

Some Observations on the Evolution and Politics of Roman Imperial Canons

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A Preliminary Observation

Recently I've been taken by Ahuvia Kahane's definition of canon as "a practice of containment in response to inherent states of surplus."¹ In his 2016 article he argues that orality has, shall we say, built-in sorting processes. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* may be the only complete epics of the Trojan Cycle left because they were the most consistently performed—others endured the ephemerality of "We Built This City [on Rock an' Roll]" or the new film *Cats*. In other words, the mere volume of written productions by Roman times had reached such a level that canonicity was required not only to curb the promulgation of pernicious or inaccurate or insane works but to limit the amount of knowledge the educated might be expected to control.

With that definition in mind, it is all the more remarkable that the Romans, a conquering people, should have taken notice of any writings at all of the peoples they had conquered. If the very act of education is conceived as acquiring a mastery of the cultural artifacts that make the Roman student a Roman of the educated elite, then surely the artifacts produced by Romans ought to be enough for a lifetime of study. This, at least, would seem to have been the attitude of the Ptolemaic Greeks, who relied on Herodotus' observations—by the death of Cleopatra VII more than five hundred years old—for written information about the very people they ruled, rather than translate Egyptian works into Greek.²

Romans and Greeks

Rebecca Flemming summarizes quite elegantly the relationship between the Greeks and Romans on the threshold of Empire:³

By the end of the Mithridatic wars, Rome had acquired a vastly increased amount of Greek knowledge. This knowledge was accumulated in literary form in the libraries of great nobles like Marcus Licinius Lucullus; in the personal form of Greek scholars and teachers—slave, freed, and free—who now made the imperial capital their home in much greater numbers; and in the form of more material booty. The encounter between Greek learning and Roman power was accordingly intensified on both sides.

Although the Romans were in general enthusiastically accepting of Greek knowledge, with the work of Marcus Porcius Cato ('the Elder' 'the Censor'; d. 149 BCE) and later of Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BCE) a movement arose to rival the written products of Greek imagination with native Latin works. This led to a codification of literary genres and styles and to what we might call the first treatises on comparative

¹ "Fan fiction, early Greece, and the historicity of canon," 1.

² Even Manetho is likely to have been read by Hellenophone Egyptians, rather than by elite Greek native speakers. Cf. Dillery, 94.

³ "Knowledge and Empire," *Camb. Hist.* 236.

literature.⁴ The movement also led to such remarkable productions as Varro's *Disciplinae*, an encyclopedia, a canon we might call it, of all the knowledge a Roman of good class ought to have.⁵

In addition, Roman students were soon put to work imitating Greek masters and their genres.⁶ When under the Emperor Augustus a concerted effort was made to reproduce in Latin the literary 'canons' of the Greeks, the Romans were primed with an exhaustive knowledge of original texts (such as Homer) and of the commentaries produced by centuries of studies of such texts (at the great Library at Alexandria, f. e.). Thus, when P. Vergilius Maro sets out to create a Roman Odysseus/Achilles in the form of the Trojan Aeneas, he has on hand (1) his excellent knowledge of Greek; (2) his schoolboy experience imitating the Homeric style; (3) access to commentaries (by the librarians of Alexandria, f.e.) on Homer's works;⁷ (4) access to previous imitations of Homer's work, which are lost to us; (5) access to imitations of Homer's work written by librarians of Alexandria; (6) access to early Latin epics in the style of Homer. And yet, with all that, Vergil's epic *Aeneid* proves to be something quintessentially Roman.

The Wonder of It All

While all this traffic between Greek learning and Roman emulation seems familiar to us, let's take a moment to contemplate how it might have seemed to the peoples of the ancient world themselves.⁸ The Greeks, for example, are remarkably incurious about the written cultural artifacts of other peoples. In the whole of their history with the Persians, for example, we have not a single example of a Persian work translated into Greek by a Greek native speaker. In fact, we have only the Athenian historian

⁴ We might mention in this connection the *περὶ ὑψους* (*De sublimitate*), a curious little treatise from about this period (although wrongly attributed to the rhetor Cassius Longinus), which is attempting to formulate a theory of greatness in literature which transcends genre, culture, and language. In service of his theory, the author (probably a Greek professor at Rome) praises, in addition to masterworks in Greek, works by Romans in Latin and 'Let there be light' from Genesis.

