

The Bible and Literature

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The girl sat grimly across from my desk with a class-drop slip in her hands. “I don’t think that any Christian should take Ancient Classics,” she muttered, having spent about a month in the course. “It isn’t right to read literature that honors false gods.” After a short discussion I signed her piece of paper, and she was free.

About half a year later another student occupied that same chair. “I want to take Ancient Classics next semester,” he explained, “because I had the same course at another Christian college, and it’s pretty well ruined my faith. Maybe if I repeat the class here, I have a chance of getting my religious beliefs back.” He did join the course, asking very challenging questions based on his previous study. At the end he reported that his faith had indeed been re-established by the experience.

Those two young people represent extremes in attitude. More typical is the intellectual student who says casually, “My education has been awfully narrow up to now. I want to learn for myself about all the philosophical ideas that my Adventist schools skipped over. I hope you will cover those things.” He or she may be the most frightening of all, like the child who wants to run carelessly through a field laced with land mines.

Any literature teacher in a Seventh-day Adventist school faces such divergent attitudes all the time. Some students believe that God has proscribed the reading of outside literature absolutely, while others demand that literature classes be free from what they see as Scriptural “bias.” Not surprisingly, this latter outlook sometimes extends to faculty members as well. One professor recently told me, “When I hear the phrase ‘integration of faith and learning,’ I feel like throwing up.”

Teachers like me react by trying to find the middle path between the two extremes. On one

hand we believe that since the world's literature is there to be dealt with, we had better train our students to confront it wisely. But we also recognize that every excursion into Homer, Shakespeare, or Dante is a potential tour of enchanted ground. We try to steer between cliff and swamp, choosing a path that provides education but avoids the kinds of spiritual hazards that my second-time-through student had experienced earlier.

Still, although that may seem like a sensible outlook, is it Biblical? After all, most Sabbath schools have plenty of participants who begin every sentence with "Well, *I* think. . .," to which the proper response would be, "Why does that matter? Isn't the real question what the Bible says about it?" Any idea of how people of faith should relate to literature must begin with a study of how Scripture itself bears on the question. But that is hard to answer with sufficient rigor. The task involves pulling together material from six or seven specialty areas amid four different major fields. The work of Bible scholars, archaeologists, Church historians, and literary specialists must be included. There is simply no other way to produce a unified overview of Biblically sanctioned attitudes toward non-Biblical literature.

As difficult as the assignment seems, however, it is clearly worth attempting. We need to build our teaching on a clear understanding of Bible principles toward worldly literature, especially since Seventh-day Adventists have been blessed with a prophet who has made such a number of statements about the subject.

Defining Literature

Let us begin by clarifying what we mean by the term "literature" itself. After all, the first job is to figure out exactly what we are considering for classroom treatment. But even this is a problem, since handbooks of literary terms generally leave that one to the imagination. Fortunately, a standard

college dictionary is not so cautious, calling it “writing in prose or verse regarded as having permanent worth through its intrinsic excellence.”¹

Now, how does one measure or even recognize “permanent worth” or “intrinsic excellence”? One way, of course, is to notice how many periods have found it meaningful. If several generations have valued a work, we may begin to call it a classic, the highest form of literature.

Even in these cases, though, questions remain. By what criteria do we identify the quality of recently discovered ancient writings, or of contemporary works about which the jury of generations is still out? And which forms are eligible? Should Maori campfire songs be included? How about common nursery rhymes, some of which may trace back to medieval centuries? The answer is so subjective that the silence of the standard literary handbooks should not surprise us.

Thus we are forced to define the term ourselves. I suggest that we do so in the context of our concerns over the power of literature to compete for the minds of our young people, since that is why we are concerned in the first place. Let us postulate that literature may be discerned by the impact it has on hearer or reader. Shelley called poets “the unacknowledged legislators of the World.”² Whether or not we choose to agree with him, a piece of real literature is certainly measured by its power to change or affirm people’s beliefs about their lives, society, the world, and the universe. Nursery rhymes, for instance, can fit into this definition. A child hearing Mother sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” over and over might become somewhat more receptive to the message of the last line, “Life is but a dream,” and might make the first tiny step toward mysticism. Or course, those

¹Random House Webster’s Dictionary, 1991.

²Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed., Vol. 2, M.H. Abrams, ed., (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 245.

words might not take root in the child's head at all. But if the potential--the power--exists, we may call it literature.

Of course that implies danger. It is said that after the publication of Goethe's eighteenth-century novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, numbers of lovesick European teenagers imitated its hero by committing suicide dressed in long blue coats. Likewise theater and films are included on the same grounds since their ability to create audience reactions is undeniable, as when Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* helped to incite the young thugs at Columbine High School. Let us agree for the sake of argument that whether we approve or condemn a particular work, its power to sway our thinking brands it as literature.

Yes, the definition must include propaganda. What else can we call *The Apology of Socrates*, which Plato wrote so skillfully that his philosopher-hero has been accepted by much of the world as having the same status as Jesus Christ? The truth is much different, as can be discovered by anyone with an interest in going beyond the standard platitudes. But more of that later.

True, this definition skips over the very real issue of refinement or "quality." But that is no great problem. For instance, any pretensions of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the status of great art have long since been disallowed, yet the book itself is studied with interest in literature and history courses as having been influential at a major turning point in American thinking. It may not be a classic as we defined the term earlier, but its influence over its own time is credential enough for allowing it the status of literature.

The Bible, of course, is the archetypal classic, both because its poetic quality is unexcelled and for its world-changing dynamism, a recognized miracle for more than thirty centuries. So, strictly speaking, the assigned title "The Bible and Literature" is misleading. "The Bible Versus Other Kinds

of Literature” might be a better choice.

Dealing with the Tension between Scripture and Other Literature

That “versus” is at the crux of the present concern. Obviously any powerful expression of an idea opposed to Scripture is a declaration of war against Scripture. How does the Bible itself regard that war? Does it demand that we let its voice alone speak to us (as my drop-slip student was so sure), or is it confidently tolerant of competing literary works with their ideas? How does The Word direct that we respond as individuals and teachers to the challenge posed by the power of other literature?

To answer that question we need to address several lesser ones in turn.

1. What attitude does the Old Testament show toward pagan literature of its original time and place?
2. What stance is evident in the New Testament toward the various literary forces that swept Palestine during the inter-Testamental Period and the First Century?
3. How has the attitude of Church leaders and thinkers toward non-Christian literature over the last two thousand years related to the Bible’s outlook on the subject?
4. How does the Bible’s perspective on non-Christian literature apply to our own time, especially seen with the guidance of Ellen G. White?

First, though, we need to rid ourselves of the modern misconception that the issue is between the Bible and secular literature. Actually, there is no such thing as writing apart from religion. To begin with, no Hellenic or Middle Eastern language, including Hebrew and Aramaic, included such

a word, because ancient peoples saw their deities as relevant in all areas of their lives.³ The peoples of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Middle East observed constant rituals honoring their gods, and the literature of those places is very related to their religions.

