

THE PHILOSOPHIC PREPARATIONS FOR
CHRISTIANITY

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The philosophic preparations for Christianity began with the gathering together by Enoch of the doctrinals of the Most Ancient Church. It is stated in the Writings that the knowledge of these doctrinals—which included, among other things, the science of correspondences—was scattered throughout the whole of the area surrounding Canaan.

“Enoch, of whom mention is made in Genesis (chap. 5: 21–24), with his associates, collected correspondences from the mouth of those people, and transmitted the knowledge of them to posterity. From this it came to pass, that the science of correspondences not only was known, but was also cultivated, in many kingdoms of Asia, and especially in Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, Syria, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and also Canaan. From thence it was carried over to Greece, but was there turned into fables, as may be sufficiently evident from what is told of Olympus, Helicon and Pindus near Athens, and also of the winged horse called Pegasus, as that with the hoof he brake open the fountain, by which the nine virgins (the Muses) established their seats. Similar were the rest of the things which are called fabulous, which were written by the most ancient writers in Greece, and which were collected together and described by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*” (Verbo 18).

It is of particular interest to note that, with the Greeks, the knowledge of correspondences was turned into fables. The various attributes of the Lord were personified, and from this came the polytheistic pantheon of the Greek mythology. Although the New Church man may know, by applying the science of correspondences to their myths, that these were originally parables,* the Greeks in time came to regard them as nothing more than interesting examples of literary imagination. Religion supplied neither a code of life nor a reasonable explanation of the universe.

Philosophy was born when men began to inquire into the causes of the natural world from the effects they saw, seeking for *natural* causes instead of ascribing all causes to the capricious gods and demi-gods. The Miletan school of philosophers were the initiators

* See *The Mythology of the Greeks and Romans*, by C. T. Odhner.

of this movement, from which the germ of the scientific method emerged. In wrestling with the problems of reality and change, they produced several irreconcilable views and theories. The obvious failure to achieve any real agreement on these problems led to a feeling that it was quite impossible for man to have any certain knowledge. The gods had been discredited; the traditional religion and ethics were called in question. It was a destructive, iconoclastic age; an age of relativism and unenlightened self-interest; an age wherein authority in any form was flouted, wherein desires were not to be evaluated, so it was said, against any absolute criterion, for there was no such thing. They were simply to be indulged if felt to be good.

In this atmosphere, whatever doctrinals of good and truth remained from the Ancient Church were completely swamped. Here was Greek philosophy at its lowest. The men largely responsible for this state of affairs were known as Sophists. They boldly claimed to teach any man wisdom—a claim which dismayed the more conservative thinkers. Many of the Sophists were no more than charlatans, delighting in clever but empty analyses of terms, and boasting of their ability to argue both sides of any given question. It is such shallow reasoning, devoid of a love of truth, that is nowadays associated with the word sophistry.

But the Sophists were not entirely useless. In being so critical of the old traditions, and in ushering in an era of restless individualism, they caused some of the more conservative philosophers to see the need for a new beginning, for a period of reconstruction. The man who pioneered this movement proved to be one of the most influential of Greek philosophers, not only in the whole history of thought, but especially in helping to foster an attitude of mind which to Christianity, over four hundred years later, was to have a strong appeal. This man was Socrates, who has been described by Marsilius Ficimis as “the John the Baptist of the Ancient World.”

If this appears to be too exalted a title to claim for him, let us reflect that the Cynics and, most of all, the Stoics, besides his famous pupil Plato, based their ethics on Socrates' life and teachings. His influence was certainly profound, even if it was not immediately widespread. From the *Apology*—Plato's account of Socrates' speech in his own defense at his trial—it becomes ap-

parent that he made many enemies by his lifelong hobby of "examining" people; but it is equally evident that the nobility of his character and beliefs had not passed unnoticed. He had made the soul and its improvement the main interest of his life. Virtue, or the highest good, was the goal to which Socrates looked, and he never ceased trying, even in his final speech, to turn the thoughts of other men in that direction. To the suggestion that he might escape death if he departed from Athens, promising to keep quiet and to refrain from exposing "the self-sufficiency and other faults" of those he met—for this, according to Xenophon, was the reason "many who were once his followers had forsaken him"—he replied:

If I say that such conduct would be disobedience to God and that therefore I cannot keep quiet, you will think I am jesting and will not believe me; and if again I say that to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking, and examining myself and others, is the greatest good to man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you will believe me still less.

The reference to the unexamined life sounds a note quite similar, on the moral plane, to that of the "baptism of repentance" in Mark 1. Socrates was, in fact, as one authority has pointed out, "the founder of moral science."*

Xenophon, in his *Memorabilia*, says of him:

He appeared to me . . . to exhort his hearers to practise temperance in their desires for food, drink, sensual gratification, and sleep, and (to practise) endurance of cold, heat, and labor. . . . He who undergoes trouble willingly (he used to say), is cheered in undergoing it with some expectation of good" (Book 11: 1).