⁵ Although this work is lost, we can reconstruct with some confidence its contents. For more information, see Flemming, "Knowledge and Empire" 237.

⁶ Canons in Roman education, as a complex and well-documented topic, are outside the scope of this (small) paper; I will merely mention that canons of literary works in the Latin vernacular formed the hub of 'higher' education for Romans of good class. The rhetorician Quintilian (d. ca. 100 CE), for example, once proposed that the entire school curriculum be keyed to Vergil's works.

⁷ Displayed by his knowledge of Ethiopian cooking, f. e.

⁸ The following discussion of Latin literature owes much to the magisterial study of Denis Feeney, *Beyond Greek* (2016).

Thucydides as an example of a Greek who had bothered to learn the Persian language—despite the fact that Persian is of the Indo-European family of languages and, thus, is an easy target for a Greek speaker.

Before I advance too much farther into this argument, let me address the question of interpreting. Of course, after Alexander's conquests in the East, Greek diplomats and apparatchiks were obliged to devise some system of communication with the peoples they now governed, and a cadre of interpreters grew up. Some of these may very well have been Greek native speakers who mastered, say, Egyptian, but, on the whole, it seems, from the admittedly limited evidence we have, that the conquered peoples learned Greek, rather than the reverse. Thus, for example, as is famously attested, although the Ptolemies ruled Egypt for nearly three hundred years, only the last of the Ptolemies, Cleopatra VII of undying fame, bothered to learn Egyptian.

But, perhaps more to our point, interpreting is not translating a written text into a text of another written language, as the translators of *The Five Gospels*, f. e., well know.⁹ Translation requires a level of understanding of both languages' cultures that we'd be hard put to argue the Greeks (and most of the other peoples of the Mediterranean) are willing to cultivate. Moreover, writing itself in the ancient world can be problematic; it cannot be any easier for an ancient alphabet-user to master a syllabary than it is for a Midwestern student to master reading and writing in Chinese.¹⁰

Another issue worth considering is illustrated by the translation of Greek works by Arabic scholars in the years 750-1000 CE. In this reasonably brief time, most of what remained of Greek science, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, etc., was translated into Arabic, but not a single work of literature or history. It is assumed such works were determined to be too culture-specific to be of use to the Arabic speakers. This example can serve as an index of the typical compartmentalization of cultures in the

⁹ My colleagues will recall how we were enamored of the translation, "Jeez, you guys!" until someone pointed out that "Jeez" was likely a euphemism for "Jesus"!

¹⁰ This is less problematic for the Romans, who had adopted the Greek alphabet—with some changes—as their writing system as early as Etruscan times. In fact, the very earliest piece of Greek alphabetic writing (ca. 775 BCE) we have is from central Italy, from Gabii, about ten miles from Rome, where Romulus and Remus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus says (*Ant. Rom.* 1.84.5) went to school. Cf. Feeney, 39ff.

That the Romans were accustomed to translate Etruscan writing in Greek letters to Latin writing also in Greek letters (and vice versa) may have been responsible for their alacrity in adopting the writings of other, subordinate, cultures. We have more than 11,000 Etruscan inscriptions but are not really very close to deciphering the relationship between the two cultures.