Have we found ancient writings that some call “secular”? Certainly. The adjective is frequently applied to literary works that do not mention deities or sacrifices directly. Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War is a good example. The Book of Esther is another. But such works demonstrate a philosophical outlook clearly compatible with the theologies of their particular cultures. The phenomenon of *irreligious* writings was virtually unheard of.

But the question remains: why do we moderns need the word “secular” when ancient writers did not? The answer involves the underlying connection we make between the word “religious” and Judeo-Christianity. Our most refined intellectual heritage comes from two streams of thought, Greek and Hebrew, which are deeply divided. We use the word “religious” generally to denote a world view coming from ancient Israel, and thus we clearly need a second word for writings derived from the philosophical ideas of our Hellenic parent. That word is “secular.” Because the novels, histories, etc., make no mention of Zeus, Athena, nor Apollo, we sometimes miss the fact that they are philosophically pagan rather than neutral. Of course, Greek thinking itself is simply a purification of the idolatry characteristic of cultures from Babylon to Gaul. Thus the terms “secular” and “pagan” will be used synonymously in this paper.

One example of the dichotomy between the two sides comes in the popular catch phrase *carpe diem*, originally coined by Horace, the classical satirist. In essence it means that because life is short

³Conversations with professors of religion Donn Leatherman, Ph.D., January 8, 2000, and Michael Hasel, Ph.D., January 12, 2000. (Dr. Leatherman specializes in ancient languages, and Dr. Hasel is a scholar of Biblical archaeology.)

and troubled, we must grasp sweetness where we can and while we may. A popular advertising slogan from years ago captures the idea exactly: “You only go around once, so go for the gusto!” Even Adventists often miss the underlying pessimism in that scenario, or its incompatibility with the hope Christianity offers. The opposite Christian doctrine might be phrased, “Heaven is available through Grace, so start now!” Yes, the appeal is the same--to use time wisely--but its basis is the promise of the Blood, not the threat of impending doom. The world posited by the first slogan is rooted in despair, while that of the second is miraculous hope. But because the idea of heaven is absent from standard *carpe deim*, we call such thinking “secular,” even though such thinking is actually as hostile to Christianity as the pagan cults among which it originated.

Seen in that light, the situation in the ancient Near East between Biblical and extra-Biblical literature can be understood more clearly. Whether we use the word “secular” or not, the issue continues to be what it always was: a clash of religions.

Old Testament Cultural Ramparts

It does not take much study of the Old Testament to form an idea of Biblical attitudes toward Israel’s pagan neighbors. The slaughter of the Amalekites (I Samuel 15) is perhaps the most extreme example. Elijah’s exterminating the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:40) is a parallel. And we remember the cautionary message in Solomon’s experience with his multiple wives and their religions (I Kings 11). God’s people were enjoined to destroy sites and priests sacred to false gods, and even seemingly innocent practices were prohibited because of their pagan context. For instance, Exodus 23:19 commands, “Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk,” a passage explained by “the fact

that boiling sacrificial kids in their mothers' milk was a ritual practice of the Caananites.”⁴ God's people were to avoid the theological ideas and practices of those around them. At first glance, then, we would expect to find similar aggression toward writings in Old and New Testament times which dovetailed with those pagan theologies. Is that what actually appears?

The Old Testament 's Attitude Toward Ancient Literature of the Near East

The ancient Near East was rich in extra-Biblical literature. One scholar has called the works that have survived as broken clay tablets or scraps of papyrus an “embarrassing wealth” of material.⁵ (Presumably the embarrassment comes from scholars' having paid little attention to such a mass of writings until the nineteenth century.) Besides legal and business records are Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite myths, tales, epics, legends, and songs, along with histories and various kinds of wisdom literature. The definitive anthology which claims to include a “fair sampling” of such works has several hundred, the equivalent of a respectable undergraduate literature textbook.⁶

There must have been a good deal more. What we have is largely taken from libraries unearthed from the ruins of cultural centers, yet that represents only a fraction of the material potentially available. For one thing, numbers of religious and civic sites certainly lie undiscovered. Even worse, looting of known sites serves an enthusiastic black market worldwide, which renders many items as inaccessible as burial could ever have made them. When we recall that most of the Dead Sea Scrolls along with “the only likely relic from Solomon's Temple” were rescued from

⁴Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Washington: Review, 1978), p. 628.

⁵James G. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton UP), 1974, p. xx.

⁶Pritchard, p.xxi.

antiquities markets, it is chilling to imagine what has been lost.⁷

Still, what we have is remarkable. It clearly indicates that cultures surrounding ancient Israel enjoyed a rich variety and quantity of literature dedicated to celebrating and extending the pagan religions they represented. And we can feel sure that just underneath the more formal works were myriads of “folk” songs, poems, and tales shared informally. For a formal example, however, let us consider the “Tale of Aqhat,” found at the site of ancient Ugarit and dating from the fourteenth century B.C. It concerns the hero Aqhat but begins with his famous father, a sage named Daniel.⁸ This tale predates the familiar Bible character by some 700 years.⁹

A sackcloth couch does Daniel,
 A sackcloth couch mount and lie,
 A couch of loincloth and pass the night.
 But lo, on the seventh day,
 Baal approaches with his plea;
 “Unhappy is Daniel the Rapha-man,
 A-signing is Ghazir the Harnamiyy-man;
 Who hath no son like his brethren,
 Nor scion hath like his kindred.
 Surely there’s a son for him like his brethren’s,
 And a scion like unto his kindred’s!”¹⁰

Baal, of course, honors the sage’s wish by giving him the heroic son.

We should turn aside a moment to ask the obvious question. What relationship exists between this Daniel and any character in the Bible? Scholars are divided on the answer, with some believing

⁷Hershel Shanks, “The Great MFA Expose,” *Archaeology Odyssey* May/June 1999, p. 21.

⁸Pritchard, pp. 149-155. I follow this author’s spelling of the name.

⁹Siegfried H. Horn, et al. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary, rev. ed.*, (Washington: Review, 1979), p. 265.

¹⁰Pritchard, p. 150.

that this Daniel—not the famous prophet—is the one referred to in Ezekiel 14:14: “Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord God” (KJV). The name is mentioned again in Ezekiel 14:20 and 28:3. Several scholars “have pointed out that the spelling of the name Dan’el in Ezekiel and in the Ugaritic texts is the same, while that of the statesman Daniel is different. . . .”¹¹ Horn calls it “noteworthy that Daniel of the Ugaritic texts is called a rp’, ‘rephaite,’ [‘rapha-man’ in Pritchard’s translation] a term that parallels the ‘Rephaim,’ a people of ancient patriarchal times.”¹² The story of that earlier Daniel does not appear in the Bible. Therefore if Horn is right, the only extant source for the Ezekiel references is a heroic story in honor of Baal.

For our purposes, it does not matter if Horn is wrong (as many believe him to be since Ezekiel and the prophet Daniel were in Babylon at the same time). We may simply notice our own first reaction to hearing the name of Daniel used in connection with praise to Baal. Imagine the effect of that story on a Jew who heard it in folk-tale form at the lips of his pagan neighbor. Here is kindly Baal answering the needs of a wise devotee, much in the manner of JHVH to His servants. Would we not expect God to direct some prophet of that time to warn the people against this type of literature?