Here is a foreshadowing of the Lord's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly in Matthew, chap. 6, with regard to seeking after merely sensual and worldly things. There is, of course, in Socrates' teaching no recognition of spiritual good. The "expectation of good" of which he speaks is an expectation of what we know as "purely natural good." The motive never rises higher than happiness in *this* world. Yet such natural or moral good must be present in the individual and in society as a plane for the influx of spiritual life, which is Christianity.

Bearing in mind, then, the limitations of Socrates' "moral science," we may see how he helped prepare a remnant to receive

* Fisher, *Beginning of Christianity*, p. 140.

the Lord's condemnation of merely external piety. For, as Xenophon says,

"By dissuading his followers from ostentation, he excited them to pursue virtue. . . . 'Let us consider,' he would say, 'what a person must do, if, not being a good flute-player, he should wish to appear so. Must he not imitate good flute-players in the adjuncts of their art? Yet he must never attempt to play, or he will at once be shown to be ridiculous and not only a bad flute-player, but also a vain boaster.' By similar examples he showed that it was of no profit for a man to appear rich, or valiant, or strong, without being so" (Book 1: 5).

Socrates also quotes with approval Hesiod's views on vice and virtue:

"Vice it is possible to find in abundance and with ease; for the way to it is smooth, and lies very near. But before the temple of Virtue the immortal gods have placed labor, and the way to it is long and steep, and at the commencement rough; but when the traveller has arrived at the summit, it then becomes easy, however difficult it was at first."

The similarity to "Strive to enter in at the strait gate" (Luke 13: 24, Matthew 7: 13, 14.) is obvious.

The same theme runs through the *Choice of Hercules*, a fable quoted by Socrates to convince one of his followers, Aristippus, that the way of virtue is not the easy, pleasant and self-indulgent way. It is interesting to note, however, that Aristippus seems to have been unimpressed, for he founded the Cyrenaic school of philosophers, who ignored the ascetic side of Socrates' teaching and concentrated their attention on the joy to be derived from intellectual pursuits. The avoidance of pain and the enjoyment of pleasure became for them the highest good. How even such quantitative hedonism was used by the Lord as a preparation for His advent will be seen below after the part played by Plato, the most famous of Socrates' pupils and a great philosopher in his own right, has been considered.

One of Plato's most valuable contributions was his theory that the world of ideas was the only reality. The material, temporal, changing world of nature he regarded as a mere fleeting shadow of the eternal ideas or forms in the world of ideas. Therefore, he said, the eternal part of man's soul, his reason, which perceived that world, was superior to the body and its senses and should rule over them. This amounted to a reasoned formulation of Socrates' philosophy of asceticism, and prepared the way for the Christian

renunciation of the world and exaltation of the kingdom of heaven. However, some later philosophers, by over-emphasizing the joy of contemplating the pure ideas of the real world and the necessity of lulling the senses to sleep, exposed the mysticism latent in Plato's system. In Christian times, mysticism was represented by the Gnostic sects, which provided a kind of back-door entrance into the Christian fold.

Plato's cosmology, for all its inconsistencies, did give a purposive world view. His system rescued Greek philosophy from mere materialism, just as Socrates' influence had saved it from relativism in epistemology and ethics. The emphasis on absolute standards in things metaphysical was carried forward by the Stoics.

The Stoics, in fact, derived much of their philosophy from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Their asceticism was taken over from the Cynics, a group of Socrates' followers who, taking a differing view of his ethics from that of the hedonistic Cyrenaics mentioned above, emphasized the simplicity of their master's dress and mode of life, his humility, his utter lack of dependence upon the good opinion of the world at large for his happiness, and his conviction that there were universals of belief and conduct. To this they added the Platonic view that reason provided an objective standard in the realm of metaphysics, though they rejected his theory of the world of ideas. They were also influenced by the Logos doctrine of Heraclitus, which, indeed, had appeared in modified form in both Plato and Aristotle. But, above all, the Stoics were impressed by the order of the universe and postulated a rational principle as the cause of it. They also took over from Aristotle his argument for the existence of God—the concept of a final cause, “the unmoved mover.”

The idea that the creation was according to reason and order had a widespread influence in forming the climate of opinion in early Christian times. It gave rise to the Stoic cosmopolitanism—a most important development. In this regard, they said that because there was a universal orderliness, every man, who was really a microcosm or universe in miniature, ought to submit himself to this order and attune his life to it. There was thus one universal code for all mankind—a concept that helped the early Christians, for they had but to convince the Stoics among their

hearers that the Christian way of life was that same universal code, and that all mankind could be united thereby.