Mediterranean. That the works of Christianity leapt over cultural barriers is perhaps the result of the Roman model.¹¹

Poetry

When Dennis MacDonald began his series of works on the Homeric epics as models of Christian writings, he encountered resistance to the idea that poetic works could serve as the models of prose. Why did he find it so difficult to cite exact verbal correspondences between the model and its imitation? One issue that we might raise here, as Feeney does, is the fact that the poetic meters are so often associated with religious/ritual utterances, and, of course, there is nothing more culture-specific than tribal religious ceremonials.¹² Thus, early Jesus-communities may have shied away from poetic forms particularly because those forms were used to invoke the gods of the Greeks, as well as their cultural idiosyncrasies. This would not have been a problem for the Romans, who had early on recognized the convertibility of their deities with the Greeks'—even to the extent of Augustus' claiming Apollo's assistance at the Battle of Actium. Apollo, you'll recall, has some claim to be the ultimate Greek tribal god—that's why his temples are so often located on borders with other peoples.

Thus, the Romans adopt the hymnic forms of the Greeks (cf. Catullus' epithalamia, f. e.) and the funerary elegy, two forms that can be firmly associated with religious rituals. Although the elegiac metrical scheme is not particularly suited to Latin (as, we might say, English is not particularly suited to opera), some of the most celebrated Roman poets wrote in that genre, including Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus. Some of their works are true to the form—Propertius' elegy to Cornelia (IV.11), f. e. But the most renowned elegies produced by the Romans aren't about funerals at all—the illustrious Cornelius Gallus, whose poems are all but lost to us, adapted the Greek meter to create the Latin love-elegy.¹³

Evolution: Revolution

¹¹ Here the specter of the Septuagint will be raised—perhaps the ultimate example of a written work translated out of its original language(s) into Greek. But, despite early scholarship on the subject, the Septuagint was doubtless translated by and for Hellenophone Jews in Alexandria who had lost or were losing their Hebrew and/or Aramaic. It was certainly not commissioned by a Ptolemaic monarch, although perhaps tolerated. Cf. Feeney, 24-25.

¹² Feeney, 65-91.

¹³ Of course, lurking in all these arguments is the question of the transmission of texts. It may be that I have to take back all these remarks if the Herculaneum Library, f. e., has anything of importance. For Gallus, f. e., we had only one line until 1978. We now have ten lines.

Gallus's example brings us to another point about the Roman co-option of Greek literary forms. The Romans have a notion of the evolution of ideas. The student is not merely to imitate their models, but to add to them, to improve them.¹⁴ This can be very clearly seen in Quintilian (*Inst.* 10.2.1-28) and Velleius Paterculus (*Vell.* 1.17.6-7), both writing in the first century CE. Thus, Catullus is supposed to improve, to Romanize, Sappho in his poem 51, and Gallus and the elegists are allowed to transmute a poem on the funeral of a loved one into a poem on the funeral of love, f. e.

As for the opinions of mimesis of the ordinary Roman, I might appeal to a fresco from the House of Gavius Rufus in Pompeii, now in the Naples Archaeological Museum (see Figure 1, below). The setting is Crete at the time of the jubilant triumph of Theseus over the bull-headed Minotaur. The hero is being congratulated by several ecstatic children.

This fresco, we might say is the very essence of the innovations of the Romans' approach to Greek literature/knowledge. Here a typical Roman family has had themselves painted into the scene (or so we usually say), with their homely faces contemplating the muscular perfection of the ancient—even to them—Athenians' tribal hero. They're painted in the naturalistic/realistic style the Romans and Etruscans prefer, with all their physical imperfections and in their ordinary clothing. The hero, taller, stronger, nude, is fully idealized and portrayed almost in a different plane. Isn't this the very essence of the Romans' co-option of Greek myth, heroes, epic poetry? And yet, haven't the family added something to the original 'text'—Romanized it?

Fan Fiction Memes

As some have scholars of religion and social anthropology argued, Stanley Hauerwas and Lane McGaughy among them, there are two kinds of religions which have had an impact on the development of the West: tribal religions and story religions.¹⁵ A tribal religion might be defined as one whose adherents are united by kinship or tribal ties, which are reinforced by religious ritual and myth. A story religion might be defined as one whose adherents are bound by their reverence for a story which shapes—and perhaps flatters—their vision of how the world works.