None did. In the entire Old Testament, though there are certainly polemics against pagan ideas, we find no cautioning against exposure to pagan literature itself. Still, if the Old Testament were merely silent on the matter, are we not hair splitting in order to argue from a lack of evidence? Are not the ideas and the literature are one thing?

¹¹Horn, p. 265.

¹²Horn, *ibid.*

Happily, we have positive indications of God's standpoint on the question. Take the correlation between Proverbs and the Amenemope, an ancient Egyptian wisdom text current in the Ramesside Period, a time when "the tribes of Israel became a nation."¹³ A sampling is enough to indicate their relationship.

Amenemope 1: Give your ears, listen to the things which are spoken; Give your mind to interpret them. It is profitable to put them in your heart; They will act as a mooring post to your tongue. See for yourself these thirty chapters. They are pleasant, they educate.

Proverbs 22:17-21: Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips. Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge. . . .¹⁴

At least one scholar seems sure of which was a source for the other. "It can hardly be doubted," she says, "that the author of Proverbs was acquainted with the Egyptian work and borrowed from it."¹⁵ We should note that both Walton and Lichtheim argue strenuously against any suggestion that such passages as Proverbs 22 reflect "merely an adaptation" of pagan literature.¹⁶ Rather they use the texts as further evidence of the old principle that writings reflect the literary contexts from which they originate.

It is this issue of context which presently interests us, since at least some Old Testament

¹³Miriam Lichtheim, "Instruction of Amenemope," *The Context of Scripture*, I, William W. Hallo, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 115.

¹⁴John H Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 192. Apparently both translations are by Mr. Walton, who has reordered some lines in the Egyptian work.

¹⁵Lichtheim, *ibid.*

¹⁶Walton, p. 197.

writers were familiar with a corpus of pagan literature despite any danger from its power. A number felt free to reference, to imitate, and even to paraphrase those works for their own purposes. Walton makes the claim candidly: “In its role, Israel often drew from the contemporary literary milieu and motifs to shape its unique theological perspective.”¹⁷

However, that must mean that exposure to non-Biblical literature went uncondemned in Old Testament Israel, startling though the idea may be. When we remember that most such works were composed in the context of honoring Baal, Marduk, Thoth, and a hundred other deities, it is remarkable that we find no proscription regarding the singing of songs, the telling of stories, or the reading of texts associated with those divinities anywhere from Genesis to Malachi. Where the issue is visible at all, familiarity with pagan literature seems to have been accepted as a matter of course, despite any perceived threat it might have posed to Scriptural thinking. It may be important to remember that the prophet Daniel refused the king’s food, but not the books in his curriculum. We may marvel at such Biblical self-assurance, but it is hard to deny.

Hellenistic Jewish Literature During the Inter-Testamental Period

Between the writing of Malachi and Matthew, a period of four centuries, came a time of intellectual ferment as conflicting ideas surged across the Jewish mental landscape. One scholar expresses the situation eloquently:

Demons and angels filled the ether; light and darkness struggled for man’s loyalty. Seven archangels were balanced by many demons in man’s conception of the unseen, and life became conflict on a high level. In the world, parties and sects were formed until there was fragmentation of the Jews into Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and others. It was an active creative era both in the one world of political struggle and in the fragmented world of

¹⁷Walton, p. 236.

man's inner life.¹⁸

The invader now causing all that turmoil was, not Baal, but the culture of Greece, brought into prominence by the rule of Hellenistic Syria. In 168 B.C. Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) forbade Jewish worship in the Temple. "There was no high priest. In fact, the temple was rededicated to Zeus Olympus, and sacrifices made to him."¹⁹ One historian describes the situation evocatively:

Like a fine mist, Greek thought filled the air, and the musical Greek tongue became the "lingua franca" of the ancient world. Even Rome's mighty empire bowed before the sway of this Greek kingdom of ideas. . . . The gymnasium, stadium, and theater which Greece created for the ancient world furnished the amusements for its masses. Greek literature and art set the standard for all artistic production. The philosophies of Greece became the dominant forces in the thought-life of the Mediterranean world.²⁰

All this Hellenism played very well with young intellectuals who thought themselves ahead of their more traditional neighbors. "It became fashionable to remove the marks of circumcision and to wear hats with brims in Greek style. To be up-to-date meant to ape Greek ways and to engage in Greek thought."²¹ Actually, this is also a pattern among today's intellectuals, though some might not recognize the fact. One of my most intelligent students, a product of 12 years of Adventist schools, remarked at the end of Ancient Classics: "In your class I have realized that all my life I've been a Greek. From now on I want to be a Seventh-day Adventist. . . ."

Central to Hellenism was its literature, beginning with the epics and hymns of Homer, and

¹⁸Carl G. Howie, *The Creative Era Between the Testaments* (Richmond: Knox, 1965), p. 9.

¹⁹Howie, p. 20.

²⁰Henry Kendall Booth, *The Bridge Between the Testaments* (New York: Scribner, 1930), pp. 51-52.

²¹Howie, *ibid.*

continuing with great tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes. Those, along with works of philosophy by Plato and Aristotle, writings of Stoics and Epicureans, the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, great speeches of Demosthenes, etc., all produced a rich cultural blend. The Romans added considerably to the mix with their own literary host: the poets Virgil, Ovid, and Lucretius, playwrights including the serious Seneca and the comic Plautus, moralists like Cato, the satirists Horace and Juvenal, orators such as Cicero, historian-statesmen like Pliny the Elder and Julius Caesar himself, and the list goes on.

Still, despite all the diversity and the cool questioning of the philosophers, a firm piety toward pagan gods remained. For instance, today the average person thinks of the theater purely in recreational terms, but such was not the case in ancient Greece and Rome, whose drama was cultic to the core. The tradition began in Greece with so-called “satyr plays” featuring devotees in goatskin costumes who sang stories in praise of Dionysus, the god of wine, revelry, and disorder. The rites included tearing a live animal apart at the altar.

In time these became more formal productions in which two kinds of stories were acted out. Tragedy showed the horrible results of *hamartia*, a mistake often caused by *hubris*, disproportionate pride. Like the animal victim, the tragic hero made a hideous spectacle of suffering. Comedies, on the other hand, invited belly laughs through bawdy talk and obscene costumes. Dionysus was equally happy with either mode of drama, as are his heirs today.

Pious Jews reacted strongly against all this in what one scholar calls “the violent and implacable war between the Maccabees and the Greek cities in Palestine.”²² Of course the Maccabees

²²E.J. Bickermann, “The Colophone of the Greek Book of Esther,” *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), p. 244.

won that war, restored proper worship to the temple, and kept the Jewish heritage of Palestine firmly in place for a time.

Hellenistic culture surged out again during the time of Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.), who built grand theaters in Caesarea, Jerusalem, and Jericho. The one at Caesarea “was part of a very impressive urban complex intended to symbolize the Hellenistic character and spirit of Herod’s kingdom.”²³ From then on, a growing list of Greek theaters would ensure that devotees of Dionysus would find congenial surroundings in Palestine.

