage, even if that heritage lies mostly in the past, needs to understand the relationship that developed between Christian ideas and Greek philosophy. To do that, one first needs to understand the development of Greek and Roman thought. Christian theology has shaped and is still shaping many places in the world, and it was the Greeks who contributed a philosophical language to Christianity.

The church fathers are incomprehensible without knowledge of Greek philosophy. Thomas Aquinas, whose ideas still shape much of Christian philosophy and theology, relied heavily on an interplay of Greek categories, vocabulary and concepts. The Protestant Reformers, especially the classically educated Calvin, also were deeply influenced by Greek thought.

Of course, Christians did not just copy Greek ideas. They accepted some, modified others and freely used Greek categories and vocabulary. When

they rejected Greek ideas, as they often did, even that rejection shaped Christendom by helping to define what it is *not*.

For non-Christians, such cultural ignorance is dangerous. Christianity and ancient Greek thought are built into the “operating system” of the West. Like using a computer without knowing anything about the operating system, unless you are lucky such ignorance is likely to cause harm.

Other areas of culture, such as literature, music and art, assume a working knowledge of Greek and Roman ideas. It is hard to make sense of the paintings of Rossetti without knowing something about Plato. The Narnia books by C. S. Lewis are even better when the reader can trace the author’s masterful use of classical philosophy. Even the Disney film *Pocahontas* makes use of lines borrowed from Greek philosophers, leaving little doubt that Greece pervades Western pop culture.

Finally, Christendom was born in a time much like the start of the twentieth century. Religious uncertainty and change were in the air. Old ideas had failed spectacularly, but new ideas had not yet taken their place. Christians faced a cultural, political and social environment that was both attractive and, at least in part, hostile to the gospel. How they were able to not only survive but also thrive and create a better, more appealing culture is a good lesson for all Christians today. Even non-Christians, who may be swayed by facile attacks on the cultural importance or benefits of Christianity, can utilize such knowledge for better and more constructive conversations with the billion human beings who are followers of Jesus.