After our recent discussion of fan fiction, at the 2019 Fall Meeting of Westar, with reference to Kristine Toft Rosland's splendid paper and with a *pace* to those currently scoffing at evolutionary theory informing the study of *memetics*, we might bring in speculation on the 'story meme' as a building-block of the 'memplex' of Christianity. This would let us examine smaller units of high prestige works as seminal to

¹⁴ Cf. Stachon, "Evolutionary Thinking in Ancient Literary Theory" 243-246.

¹⁵ Lane McGaughy, "God, Retaliation, and the Apocalyptic Scenario," Westar, Fall 2015.

the development of the Christian kaleidoscope of meaning. One example might serve as a model.

One of the stories we can certainly concede is formative to Christianity can be found in Books Six and Seven of Plato's Republic (Platonic Corpus pages 514-517).¹⁶ You know it well: it's the allegory of the Cave. Please indulge me as I remind you a bit of the details of this seminal text: Plato sets his scene in a cave where people have been imprisoned since childhood with their heads facing a wall. They can neither see to the side nor to the rear; their necks and legs have been shackled so their heads are fixed straight ahead (εἷς τε τὸ [514β] πρόσθεν μόνον ὄραν). Light comes from a fire burning above and set a long way behind them. Between the prisoners and the fire there is an upward path (ἐπάνω ὁδόν) crossed by a built-up wall, a kind of breastwork such as wonderworkers (often translated 'puppeteers'—the Greek is τοῖς θαυματοποιοῖς) put before the men in their audience, over which they display their wonders (τὰ θαύματα), objects of all kinds and images of men, and shapes of animals, too, made of stone and wood and every material. Some of those carrying these are speaking (τοὺς μὲν φεγγομένους), presumably, and some silent (see Fig. 2, below).

Here Glaucon—commonly identified as Plato's brother--comments on the strangeness of the image (εἰκόνα), and Socrates asks if he thinks the prisoners can see anything of themselves or one another or the objects except the shadows on the wall. Glaucon responds how could they if their heads were unmovable? Socrates then presses him to admit that (1) if the prisoners are able to talk to one another they would think that in naming what they saw they'd be naming the passing objects, and (2) if there were echoes from the wall behind, the prisoners would also think these to be the voices of the shadows in front of them. Glaucon promptly agrees. Socrates summarizes, "Then in every way such prisoners would consider truth (τὸ ἀληθές) to be nothing other than the shadows of the objects prepared by art."

Socrates then invites Glaucon to imagine the release and healing from the chains and folly if one man were to be loosed and compelled to stand up and turn his head around and walk and lift his eyes to the light. In doing all these things he would feel pain and would be unable because of the flashing lights to see the things whose shadows he had seen before. He says

What do you think he would say if someone told him that what he'd seen before was an illusion and that now being closer to reality (τοῦ ὄντος) that he saw more rightly (ὀρθότερον)? And if someone were to point out each of the passing objects and ask him to say what it was? Don't you think he would be at a loss and think that what he'd seen

¹⁶ Translations are from the Loeb edition (tr. Paul Shorey), with occasional help from me; the text is the OCT.

before was true-r (ἀληθέστερα) than the things he saw now? [Glaucou agrees, of course.]

And if he were compelled to look at the very light itself, wouldn't it hurt his eyes and wouldn't he turn back toward those things he is able to see and think that these things are really clearer than the things he'd been shown?

Socrates then asks Glaucou to imagine the man's being dragged upward out of the cave by someone (τις), carping and complaining all the way, until he's in the light of the sun. At first he'd refuse to believe the truth of the objects he's being shown because of the pain seeing in the light causes him. He'd gradually accustom himself to the light and finally be able to see the vast sky, the stars, the moon, and, in the end, the sun itself. He would realize the sun provides the seasons, the years, and governs everything in the visible world and is responsible (ἀρτιος) for everything they used to see in the cave.

And, Socrates asks,

When he thought about his life in the cave and his fellow prisoners competing for honors by guessing which shadow-objects came first or next or together, ... wouldn't he suffer (πεπονθέναι) anything rather than return to that life?