But it was among the Jews of the West that the real cross-cultural impact came, since they were centered in Alexandria, a Hellenistic city in Egypt boasting one of the finest libraries on earth. The Jewish scholars who arrived there found a thoroughly Greek culture which mirrored that of the rest of the classical world, unresisted by the conservative sects back home in Palestine. They could not help internalizing the ideas they encountered there.

One result was Hellenistic Jewish literature, including a number of apocryphal books such as III and IV Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus, The Wisdom of Solomon, II Enoch, etc.²⁴ Less well known today are the *Sibylline Oracles*, which sought to harmonize Old Testament traditions and Greek mythic themes.²⁵ This led to some shift in understanding the Torah, as when *Sibylline Oracle 3*, “remains devoted to the Law of Moses . . . [but] treats it in practice as natural law.”²⁶ In other

²³*The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archeology in the Near East*, Ed. Eric M. Meyers (New York: Oxford UP) 5: 201.

²⁴Booth, p. 60.

²⁵Booth, p. 61.

²⁶John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p.151.

words, this is the Law bent into conformity with Aristotle, an invasion by Hellenism that must have made orthodox Jews shudder. The Roman poet Virgil found the *Sibylline Oracles* so compatible with pagan thinking that he “copied outright his Fourth Eclogue from this collection.”²⁷

The Jewish writer at the apex of that western movement was Philo of Alexandria, whose efforts to reconcile Old Testament and Greek ideas (by allegorizing the Eden account among other things) resulted in a corpus of works which together are called “the greatest literary product of Hellenistic Judaism.”²⁸

But the very term “Hellenistic Judaism” implies a situation that seems to have troubled many of the pious. For instance, a somewhat altered version of the Book of Esther was sent to Alexandria from Palestine, apparently as an encouragement for the western Jews to maintain their native identity.²⁹ It includes more visible devotion than the Hebrew account, and identifies the villain Haman as a Macedonian—representing Alexander’s race of conquerors. It seems to have originated in strife between Hellenistic and Hebrew elements in the homeland.

The New Testament’s Response

Writers typically look back on previous events for guidance as to emphasis. Incredibly, however, later Canonical writings seem to show no concern over specific issues of literature. Despite all that ferment, and the fact that the Church would be recruiting Gentiles directly, the New Testament contains no direct warnings to sever contact with pagan literature, drama, etc. Christ’s prayer for his disciples, “not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest

²⁷Booth, p. 153.

²⁸Booth, p. 61.

²⁹Collins, p. 88.

keep them from the evil" (John 17:15), leaves the question open. Paul's letters to the churches in a variety of Greek cities contain a wealth of admonitions, but warnings to stay away from the powerful influence of pagan literature or drama are not among them. It is true that Colossians 2:8 warns: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy. . . ," but that is a long way from banning literature outright. As the first century continued, the great mass of Christians seem to have embraced public performances. One historian is quite candid about this: "It is plain, on the evidence of all the Fathers, that Christians continued to flock to the [public shows]."³⁰ We should remember that, before the advent of printing, such performances were the major way in which the average person had access to literature.

On the other hand, there are general admonitions we must heed. Philippians 4:8 is one: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true. . . ," and I John 2:15 is another: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." As well, 2 Corinthians 6:14 says "touch not the unclean thing." But how should we obey these admonitions, exactly?

Answering that question directly would more than double the size of this paper. But in terms of literature itself we may use the example of Paul as an interpretive model, noticing his unashamed familiarity with pagan literature at several points. For instance, it is worth citing one scholar's thoughts on Acts 17:28:

[Paul] continues, "As also some of the poets among you have said." He refers to several Greek poets, and from one of them he quotes the last half of the hexameter: "Ever and in all ways we all enjoy Jupiter, *for we are all his offspring.*" [Italics in the original.] This is taken from Aratus, a countryman of Paul himself, who was born in the Cilician coast town

³⁰Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: Univ. of California P., 1981), p. 44.

of Soli about 310 B.C., and died about 240.³¹

The principles of “whatsoever things are true. . . .” and “Love not the world. . . .” applied strictly to questions of literature might well be seen as forbidding the study of pagan hymns in praise of Jupiter. However Paul would have disagreed with that interpretation, for his own practices stand in stark contrast to it. Lenski adds:

On two other occasions Paul quotes from Greek poets. He quotes from Menander in I Cor. 15:33, and a full hexameter from Epimenides of Crete in Titus 1:12. The question is naturally asked as to how far Paul was conversant with Greek literature, in particular with poetry. When Paul quotes verbatim as he did in these three cases he thereby shows a rather thorough acquaintance with Greek literature. . . .³²

This is very strong evidence concerning the New Testament’s overall attitude toward the reading of extra-Biblical, even pagan, literature. Certainly no educated Jew could have been ignorant of increasing pagan influences in Palestine and Alexandria, and no conservative one could have been comfortable with them. Yet the man who described himself as “an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the Law, a Pharisee” (Philippians 3:5) built on Old Testament practices by showing unembarrassed familiarity with pagan writing. He would hardly have done so if a conscientious application of Scripture had been understood to forbid it. Moreover, in none of his extant letters did Paul attempt to limit what his church members should read or what public presentations (if any) they should avoid. Speculating as to why is futile, since one can make no case from a lack of evidence. Thus we are left with Paul’s actual practice to guide us.³³

³¹R.C.H. Lenski, *An Interpretation of The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1934), p. 732.

³²Op. cit. p. 733.

³³Acts 19:19 may seem to be a counterexample. “Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together and burned them.” However, this clearly refers to workbooks

To sum up, despite all sorts of cultural and theological pressures on Israel during Old Testament, inter-Testamental, and New Testament times, Scripture nowhere expressly forbids or even restricts exposure to pagan literature. The Bible seems to exhibit such unshakable self-confidence in its own superiority that it does not mind allowing any and all competitors free access to the arena of ideas. We are to remember that, despite any appearances to the contrary, God's voice is not mocked by the words of men. Just as Satan has been allowed full utterance in the courts of Heaven (see Job 1 and 2, for instance) so apparently God's people may listen to worldly literature as they choose, individually directed by the Holy Ghost. From Genesis to Revelation, that seems to be the rule.

But possibly we ought to consider further. St. Paul articulates an important principle in I Corinthians 6: 12: "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." Beginning in the second century and onward, many Christians questioned the expediency of some kinds of literary exposure, provoking real controversy.

The Church Fathers and After

The first debates over pagan literature occurred among the early Church Fathers over the issue of cultural contact with one's heathen neighbors. Followers of Justin Martyr, noting with him the absence of Scriptural prohibitions against non-Biblical literature, believed that Christians should not reject classical culture out of hand but should rather use terms current in pagan philosophy to explain Christian ideas, a tacit endorsement of non-Biblical literature from where those terms must

of magic listing incantations, etc., which have as little claim to being identified as literature as do today's auto shop manuals. See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 180.

originate.³⁴ (For instance, Plato's dialogues certainly qualify as literature, while Homer's epics were the starting point of classical culture including philosophical themes.)

Standing on the other side of the debate were followers of Tertullian, whose most famous questions resonate even today: "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What does [Plato's] Academy have to do with the Church?"³⁵ In that context the question of exposure to heathen philosophy and literature comes to the forefront.

