

Homeric Nonnus/Biblical Nonnus:
Reconciling Classical Literary Continuity and Christianity in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*

As the author of both the *Paraphrase of the Gospel According to John* and the epic *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus' relationship to Christianity and paganism has long been a controversial topic. Most scholars no longer treat the two as opposites, as though they were irreconcilable in both public and private life, and instead recognize a vast grey area between the two spheres, allowing for complex cooperative relationships between Pre-Christian and Christian religion and literature within an individual's work (Shorrock 2011, 4). Christians had pagan teachers, learned from poetry and rhetoric centered on Pre-Christian religion, and continued to create art within the same tradition as classical authors. For example, Ausonius seemed to have no difficulty utilizing classical modes, continuing to call upon the muses in a letter to his student, Paulinus of Nola despite Paulinus denouncing classical imagery and the literature of "deaf Apollo," preferring to use classical meter to promote Christianity (Shorrock 2011, 15–16). Clement of Alexandria, in his second-century *Exhortation to the Greeks*, also attempted to incorporate traditional Greek religion into his Christian worldview, and saw Euripides' plays and the religion that informed them as part of a greater cultural heritage, which included Christianity; Euripides, according to Clement, had the "proper grasp of truth" although he "failed to reach the end", that is, the proper Christian faith (Griffis 2020, 97).

Therefore, it is reasonable to imagine Nonnus, writing in the ostensibly Christian fifth century, balancing his Christianity and his desire to continue similarly writing in a Homeric style. It is also, therefore, unnecessary to ascribe one of his works to another author, claiming that a Christian could not write the *Dionysiaca* and that the *Paraphrase* must be by a separate hand, or theorize that Nonnus must have converted to Christianity after completing the *Dionysiaca* and then wrote the *Paraphrase*. This paper is instead premised on Robert Shorrock's proposal in *The Myth of Paganism: Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity*: that Nonnus wrote these works not

in sequence, but contemporaneously, with the shorter *Paraphrase* begun and finished while Nonnus wrote his larger epic *Dionysiaca* (51–52). Through an analysis of Nonnus’ references and addresses to Homer in Books One, Thirteen, and Twenty-five of the *Dionysiaca*, I intend to show how Nonnus regarded Homer in much the same way as Clement of Alexandria viewed Euripides—as an important piece of a shared cultural lineage, albeit one that could also be much improved upon. I hope thereby to shed light on the larger questions of how Nonnus, a Christian author, saw himself within this shared lineage, of what classical literature and its religion represented to someone who supposedly did not practice it, and of how his writing was affected by his drawing on both classical and Christian traditions.

Works Cited

- Griffis, Sarah. 2020. “Christian Interaction with Greek Tragedy in the Second and Third Centuries.” *The Classical Outlook* 95(3): 93–104. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26974170>.
- Shorrock, Robert. 2011. *The Myth of Paganism: Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity*. London: Bloomsbury.