Socrates then has the man returning to the cave and his fellows, his eyes filled with the sun and unadjusted to the darkness. And, Socrates continues,

When he tried to compete with the others, he wouldn't be able to pick out the shadows ... and wouldn't the others laugh at him and say his vision was ruined up there and that nobody should bother to go up there? And as for the man trying to loose them and lead them up, if it was possible to lay hands on him and kill him, would they not kill him?

Of course, the allegory was not intended to be read *ex nihilo*; in fact, Plato has a very long introductory argument introducing two other extended metaphors: the divided line and the sun. Moreover, to the Athenians of Plato's day, the issues raised here that are relevant to Plato's thought would be: the tension between the Knowers of the Beautiful and the Knowers of the Good; the search for absolute standards of behavior in the citizens of a polis; the question of the relationship between the politician and the philosopher, the unique knowledge—not opinion--of the philosopher; the value of philosophical education, etc. Obviously, the prisoner who escapes up, the direction of heaven, to the light of the Sun, the one god evoked here, is a superhero, a Knower, a New Man, a Neo (as *The Matrix* has it)¹⁷—clearly Socrates, for Plato, who writes after his martyrdom--and, of course, any geeky Classics major bullied in high school.

Now, the sheer power of this passage, especially to a budding philosopher, is demonstrated by its very placement in the Platonic corpus—at the beginning of the book

¹⁷*The Matrix*, directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski (as the Wachowski Brothers), Warner Brothers, 1999.

bearing the magic number seven. (Consider the collections of the seven greatest hits of Sophocles and Aeschylus that remain to us.) That the allegory belongs to a much longer argument which began on page 504 and that the argument shouldn't have been divided here is actually telling us something: although we can't know how or when the book divisions were made, to some at some time the allegory was studied apart from its closely-argued philosophical underpinnings.

The disjunction of the allegory from the earlier discussion puts this passage more firmly into the realm of political commentary. As Hannah Arendt and others have argued, in the historical context, the passage speaks not so much to the absolute truth obtainable by the student of philosophy as it does to the enraged bitterness of a Plato who saw his teacher, the supreme Knower, martyred by his polis.

This story, in the text of a high-prestige culture, must have attracted any Jesus-follower, in search of pagan prophets. That the political system of fifth-century Athens is effectively dead in the Roman Empire, that Plato is discussing the actions of the Athenian city-state, without reference to any external influences or powers, that, in fact, the allegory may only be applicable—as a political statement—to the circumstances of one man, at one time, in one city-state likely escaped the Jesus-followers as assuredly as it did the makers of *The Matrix*. The allegory—and the end of Socrates—are that compelling. What a story! And what an invitation to fan fiction!

Moreover, in the run-up to the allegory in Book Six, Plato has Socrates referring cryptically to a longer argument and to not passing by the [one and only] Form of the [one and only] Good (ἢ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα 505a). Socrates then proceeds to a discussion of a mysterious [one and only] child (the word used is ὁ τόκος) of the Good. “I am willing to say what is the offspring of the Good and what resembles it most closely (ὅς δὲ ἔκγονός τε τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ φαίνεται καὶ ὁμοιώτατος ἐκείνῳ).” After his pupil Glaucon comments, “Well, tell us, you'll pay for the tale of the father (τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποτείσσεις τὴν διήγησιν) another time,” personifying the Good, as Socrates has personified the child (τὸν τόκον) in his reply, Socrates goes on,

I wish I could render it [τὴν διήγησιν] to you and you receive it (κομίσασθαί). At any rate, receive this child and the offspring of the Good. Take care, however, lest I deceive you with a false account (κίβδηλον.. τὸν λόγον).