Tertullian's concern was over philosophy, but he was equally troubled about how pagan ideas were transmitted through theater and festivals. The core of Tertullian's argument on the subject is contained in his treatise "Spectacles," which exposes the evils of public displays and condemns them. Again we should note that civic performances provided the average person's major access to literature. Tertullian admits backhandedly that the Bible is silent on the subject of pagan literature; he does find indirect evidence to support his beliefs, however.

For there are some brethren who, being either too naive or overparticular in their faith, demand a testimony from holy Scripture, when faced with giving up the spectacles, and declare the matter an open question, because such a renunciation is neither specifically nor in so many words enjoined upon the servants of God. Now, to be sure, nowhere do we find it laid down with same precision as "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not worship an idol," "Thou shalt not commit adultery," "Thou shalt not commit fraud"—nowhere do we find it thus clearly declared: "Thou shalt not go to the circus," "Thou shalt not go to the theater. . . ." But we do find that to this special case there can be applied that first verse of David, where he says: "Happy is the man who has not gone to the gathering of the ungodly, nor stood in the ways of sinners, nor sat in the chair of pestilence."³⁶

³⁴R. Dean Peterson, *A Concise History of Christianity*, (Albany: Wadsworth, 2000), p. 64.

³⁵ Peterson, *ibid.* (The "Academy," of course, is Plato's famous school of philosophy begun in the fourth century B.C. and which lasted 900 years.)

³⁶Tertullian, "Spectacles," in Joseph Deferrari, ed., *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 40 (New York: Catholic UP, 1959), pp. 52-3.

The editor adds an ironic footnote declaring that even though Tertullian speaks elsewhere against schools of philosophy (“the Academy”), he himself is “under the influence of sophistic methods of argumentation taught in the schools of rhetoric . . . [based on the idea that] everything is capable of proof if one is clever enough to twist the meanings of words.”³⁷ Tertullian, on this reading, appears to be rather friendlier to pagan philosophical attitudes than his words would indicate.

And the editor’s point seems at least somewhat justified. Though Tertullian struggled to find Biblical precedents for his line of thinking, he would have had no trouble quoting passages from Plato in which censorship is as obvious as a blown-up bridge on a major highway. Referring to a famous section of *The Republic*, one scholar notices how ready Plato is to ban literature he finds objectionable. “Disconcertingly, the first topic for discussion concerns the institution of a censorship, to protect the fledgling guardians from malign influences that might injure them as protectors of the state.”³⁸ The first “influence” Plato wants to censor is Homer, the foundational author of Greek culture. Saint Paul imposed no such barriers around the Corinthians, Ephesians, etc., who were heirs of that same legacy. Some might wish to ask Tertullian his own question quoted earlier: “What has Plato’s Academy to do with the Church?”

All the same Tertullian’s argument has obvious strength as he lists evils portrayed wantonly in the theater. Why, one might ask, would any Christian, let alone any moral pagan, support such things by attending them? The truth is that neither Justin nor Tertullian indicated any disagreement about the need to eradicate those public performances, and indeed the Church banned theater for

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Barish, p. 17.

several centuries until “morality plays,” etc., gained popularity.³⁹

But Tertullian was the more adamant on these issues. He became so disappointed in the mainstream churches’ more casual attitude toward lifestyle and the encroachment of Greek philosophy into theology that “in his fifty-eighth year he rejected the orthodox Church as too sullied with worldly ways, and embraced Montanism.”⁴⁰ (The Montanists looked forward fervently to the Second Coming and practiced strict rules of personal conduct.) This pattern of calling for reform and even separation would be repeated by his intellectual heirs throughout history.

By contrast, the followers of Justin, including Origen and Clement of Alexandria, mixed actual pagan philosophical ideas into their theological writings. One scholar comments that “Origen starts, not from the doctrine of the Word, but from a God whose main characteristics are determined more by Platonism than by Scripture.”⁴¹ Here was evidence of the danger posed by Athens toward Jerusalem-based thinking.

For our purposes it is enough to grant that literature’s power to transmit philosophical ideas can be dangerous. This was recognized about a century after Tertullian by Minucius Felix, many of whose passages are reminiscent of Ellen G. White’s. For example, the following sounds much like a statement from *Testimonies*: “By these . . . charming fictions the minds of boys are corrupted. With the . . . stories sticking in their memories they grow to the full strength of their mature years, and in

³⁹“Drama,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (1936), 7: 586.

⁴⁰Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, vol. 3, 1944 (New York: Fine, 1993), p. 613.

⁴¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. 1. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), p. 226.

the same opinions [they] grow old, though the truth is plain to see if they would only look for it.”⁴² The practicality of Felix’s concern seems to match Mrs. White’s: both worried that literature laden with pagan ideas would grip the young and charm them away from all regard for Scripture, until their minds were closed against the Bible forever, making an intelligent choice between Athens and Jerusalem impossible for them. Such youngsters would certainly appear to be “under subjection” to non-Biblical literature, using St. Paul’s term.

Perhaps the most famous warnings against literature were written by Augustine, who made a number of comments in various writings. His best known passage on the subject is found in the *Confessions* as he reviewed his former delight in seeing plays: “Theatrical shows, filled with depictions of my miseries and with tinder for my own fire, completely carried me away.”⁴³ He compared the results to the infection of a wound. “Yet, an inflamed sore, and putrefaction, and blood poisoning followed, as if from the scratches of finger nails.”⁴⁴

However, even though theater itself had been suppressed and people like Minucius Felix were calling all fictive writing into question, classical texts continued to be valued. For instance Celtic monks of the eighth century diligently preserved ancient Roman texts after barbarous Germanic tribes had swept Europe into the so-called Dark Ages. A historian notes that scholars from as far away as the eastern Mediterranean sought out “the most inaccessible fringes of Cornwall, Ireland, or the

⁴²“Octavius,” in Joseph Deferrari, ed., *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 10 (New York: Catholic UP, 1959), pp. 372-73.

⁴³Augustine, *Confessions*, in Joseph Deferrari, ed., *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 21 (Washington: Catholic UP, 1953), p. 50.

⁴⁴*Ibid*, p. 52.

Hebrides,” as when, for example, “in the year 550 a boat-load of fifty scholars arrived at Cork.”⁴⁵ Of course they brought manuscripts with them. One writer claims that “Latin literature would almost certainly have been lost without the Irish.”⁴⁶ If that is true, Irish monks preserved even lewd plays like Plautus’ *Amphitryon* in which Jupiter seduces the protagonist’s wife, stopping the rotation of the heavens to give himself more time to enjoy her. The happy ending comes when the lead character finally accepts Zeus’ love-child as a gift from the god. We may draw a legitimate distinction between preserving a play to be read and endorsing its performance, but the rescue itself did happen.

Here again we need to remember that those Celtic Christians were much more devoted to the Scriptures than they were to following traditions of any Church Fathers associated with Rome. At least one scholar finds evidence that the majority of the British Celts clung to an independent reading of the Bible strongly enough to keep the Sabbath for several centuries until being swallowed up, one company at a time, by the Catholic Church.⁴⁷

True, other historians are not so sure that the Celtic Church really was the sole repository of Latin texts. They mention Alcuin, a Saxon churchman who built up the finest library in England some 200 years after the scholars had migrated to Celtic lands. Then Charlemagne recruited him to head the school at the center of that emperor’s great text-gathering project. Alcuin “made several literary journeys . . . once as far as Rome, and each time returned laden with MS treasures, secured, by a

⁴⁵Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation* (New York: Harper, 1969), p.7.

