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**Garrison, Roman.**  
***The Graeco-Roman Context of Early Christian Literature***

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Garrison's book focuses on the relationship of early Christian literature to Graeco-Roman philosophy, poetry, and cultural practices. After an introductory chapter, he explores eight different issues in separate chapters. Garrison's introductory chapter defends the necessity of investigating early Christianity in its Graeco-Roman context by appealing to two distinct reactions to Graeco-Roman culture exhibited by early Christians: virulent polemics against the mythic portrayal of the gods as immoral, anthropomorphic, and duplicitous, and "cautious acceptance of the Greek poets and philosophers" (p. 14). Thus although ecclesiastical rhetoric has traditionally denied that Christian beliefs and practices had been influenced by Graeco-Roman culture, and, according to Garrison, modern scholarship has followed its lead in emphasizing the Jewish origins of Christianity, the explicit statements of the early Christians themselves warrant a closer investigation of the influence of Hellenistic culture on early Christianity. "While the affirmation of the Jewish and Palestinian roots of early Christianity is certainly justified, to emphasize this influence to the neglect of significant 'Hellenistic' sources and parallels risks distorting our understanding of Christian origins" (pp. 20-21). Garrison sets out "to offer an understanding of how certain themes, stories, and concepts from the Hellenistic world *may well* have influenced the teachings and writings of the early Christians" (p. 23) or alternatively, "to call attention to the social and even linguistic setting of early Christian literature and, secondly, to explore the apparent significance of specific 'parallels'" (p. 26).

Eight such connections or parallels are explored in the ensuing chapters. In chapter 2 Garrison suggests that Paul's exaltation of *agaph* in 1 Corinthians 13 is an implicit polemic against Aphrodite's influence on the Corinthians' sexual behavior. In chapter 3 the topic is the symposium and its impact on early Christian meals. Chapter 4 examines Mark's and Luke's utilization of the literary *topos* of an individual's last words. In chapter 5 Garrison argues that Clement of Rome's awareness of contemporary political

philosophy influenced his choice of the "state" as a metaphor for the church and the specific ways in which he addressed the conflict in Corinth. Chapter 6 addresses Matthew's depiction of Jesus as fulfilling God's will by drawing on the literary representations of Achilles, Socrates, and Ignatius of Antioch. Redemptive almsgiving in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians and its relation to the Hellenistic vice of the love of money is discussed in chapter 7. Chapter 8 addresses controversies evident in 1 Corinthians and Ignatius about the nature of the kingdom of God. The final chapter deals with Paul's adaptation of the *topos* of the athlete in Hellenistic moral philosophy.

While Garrison is right to emphasize that understanding the Graeco-Roman context of early Christianity is essential (pp. 20-23), and while his use of non-canonical Christian sources to shed light on the NT is noteworthy, his arguments for "specific 'parallels'" need to be developed in greater detail to be convincing. As Garrison himself surprisingly admits, in this book he is defending no specific thesis (p. 26) but is only raising possible influences. The result is a series of uneven essays, some of which have no clear direction (e.g., chapters 3 and 6) or clear connection to Graeco-Roman material (e.g., chapter 8). The essays are at times suggestive (in particular chapters 5, 8, and 9), but due to their brevity they fail to engage in sustained analysis of either the Graeco-Roman or the early Christian material. The most intriguing chapter is the eighth, which suggests that particular visions of the kingdom of God, polemicized against by Paul and Ignatius, have their origin in the synoptic sayings tradition. Most chapters, however, remain on the level of offering the "apparent significance of specific 'parallels'" (p. 26; emphasis mine) without attempting to articulate the precise nature of the parallels, the mechanism of influence, or its implications for the Christian text under scrutiny.

Two examples demonstrate these problems. In chapter 2 Garrison builds his portrait of the sexual influence of Aphrodite on the basis of her mythic representation. Without ever engaging recent analyses of the worship of Aphrodite in Corinth, which discount both the historical value of the Corinthian reputation for sexual immorality and the proverbial thousand cult prostitutes, he claims "the prevailing influence of the Aphrodite cultic practices in the city had promoted a freedom that expressed itself in immorality" (p. 37) and uses this polemical context to guide his exegesis of 1 Corinthians. A key portion of Garrison's argument is ultimately an argument from silence: Paul "chose to challenge, but not identify his 'enemy'" (p. 37). The conclusion that in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul substituted *agaph* for *erws* as a polemic against sexual immorality (which Paul had discussed earlier in chapters 5-6) seems to be misled by the search for Aphrodite in 1 Corinthians. In light of the immediate context (chapters 11-14), it seems more likely that Paul's polemic is against *eris* ("strife") rather than *erws*! Similar methodological problems are evident in chapter 4.

The argument from silence is again invoked when Mark's failure to refer to Jesus as the "begotten" son of God or to mention Jesus' birth is taken as evidence that he sought to

avoid making a direct comparison of Jesus with Heracles (p. 52), and Heracles' dying cries to Zeus are taken as parallels to Jesus' cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," with merely an unexplained cross reference to Psalm 22. This is not to say that there is no merit to investigating the relevance of tragic heroes' final words for the composition and reception of the gospel portraits, but a more precise thesis and thorough argumentation are necessary. Thus while attempting to follow S. Sandmel in avoiding the methodological sin of "parallelomania" (p. 23), Garrison's book falls into the very trap it hopes to avoid. With careful analysis of both the Graeco-Roman and early Christian material, as has been done in other volumes (e.g., the *Festschrift* for Abraham J. Malherbe, *Greeks, Romans, and Christians* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990]), fruitful connections can be explored to increase our understanding of early Christianity's productive tensions with its cultural environment.