Now, here ὁ τόκος is a pun on the technical term for interest on a payment, as well as the word for ‘child’—making this an extended punning metaphor. The question is: would it be understood as such, five hundred years later, by non-native speakers of Greek? Or would the account which follows, containing the Cave allegory—and the divided line and sun analogies, subjects for another day—be taken as a prophecy of the coming of Christ and of the production of the gospel accounts? Would the ‘tale of the father’ be taken as a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures?

Might this tale have informed Marcion's views, for example? Marcion, in his insistence on the story religion aspects, the newness of the cult, rejects the necessity of telling the tale from any other perspective than--we might argue--that of the Knower, the messianic Neo of *The Matrix*. If we keep our eyes on the Neo-figure, borrowing from the Matrix--the being sent by the Monad, as Marcion would have it, the Messiah—and recall his real-life antecedent, Socrates, all is well. But there are other actors in this playlet—and their significance is less transparent. Do the prisoners represent the whole of human society? Where were they at birth, since they are apparently bound only since childhood (ἐκ παίδων ὄντας ἐν δεσμοῖς)?

I'm nitpicking here, but here's a question that might very well have exercised early Jesus-followers: who are the puppeteers, the guys transporting the statues of humans and other living things (καὶ ἀνδριάντας καὶ ἄλλα ζῶα)? Aren't they in possession of the knowledge of the real as well—or at least of a better knowledge, since they are looking at puppets rather than shadows? And what would be the status of the figure who leads our Neo out of the cave? Where did he come from, what was he doing in the cave? Some might have responded to some of these questions by equating the Hebrew Scriptures with the falseness of the shadow figures paraded in front of gullible religious tribalists. But what of the Jewish Jesus-communities, who (apparently) cheerfully subscribe to the Hebrew Scriptures as leading the way to the One true Truth? As setting the stage for the new Revelation? Of course, there are political problems in transferring this tale so tuned to a particular time and place to the circumstances in which a variety of Jesus-communities, scattered from Asia Minor to Egypt to North Africa to Rome to Lyons (with Irenaeus) might find themselves. The necessity of escaping Roman retribution for the Jewish revolts might be one factor; on the other hand, this new cult must be defended as an old religion to earn official Rome's seal of approval and—most likely—Roman converts.

Keeping in mind these considerations, let's turn to a text which, by the very multiplicity of copies we've found—and Irenaeus's condemnation--must have some currency in the early Jesus-communities. The so-called *Apocryphon of John*, the *Secret Revelation of John*, or the *Secret Book of John* exists in four separate extant Coptic manuscripts, three from the cache found at Nag Hammadi in 1945, and one, Berlin Gnostic Codex 8502, acquired in 1896 by Dr. Carl Reinhardt. Two of the Nag Hammadi texts appear to come from the same manuscript tradition (Nag Hammadi II and iV); the other—shorter—Nag Hammadi text (Nag Hammadi III) and the—again shorter--Berlin text differ significantly from the longer texts and each other. A series of events, some catastrophic, delayed the publication of the Berlin codex of the Revelation until 1955: burst water pipes, World Wars I and II, the death of the original editor Carl Schmidt, and the delay in the publication of the Nag Hammadi codices. His inability to obtain

transcripts of the Nag Hammadi texts compelled the new editor, Walter Till, to publish the Berlin codex without reference to the three newly-discovered bits. A synoptic version of all four texts wasn't published until 1996 (by Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse).

First, as an index of the relevance of Plato to this text, let me refer you to Karen King's *The Secret Revelation of John*, where she cites the philosopher on 51 of her 264 pages of text. She cites Plato's *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*, but not the *Republic* or the Cave analogy. And yet it's a fragment of the *Republic* (Platonic Corpus pages 588-589, Book 9)—and of no other of Plato's dialogues—that was found in that jar at Nag Hammadi. Let's assume, therefore, that we're on safe ground here--we are pretty firmly in Platonic territory. But listen to Karen King's analysis of the work in her 2006 book (p. 3):

In contrast to Roman rulers who declared themselves the authors and enforcers of universal justice and peace, the story describes the world as a shadowed place ruled by ignorant and malevolent beings. ... Divine emissaries frequent this dark world, bringing revelations and working in secret to lift the soul out of ignorance and degradation and restore it to its rightful place in the world of light.