⁴⁶Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 193.

⁴⁷Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (Brushton, N.Y.: Teach, 1972), pp. 75-90.

liberal expenditure of money, from different monasteries.”⁴⁸ But that statement contains an interesting implication. Whether it was Irish or continental monks who preserved such literature as the above play, the important thing is to notice where Carolingians such as Alcuin found those manuscripts waiting for them. One writer states that “We would now have very little of the Latin classics were it not for the labor and intelligence of the Carolingian scribes.”⁴⁹ However, that labor depended upon mining the monasteries.

From all this, it seems wise to recognize that tolerance for literature is well represented in diverse branches of Christianity.

A seventeenth-century example of a man with that attitude is John Milton, Puritan and devoted Bible scholar as well as poet and essayist. His pamphlet, “Areopagitica,” is history’s most famous defense of the freedom to publish, and stands as a major precursor to the First Amendment of the American Constitution. In one passage he calls to mind

the high providence of God, who, though he command us temperance, justice, continence, yet pours out before us, even to a profuseness, all desirable things, and gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety. Why should we then affect a rigor contrary to the manner of God and of nature, by abridging or scanting those means which books freely permitted are [sic], both to the trial of virtue and the exercise of truth?⁵⁰

True, other Puritans took a more restrictive view, for instance closing down English theaters as soon as enough political power had come into their hands. But even this generality needs clarifying:

⁴⁸Philip Schiff, *Fourth Period*, Vol. 4 of *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), p. 685.

⁴⁹Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: Morrow, 1991), pp. 138-39.

⁵⁰John Milton, “Areopagitica,” *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes, (New York: Odyssey, 1957), p. 733.

However, one should not think of the Puritans as being invariably opposed to theatrical entertainment *per se*. Several of the patrons and even of the dramatists . . . were of the Puritan tendency. However that may be, external political events overtook internal developments decisively when the public theaters were closed altogether in 1642. It is debated how far, even then, the Interregnum [when Puritans ruled England] meant a break in dramatic tradition. For publication, private performances and the careers of dramatists . . . continued throughout.⁵¹

Thus sterner Puritans than Milton were still not quite ready to dismiss theater out of hand as Tertullian had. It is interesting to recognize how their attitude contrasts with their enemies' censorious reaction after the Puritan experiment in English government had collapsed. During the next century, English Christians of all sorts found their speech and writings ruthlessly suppressed by an intelligentsia modeled on classical Greek and Roman patterns. "Madness" was . . . the charge most often levied against any sort of serious and outspoken Christianity, and it is certain that many were locked up in insane asylums for life simply for preaching or declaring their faith openly."⁵² However restrictive the Puritans' Bible-based attitude looks to our generation, it was far more tolerant of variety in literature than were their political successors.

As is well known, two "great awakenings," in which Puritan thought and Wesley's Methodism played central roles, were required for Christian piety to again be generally acceptable in England and America. The Seventh-day Adventist Church arose from the American experience of the latter revival.

This church was not merely derivative, however. Unlike the sects from which its members came, the Seventh-day Adventist Church claimed a prophet who, by that claim, was seen as able to

⁵¹Alastair Fowler, *A History of English Literature*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP), p. 93.

⁵²David Lyle Jeffrey, *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 6.

confirm new insights into Bible truth and to provide special counsel for people in the latter days. Those admonitions, like Tertullian's, emphasize that worldly literature and entertainment are "teeming with errors and fables. Novelties in the form of sensational dramas are continually arising to engross the mind, and absurd theories abound which are destructive to moral and spiritual advancement."⁵³

Of course Tertullian and his immediate heirs were unacquainted with novels, but Mrs. White's statements on that subject simply apply the same Pauline principle of expediency to this new art form. "The readers of fiction are indulging an evil that destroys spirituality, eclipsing the beauty of the sacred page. It creates an unhealthy excitement, fevers the imagination, unfits the mind for usefulness, weans the soul from prayer, and disqualifies it for any spiritual exercise."⁵⁴

Such assertions make some believe that Mrs. White wanted all fiction denied to God's remnant people. John Waller's analysis following a close study of her counsels on reading takes a more temperate view. "It is sufficiently clear," he says, "what she thinks about habitual novel-reading, and all sorts of reading practices that lead to such addiction. She tells us again and again. In other places she unmistakably refers to particular sub-genres such as *sentimental* fiction or *sensational* fiction, which were easily distinguishable types in her day."⁵⁵ He then includes a caution: "But when Mrs. White speaks broadly of 'fiction,' does she necessarily mean to include every story, long or short, moral or otherwise, that does not happen to be true-to-fact? If she doesn't mean that,

⁵³*Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4, p. 415.

⁵⁴*Messages to Young People* (Nashville, TN: Southern, 1930), p. 272.

⁵⁵"A Contextual Study of Ellen G. White's Counsel Concerning Fiction," in *Seventh-day Adventists on Literature*, ed. Robert Dunn (Riverside: Loma Linda UP, 1974), p. 54.

why isn't she more precise?"⁵⁶ For answer, he notes what we recognized at the beginning of this present study—that “Our language is deficient in single, precise generic terms applicable to fictional literature; the terms notoriously overlap.”⁵⁷

Still, parsing Mrs. White's specific terms can take us only so far. The truth is that her stance on theater/literature is far more proscriptive than anything written by a Judeo-Christian before Tertullian, Minucius Felix, or Augustine, though it makes common sense in the same way as they did, and with the same quality of evidence. On the other hand, we should acknowledge other balancing statements by Mrs. White. For instance, “The minds of men need literary as well as spiritual training that they may be harmoniously developed; for without literary training, men cannot fill acceptably various positions of trust.”⁵⁸ As we have seen, a number of Old and New Testament writers demonstrated the good effects of such training.

What does all this come to regarding Mrs. White? A prophet speaking to her own time would be expected to add new emphasis or clarity to ideas from former prophets while remaining in fundamental harmony with them, which is exactly what we see if we give credit to the full breadth of her statements. Admittedly the bulk of what she wrote about literature was cautionary, but is it certain that we should judge her overall message solely by the sheer weight of words on each side? Dr. Leslie Hardinge, Professor of Religion at Pacific Union College, once remarked to me that the smallest comment of Scripture or the Spirit of Prophecy is not to be dismissed outright on account of its size. “A key doesn't have to be big,” he said. “A few ounces of brass can give us the use of

⁵⁶Waller, *ibid.*

⁵⁷Waller, *ibid.*

⁵⁸*Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern, 1923), pp. 255-56.

a car weighing half a ton.” We should take all of her statements into account—not just the majority on a particular issue. God’s people today are especially responsible to prepare for the Second Coming, but just as in earlier ages His messenger has made room for responsible exposure to things literary, calling it necessary in fully educated service for Him. God’s remnant people are to avoid the impure, but not to be so afraid of contact with the world’s literature that we adopt a siege mentality.