The Stoics were the first to attempt to harmonize philosophy and religion. They believed that the fact that a yearning for religion was never completely destroyed was proof of its validity. In order to free the popular religion from some of its crudities and absurdities they began to allegorize the old legends, no doubt without realizing that they had originally been parables. This movement gained momentum as the time of the Advent approached.

It was said above that even the hedonism of the Cyrenaics was used by the Lord as a means of preparing the world for His Advent. Their views and values were adopted in large measure by the Epicureans, contemporaries of the Stoics and, of course, rivals. Their doctrine of enlightened self-interest, of one's own happiness as the guiding principle of conduct, was in direct contrast to the Stoic insistence on the welfare of society as being the highest good. The Stoics thrived on this opposition and felt it a *duty* to mankind—a concept repugnant to Epicureans—to warn against their individualism, which could divide rather than unite the world.

The Stoic philosophy had a great vogue among the Romans. Being a more practical people than the rather theoretical Greeks, they did not find a great use for the speculations of the latter, whose works they encountered when they conquered Greece; but they willingly accepted the ethics of the Stoics, regarding them as the summit of Greek philosophy since they could be readily applied to life. The following is an interesting account of the attitude and interests of the Roman nobility at this time (about 12 B.C.). The subject is a warrior noble:

When he came home, he had many interests. . . . It was stimulating to listen to his Athenian friend talking cleverly on Philosophy. His wife might have invited some Oriental traveller, who spoke of the old religions of the East. Husband and wife both worshipped the family gods, who had been revered in the days of the kings, as well as the splendid divinities of Olympus; but they were beginning to believe that there was one supreme spirit that ruled, *as the Stoics taught*. If the traveller knew Judaea, he might speak of Jehovah; or the talk might turn to Isis and Serapis of Egypt; if the Roman had studied at Athens, they might compare the teaching of the Greek mystics and the Egyptian priests on the future life beyond the grave.*

* W. N. Weech, *World History*, p. 208.

There was already in the expanding Roman Empire a certain political cosmopolitanism, so that the Stoic ideal of a universal moral brotherhood was quite attractive.

The narrowness of the Greek city states had long since passed away, and even the exclusiveness of the Jews was assaulted and, at Alexandria at least, largely broken down. Alexandria, in Egypt, became the leading intellectual and trading center in the world during the period 323 to 181 B.C. Founded by Alexander in 333 B.C., it attracted scholars of every branch of learning from all regions about the Mediterranean Sea. Here was a large Jewish population, exiles who had fled there when the Persians invaded Palestine. Here was the meeting point of Greek philosophy and the Jewish religion.

With regard to the latter, we have seen that the science of correspondences was one of the doctrinals from the Most Ancient Church known in the lands of Canaan, Egypt, Assyria, Chaldea, Lybia and Arabia. "But when in process of time the representatives of the church, which were correspondences, were turned into things idolatrous and also magical, the science of correspondences, by the Lord's Divine Providence, was gradually obliterated, and among the Israelitish and Jewish nation was altogether lost, and became extinct. The worship of that nation did, indeed, consist of pure correspondences, and was therefore representative of heavenly things; but still they did not know what anything signified, for they were altogether natural men" (S.S. 22). They preserved the Word of the Lord with meticulous care while they perceived nothing spiritual in it. They believed that they were a chosen people and that the promised Messiah would deliver them from the hands of their enemies in the world and exalt them above all other nations. The idea of a heavenly kingdom was inconceivable to them. Indeed, they had had no notion of an after-life until their contact with the Persians during the captivity. Even then, they could not think of a spiritual body, but imagined that they would rise in their material bodies.

The Alexandrian Jews could not maintain their exclusiveness among their neighbors and associates who, having all adopted the dominant Hellenic culture, did not recognize the authority of the one God, Jehovah. It was useless to insist on their claim to be a chosen people. Besides, they could not help noticing that the way

of life of the Gentiles was in many respects superior to their own. If they wanted to convert them to Judaism, they had to explain their religion in terms of Hellenistic ideas in order to make it intelligible. Thus, there began to be a hellenizing of the Jewish religion. About 150 B.C., Aristobulus, a Jewish philosopher of the Stoic school, wrote an interesting commentary on the Pentateuch, using the Stoic allegorical method to show the harmony between it and the Greek philosophers. However, the most celebrated exponent of this method was an Alexandrian Jew, Philo Judaeus (20 B.C.-50 A.D.). His exegesis must always be of interest to the New-Church man, for he said, among other things, that the same reason which lay behind the Greek philosophers also inspired Moses and the Prophets. It is remarkable how near he came to the real correspondences in some cases, and how far from the mark he strayed in others. But his Logos doctrine was an important step towards the New Testament teaching of John. Christian scholars are at pains to show that John was not influenced by Philo, and that Paul in his occasional glimpses of a spiritual sense within the letter of the Old Testament was not drawing upon his works also. But the essential fact is that there was an idea current throughout the Hellenic world that the world soul was Reason or the Logos, and this, in Philo's system was the Wisdom, Power, and Goodness of God personified: all the ideas, powers, or angels of God are contained in the Logos. This recalls Paul's doctrine that in Jesus Christ was the pleroma of the Godhead bodily. Philo also regarded the Logos as the mediation between God and man; a fact which gives rise to this interesting comment by one scholar, writing from the Christian standpoint that the cross was the whole of redemption:

"The eternal atonement, which Philo imagined already *made* and *eternally being made* by his ideal Logos, could be effected only by a creative act of the condescending love of God: and it is a remarkable instance of Divine wisdom in history that this redeeming act was really performed about the same time that the greatest Jewish philosopher and theologian of his age was dreaming of and announcing to the world a ghostlike shadow of it." *

That this idea of Wisdom was prevalent from at least 100 B.C. is also evident from the Wisdom Literature in the Apocrypha. In the book, *Wisdom of Solomon*, wisdom is said to be the highest

* McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, s.v. Philo.

good, the essence of right knowledge and virtue, a gift from God to those who pray for it. In all these wisdom books, showing similar Greek influence, the ethics are often of a higher order than those of the Old Testament, and thus they form a kind of bridge to the New Testament.

Thus we see that, in the movement known as Jewish-Greek philosophy, the wheel has come around full circle. Greek philosophy, having emerged from religion, returns to it. The science of correspondences returns in a vague and cloudy recognition of something beyond the veil of the world of sense depicted in myth, legend, and religious history.

This Greek return to religion had, of course, been taking place independently of the contact with the Jewish, Persian, and Egyptian religions. The skepticism and eclecticism which accompanied the Epicurean and Stoic era, gave rise to the revival, among some, of the old Pythagorean number mysticism, which could be traced back to a lesser religious revival in the 6th Century B.C. However, the *Neo-pythagoreanism* included some Platonic ideas as well. Zeller sums up the spirit of this age as follows:

The feeling of estrangement from God, the yearning for a higher revelation, is characteristic of the last centuries of the ancient world. This yearning expresses nothing less than the consciousness of the decline of the classical peoples and their culture, and the premonition of the approaching new era.**

Let us summarize now some of the ideas current in the first century A.D. There was a feeling that there was one God of the universe; that His Wisdom ruled the universe; that the Jewish Scriptures were allegorical; and that man ought to strive to live according to the order of the universe, that is, to live according to wisdom, showing kindness and benevolence to mankind. Furthermore, the distinction between Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian was becoming somewhat blurred.

On the other hand, there was no certainty about the nature of God, nor was the question of the immortality of the soul settled. The Stoic doctrine of re-incarnation and the never ending cyclic recurrence of the world were cheerless doctrines, and there was a widespread fear of evil spirits and the influence of demons.

Into this "world of ideas" came Christianity with its clear and simple Gospel that the God of the universe had come in the flesh

** Zeller, *Philosophy of the Greeks*, Part III, Vol. II.

to save mankind; that He had ascended to heaven where He would draw all men to Him; that all who kept His commandments would dwell with Him; that above all, He had urged men to have love toward each other; that life after death was certain; that sinners who repented could be saved.

Some of the Jews acknowledged the Lord as the Messiah who had been promised them for so long. It was the task of the apostles to show that what had been said in the Word concerning the Messiah, the plain statements and the veiled allusions, applied to Jesus of Nazareth. While the common people, some of whom were still in the grip of Babylonish astrology, saw in the Gospel a deliverance from demons and astral predestination, and a means of bringing peace on earth, the learned philosopher saw in it a great world view. Much that had been tentatively advanced in metaphysics and cosmology was now vindicated. The Divine Word or Logos had descended, and the doctrine of a universal kingdom and brotherhood was given the status of a Divine commandment.

There were "many mansions" in the philosophic preparation of the world for the reception of Christianity. And although, as we have also seen, there was a widespread interest in and longing for a true religion, what different groups of people were looking for was dependent upon their philosophic preparation. Paul, the most astute of the apostles was well aware of this and saw the need to "give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles [Greeks]." He had observed that the same Gospel had to be variously taught; "for the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom" (1 Cor. 1: 22).

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Sixty-first Annual Meeting of the Swedenborg Scientific Association will be held in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, on Wednesday, May 21st, 1958, in the auditorium of Benade Hall at 8:00 p.m. There will be reports and election of officers, after which Randolph W. Childs, Esq., will deliver the Annual Address. Subject: "Comment on the Gottenburg Trial."

It is hoped that local Chapters of the Association will send in their reports in time for the Annual Meeting.

MORNA HYATT,
Secretary.