And again, from p. 5:

At last Pronoia sends down her own Spirit of Life to instruct humanity. Those souls who receive her Spirit reject the things of this world and cultivate the Spirit within them; those who do not become subject to the counterfeit spirit which binds humanity to the power of the wicked world rulers. They chain people to fate in order to blind them further and lead them into sin and suffering. Rather than despair, however, the *Secret Revelation of John* offers hope, for in the end all humanity will be saved and brought into the eternal light. After a period of instruction and purification, each soul will ascend up to the Divine Realm, taking its rightful place in the Aeons of the great Lights.

Now, Karen King doesn't propose that this text is based on the *Republic's* cave, but it seems to me she might have. The correspondences seem compelling. What is different, of course, is that the author of the *Apocryphon/Secret Revelation* is preaching to a different choir than Plato is—for Plato, the inhabitants of the cave represent the whole of the Athenian society that condemned the ultimate Truth-bringer, Socrates. Thus, his version has no reference to an external culture. But the author of the *Apocryphon/Secret Revelation* has a different task: his actors—such as they are—are from three different cultures: Jews who haven't accepted Jesus and, indeed, may have been responsible for his death; Jesus Jews, who wish to retain their ancestral writings; and Gentiles, who may be attracted by the cachet of so old and venerable a religion, while condemning the religion's practitioners as political rebels.

Thus, in this reconstruction the figure who must be able to see the truth/the Good—or at least know how to get to the truth/the Good—who can liberate our hero, but who has been unable to liberate the minds of his other fellow citizens is a prophet, perhaps—Moses, perhaps, or John the Baptist. In this reconstruction, the Jews have a

version of the Truth/the Good. Some among them have promulgated their fuzzy, imperfect understanding in artistic likenesses, texts we might call them. The puppeteers show their versions of the Truth to their fellow citizens, who perceive them as shadows, too set on their own interpretations to get even this imperfect truth right. When the hero arrives with the transcendent Truth, they mock him and put him to death.

What's really going on here is a kind of dialogue between Plato/Socrates and the other purveyors of knowledge in Athenian society--the artists, the poets, the sophists--who are peddling their opinions (*doxai*) as truth (*τὸ ἀληθές*). It's just that Socrates' opponents don't get to present counter-arguments in that cave--only some kind of indistinct noises (*τοὺς μὲν φθεγγομένους*), which echo off the walls that shackle and distort human thought. Moreover, the simulacra displayed by Plato's puppeteers are images, not words. But the author of the *Apocryphon* has to validate the truth-message of written documents, actual arguments, actual opinions.

It's a founding myth that lets you salvage the puppets, but not the puppeteers or their audience; a myth that lets you salvage the texts, but not their Creators or manipulators; that lets you claim, with Marcion, the brand, spanking newness of your vision, while maintaining, against Marcion, the truth of the old texts, which will identify your new cult as ancient and venerable.

This example speaks to a number of the issues we've raised above:

- (1) Prestige. It's an example from the high culture of the prestige culture of the Roman Mediterranean, from the century when that culture was at its peak;
- (2) Orality. Plato doesn't have to deal with those who might say that the puppeteers have some bits of the truth, because their truth is oral and, thus, ephemeral. The author of the *Apocryphon* has written testimony to acknowledge;
- (3) Evolution/Fan Fiction. Of course, all fan fiction is evolutionary, in the Roman understanding—every example is set to illuminate a characteristic of the hero or heroine or their history, is intended to be regarded as some kind of improvement on the original. Here, Plato himself has provided the fan fiction-ers with an example, in this very narrative. At the crucial question point when Plato asks if our hero wouldn't rather suffer anything than return to the ignorance of his life in the cave, Plato quotes *Odyssey* 11.489 (*ἐπάρουρον ἐόντα θητευέμεν ἄλλω ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρω*), where Achilles says he would rather be the servant of a landless man than lord of all the dead that have ever perished. The philosopher is proving himself a fawning fan of Homer (as he himself admits in *Republic* 10) and here has made his own fan fiction. He's made his hero (Socrates) a rival to Achilles, raised a philosopher to the status of a warrior, equated the philosopher's contribution to society with that of the warrior, and (incidentally) consoled himself for his hero's death. He's evolved his example, just as the Romans would have,

and just as the author of the *Apocryphon* has. After all, the hero of the *Apocryphon* won't live in Hades at all.