Combining Faith and Learning in the Literature Classroom

We need to begin by acknowledging current trends. Today most Adventist young people have have been thoroughly exposed to worldly thinking through the popular media, and our more intellectual students go further by reading sophisticated literature unaided. Teaching all of them to rightly divide the worthwhile from the shabby is absolutely vital. The only way to do that is to adopt a confident Scriptural stance in our classes, giving worldly literature a fair hearing in light of Biblical principles, and thus allowing the contest to take place openly. Anything less bold will leave the arena exclusively in the Enemy’s hands.

How shall we decide which authors and works to present in a given classroom? Once again, St. Paul’s principle of expediency is at the heart of the answer. We must think prayerfully about the likely consequences of choosing a particular book, play, or poem to assign, since we bear moral responsibility for those outcomes. To deny accountability for making injurious assignments (“It’s not my fault if the parents raised this kid so narrowly that *Lolita* disturbs him”) is dangerously immature in itself. A young teenager’s Christian perspective might be damaged by a book which an adult could read without harm, and it is the teacher who must decide when is right time for a particular piece of

literature.⁵⁹ We should pray for the wisdom that values the students' spiritual health above any literary work.

Whichever choices we make, we literature teachers must ourselves be educated so as to recognize the philosophical foundations of each literary period and author presented. Only thus can we acquaint students with the liabilities as well as the benefits in a given reading. For instance, before teaching the New England Transcendentalists we should be able to answer such claims as the one I heard recently, that "Ralph Waldo Emerson is an excellent intellectual role model for our young people." The clarifying retort might be "Do we really want to produce a generation of Hinduistic Adventists?" Emerson's strengths as thinker and writer should be fairly pointed out in class, but Christian literature teachers have an obligation to educate themselves for presenting such writings negatively also, a technique illustrated later in this paper.

As to pedagogy, one is free to take the best. For instance, although many in the educational world celebrate the "Socratic method," Christians have a much greater example of teaching excellence. Socrates could only acknowledge that he knew nothing, and then ask leading questions to show that his hearers knew even less. The best result of this must be a pooling of incompetence, with the uneducated clustered around someone who, by his own admission, is only marginally less so. That amounts to a tyranny of ignorance. As imitators of Christ we are free instead to pray for guidance, and then to use anecdotes, examples, explanation, humor, and above all to act as authorities who submit to the authority of Christ. One student recently remarked to me, "Say what you will

⁵⁹For instance, Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* has been central in destroying the faith of several people I know who read it as gullible teens. Not long ago a Christian adult who had just read the book mentioned it to me. "What a bunch of garbage!" was his only reaction. Of course mature youngsters might not be damaged by it, while adolescent-minded adults might. But in general, age seems to reduce the danger.

about the Socratic method, the best teachers I've had over the years have all used one technique most of the time—dynamic lectures.”

“Well,” I answered her, “so did Christ.”

Naturally a skillful teacher constantly asks leading to tap the intelligence or experience of students, but overarching that technique is a framework of knowledge supplied by the teacher's own learning as directed and shaped by the Bible and the Holy Spirit. The teacher must actually know; he or she cannot hide behind the excuse of Socratic ignorance.

We must also avoid veiling ourselves in sentimentalism, at least the kind that typically emerges in discussions of how to integrate faith and learning most effectively. “They'll know I'm a Christian teacher by my love” is the assertion. “I'll be so devoted and caring that my students will see Christ in me.” That is an excellent plan, but it will not prove the Christian background of our teaching, nor arm our students with the confidence implicit in Scripture. Socrates, too, was devoted to his pupils, but one would hardly label him or his influence as being anything but pagan, however much we might honor his morals. What we must do instead is to take the intellectually hard road and show how the specific learning of the moment connects or relates to Christianity. Only then will we be helping arm our students for the spiritual battles they will face.

Doing so within a firmly Christian context means that, however splendid the play, novel, or poem, we acknowledge that it will not follow us to the Kingdom of Heaven. For instance, profound though we find *Hamlet* to be, a revenge tragedy which explores truths amid human suffering and crime will be completely useless in a landscape lighted by the face of Christ. One Seventh-day Adventist English teacher reacted with horror and disgust to that idea. “How can you say that the great classics will burn?” he cried. “They're eternal!” No. If that were true, then the sins they

exemplify would be eternally celebrated also, and such a thing cannot be if God's promises are true. On the other hand, we must recognize that literature is an indispensable aid to the education of young Christians. Although some works are best taught positively while others should be approached negatively, young Seventh-day Adventists deserve that preparation for their encounters with the world.

Teaching Literature Positively

Most of us go into literature teaching out of love for the subject matter. Having responded to the thrill of reading from childhood on, we naturally want to share that excitement with others, especially regarding the finest, most powerful literature in history. As this paper has shown, we may do so on Biblical grounds. It is not at all unlikely that St. Paul was blessed with one or more such teachers. But we must temper our enthusiasm to avoid being *captivated* by the works we are considering. An English professor once said to me, "When my class is reading Wordsworth, we're his all the way!" As Christians we are released from that kind of slavishness, and are free to continue standing on holy ground as we appreciate what the author has written.

For instance, at the average state university *The Canterbury Tales* is presented with emphasis on humanistic realism and a couple of risqué' stories. A Christian literature classroom will find the realism very worthwhile, especially in startlingly incisive psychological presentation of some characters. In addition some generally neglected features will emerge too, such as Chaucer's pioneering effort to present Reformation ideas in Catholic England. A good example is the Parson, Chaucer's ideal clergyman, who is strictly dedicated to Scripture rather than to doctrines of saints and Fathers of the Church. This single-mindedness seems to have a wonderful effect, for the Parson is humble, sacrificially caring of his parishoners, personally clean, etc. Then Chaucer tells us why:

“But [only] Christes lore and His apostles twelve
He taught—but first he folwed it himselfe.”⁶⁰

So the Parson is guided by the Bible exclusively! When we realize that this tribute to *sola scriptura* was written in 1387, well over a century before Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door, Chaucer’s audacity is astounding. Reformation references elsewhere in the *Tales* (even including righteousness by faith) are also remarkable. Where did Chaucer learn this kind of Bible-centered independence? Was the Church’s hold on England less ironclad than on their Continental cousins? These questions lead straight into discussions of Wycliffe and even the Celtic Church, adding to students’ understanding of history through stories which have first engaged their emotions on a personal level, and so have awakened in them some individual empathy for the early Reformation experience. That is nothing if not Christian education.

But can purely pagan literature be taught positively too? Certainly. For instance, Homer’s heartbreaking *Iliad* is a glory of Greece. At its climax, two blood enemies meet privately in mutual grief over losses they have suffered in a war neither wanted. The Trojan King Priam speaks one of the most terrible sentences in all literature to Achilles, the Greek invader: “I have endured what no man on earth has done before—I put to my lips the hands of the man who has killed my son.”⁶¹ Realizing that each is an unwilling victim of circumstances, both men join in weeping and mutual sympathy. The result is a few days’ truce, the last moments of peace that Troy or either hero will

⁶⁰“The General Prologue,” *The Canterbury Tales* in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 82. Chaucer later retracted the *Tales*, presumably out of fear that the Church might otherwise consign his soul to Hell.