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Figure 1 (Wikimedia commons)

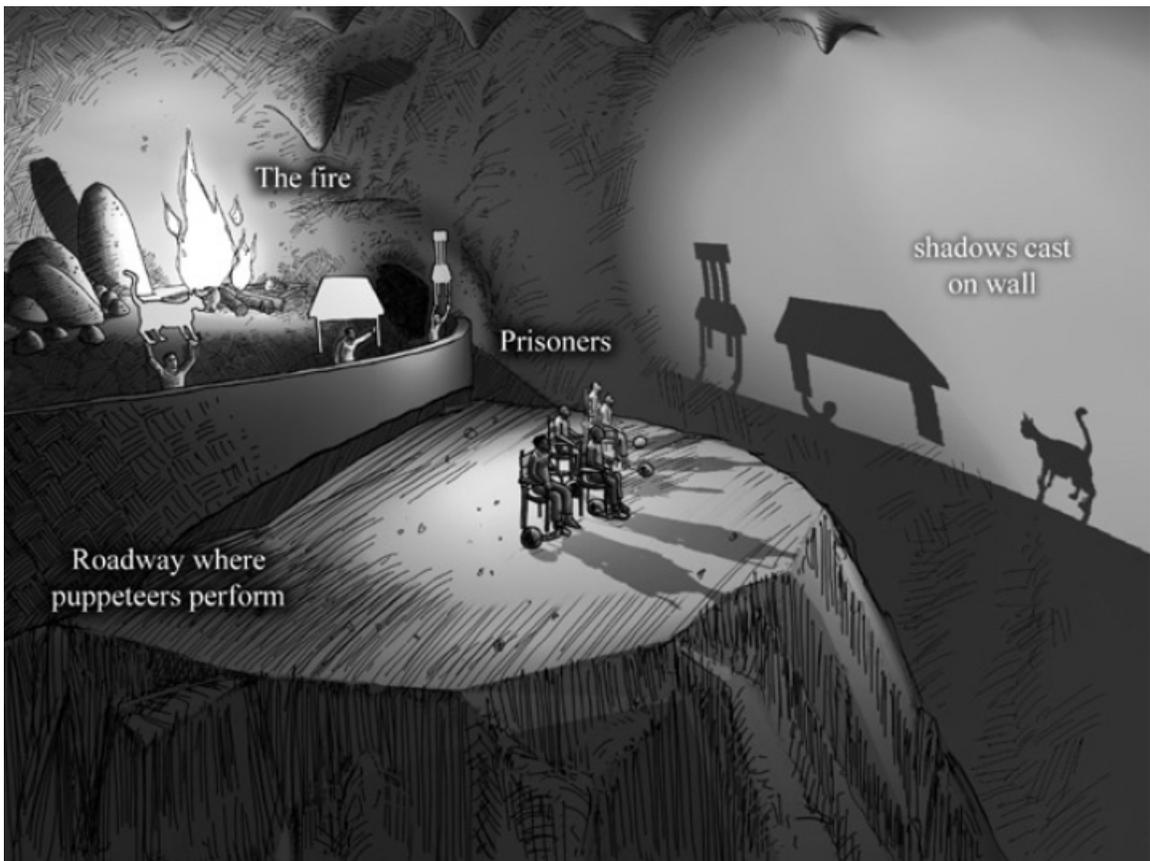


Figure 2, by John d'Alembert, Wikimedia commons