⁶¹Homer, *The Iliad*, tr. Robert Fagles, in *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, ed. Maynard Mack et al., 6th ed., 2 vols., (New York: Norton, 1992), 1: 200.

ever experience.

That is one of the most memorable scenes in Western literature, and students typically respond very strongly to it, as do I myself. But after a bit of emotional discussion someone in the class will often say, “This is a Christian epic after all! It ends with the clear message that we should love our enemies!”

“Yes,” I say, “these two enemies certainly have become friends on a level neither could have imagined before. But notice what has allowed them to do that. It is their realization that they are up against a far bigger mutual enemy.” Because Fate has made those heroes into victims, the two men can embrace, recognizing that they are blameless prey in the hands of an infinite power. Since a good God and a self-sacrificing Savior are laughable in such a grim world view, this is the exact opposite of Christianity.

I remind them that St. Paul understood very well when he said that the doctrine of the Cross is “to the Greeks foolishness” (I Cor. 1:23). Archaic Hellenism could only climb this high by accepting the malevolence of the universe itself. And, without Christianity, they are right. Such theories have abounded in the twentieth century too, where every criminal seems to wear the mask of a victim, and increasing numbers have contempt for Christian optimism. Perhaps my students, having encountered such ideas in their most touching form, will be more able to recognize and dismiss those beliefs without trouble later.

To sum up the positive approach, I facilitate student encounters with the most splendid and moving literature ever produced by writers honestly bent on exposing the truth, but I demonstrate that in reading and empathizing with the text we need never shift ground away from our Christian stand. In fact, I try to demonstrate that a Christian perspective is fundamental to the most intelligent

reading of any piece of literature.

Teaching Literature Negatively

But the Christian classroom must go farther, alerting the young to the fact that some beautiful and powerful literature is seriously flawed. For instance, when on the day when we consider Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*, students typically arrive at class incensed that such a good man was put to death by jealous citizens on a trumped-up charge. I ask them, "Now really—was Socrates actually corrupting the youth?" Several students will shake their heads, and one or two will answer "No."

Then I read to them a passage from H. G. Wells' history to the effect that Socrates' iron skepticism and insistence on his own ignorance destroyed the simple faith and inhibitions of many of his young followers, leaving them morally groundless. As a result, a number actually were corrupted. Two of those boys (Critias and Alcibiades) became the most vile traitors Athens ever produced while others slid into alcoholism or debauchery, including the son of the man whose formal charge brought Socrates into court. The facts of the case lead very effectively to questioning the value of skeptical philosophy as a way to attain progress in human thinking.

We further notice a particularly engaging piece of dialogue in which Socrates makes a monkey out of Meletus, the prosecutor, by having him "stoutly affirm" that Socrates is the only corruptor, the sole defiler, of Athenian youth. I ask how many in the room would have answered as Meletus seems to have. In the silence that follows I ask them to imagine what the average policeman might say to a speeder who tried that argument. Usually someone in the class will offer, "Buddy, there's lots of speeders out there, but you're the one I just caught, so you're getting the ticket." All agree that Meletus is an incredibly stupid prosecutor. But, some insist, the man is befuddled in facing Socrates, the most dazzling debater Athens has ever seen. They remind us that brainless district attorneys have

appeared in American history too.

That's when I ask whether this is an actual transcript of the trial. Well—no. It's an account written by Plato, Socrates' devoted pupil. "Don't you wish," I continue, "that there were another report of that event?" They nod, sadly. I then tell them the good news: there is a little-read but authentic piece called *Socrates' Defense before the Jury* by Xenophon, another of Socrates' students. Although his account of the trial goes generally as Plato's does, this alternate account shows Meletus as fully competent, scoring points in the debate that would be impossible for the man pictured by Plato. Xenophon also includes Socrates' spirited defense against the charges involved with Critias and Alcibiades, leaving one with the clear impression of the philosopher's moral virtue without resorting to Plato's apparent wish to suppress the whole question. Though it is not so beautifully crafted as Plato's, Xenophon's version has a plain sense of accuracy about it, especially since it does not ask us to believe that every speaker except Socrates is a complete fool.

Xenophon's account turns up another fascinating bit of information, too. Some time before his trial Socrates remarked that he found the idea of death to be attractive. "But now," he said, "if my years are prolonged, I know that the frailties of old age will inevitably be realized, that my vision must be less perfect and my hearing less keen, that I shall be slower to learn and more forgetful of what I have learned."⁶² Then he spoke warmly of the opportunity presented by a capital charge. "For if I am condemned now, it will clearly be my privilege to suffer a death that is adjudged by those who have superintended this matter to be not only the easiest but also the least irksome to one's friends,

⁶²Xenophon, *Socrates Defence to the Jury*, tr. O. J. Todd, *Xenophon*, ed. G. P. Gould, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard U. P.) 4: 645.

and one that implants in them the deepest feeling of loss for the dead.”⁶³

This effectively changes our impression from Plato’s picture of a heroic philosopher hounded into court but determined to tell the truth in the teeth of a death threat, into that of a man who did not care how impudently he spoke, so long as the jury would end his life and spare him both the infirmities of old age and the stigma of suicide. That sheds new light on the paradoxical fact (duly reported in Plato’s narrative) that more of the citizens voted for his death than had convicted him initially. It seems highly possible that Socrates, knowing how reluctant Athenian courts were to execute anyone, increased his display of arrogance so as to exasperate some of those who had actually voted for his acquittal a few minutes earlier.⁶⁴

When the discussion has reached that point, we are ready to start suspecting Plato’s rendition to be excellently written propaganda, powerful enough to have seduced today’s unwary readers into elevating Socrates to equality with Christ. Then we are ready to wonder why almost everyone accepts Plato’s account as utterly true without bothering to compare it with Xenophon’s. As I point out, it is ironic how intellectuals who have canonized Plato’s Socrates often dismiss the multiple testimonies of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as being hopelessly biased and untrustworthy.

Such a negative approach prepares the class to see the wonderfully positive qualities of Plato’s writing too. The philosopher was a master narrator with an astounding ability to charm away his readers’ normal scepticism. One way of doing that was to infuse the *Apology* with evocatively tragic qualities also found in the great plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴For a full presentation of this argument including some additional surprises, see I. F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (Boston: Little, 1988). Stone makes his case solely on the basis of original texts.

When that class period is finished, the students have been exposed to an important perspective, not only about literature, but with insights into Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, the Gospels, and above all the obedient narrowness of Socrates' latter-day devotees who have ignored testimony in conflict with their faith. Students have also seen new evidence that Bible accounts are indeed respectable in comparison to the best that pagan writers can offer. This is possible because we have free access to forceful literature, and a Christian perspective to give us parallax for depth perception.

No, Christian English teachers need not fear to guide their students appropriately through the most powerful non-Biblical books in history. Scripture allows it, and although post-New Testament writings and Mrs. White's counsels are cautionary, they too sanction it. Literature teachers who know their subject can demonstrate how Christians can benefit from an honest education in literature, as did St. Paul, to the greater glory of God..

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