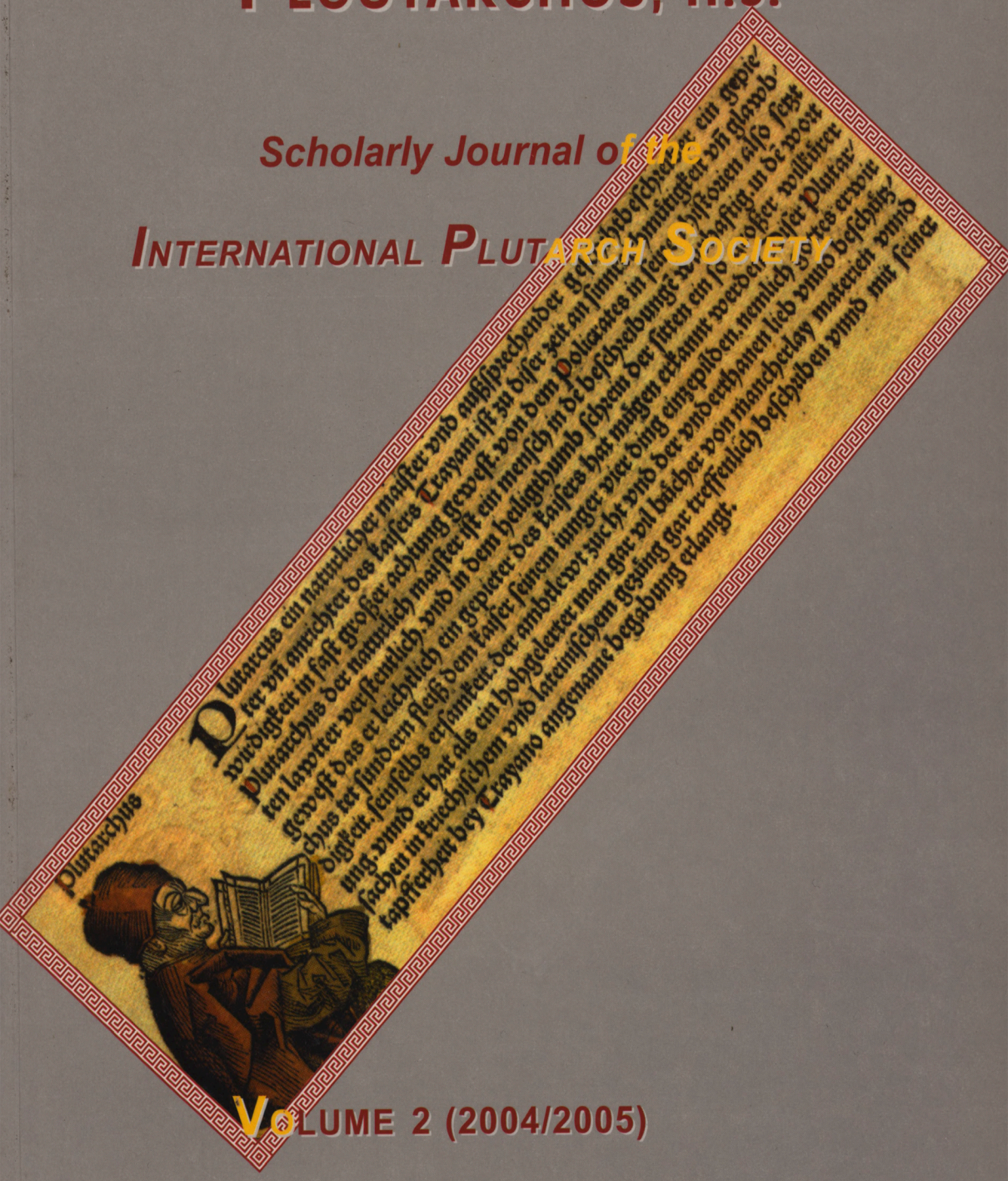
PLOUTARCHOS, n.s.

Scholarly Journal of the

INTERNATIONAL PLUTARCH SOCIETY



VOLUME 2 (2004/2005)

UNIVERSITY OF MÁLAGA (SPAIN)
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY, LOGAN, UTAH (U.S.A.)

Why the Oracles Do Not Speak (Like Before): Plutarch and the Riddle of Second-Century Religion*

by

David Olster

University of Kentucky

Abstract

Plutarch seems far more a man of his times, than one of past times. His nostalgia for the past cannot be separated from his awareness, and perhaps, concern, for the present. In his own way, he sought to provide an apologetic for a Greek culture that no longer existed, but whose cultural construction came sharply into conflict with the realities of second-century Roman transformation. We can admire his efforts to address these transformations with the power of his rhetoric, but at the same time, recognize that his cultural parochialism was giving way to a new imperial, universalist model.

Edward Gibbon did scholarship no favor when he labeled the Antonine century a 'golden age' of calm classicism and philosophical reason, whose repose was disturbed only by the rise of a new, and in Gibbon's rationalist view, rather pernicious superstition, Christianity. His image of second-century paganism is a fine model for the age of Hume, but to be fair to Gibbon, he was only reflecting his sources, the belles lettres of Fronto and Pliny, the soothing stoicism of Marcus Aurelius, and the skeptical satires of Lucian. As far as I can tell, Gibbon was the first, but not the last, to employ the letters of Pliny and Trajan to juxtapose the broad intellectual tolerance of imperial rule with the 'obstinacy' and foolishness of the Christians in order to establish the rational foundations of second-century paganism. And while most scholars do not share Gibbon's disdain for Christianity, his image of late antique paganism has remained persistent. Nearly two centuries after Gibbon, E. R. Dodds, in his seminal work, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, contrasted the rationalism of the second century with the "anxiety" of the third century to explain the rise of Christianity. Yet Dodds's brilliant psychological interpretation contains the flaw that nearly all his claims of third-century 'anxiety'

* I would like to thank HUBERT MARTIN for his immense help in sorting out several chronological and biographical problems with Plutarch's writings. All misinterpretations that remain in the text are my own.

rest on second-century evidence. Characteristically, he employs the dreams of Aelius Aristides, the panegyrist of Antonine rule, as an exemplar of neurotic introversion, and the dualism of second-century Christian Gnostics to demonstrate the third-century rejection of the world. Ironically, the most famous third-century author he cites, Plotinus, is actually, for him, the last representative of Hellenic rationalism. Even more recently, the best popular synthetic work on late paganism, Robin Lane Fox's *Pagans and Christians*, while recognizing the centrality and significance of amulets, sacrifices, demonology and other pagan practices for the continuing power of pagan belief, still distinguishes this low popular practice from the philosophical heights of a Marcus Aurelius, or for that matter, Plutarch.

The place of Plutarch in the broader discussion of Roman imperial religion is difficult to assess. Although he is, without doubt, the most voluminous, extant Greek author of the imperial period, and a treasure trove of information for cultural studies, in 1967, R.H. Barrow could still claim, "Little has been written about Plutarch in England"[1], and as recently as 1994, Jacques Boulogne could still lament the relative lack of synthetic work on Plutarch and his relationship with his contemporary culture[2] Scholarship has only in the last decade or so begun to address seriously Plutarch's cultural place, particularly by Italo Gallo and his associates who have now produced several important volumes on Plutarch the witness and participant in Roman imperial culture, rather than the preserver of earlier times[3]. In particular, they have begun to set Plutarch's religious views into the broader cultural context of the late paganism, and especially, the role of Roman imperial ideology in shaping imperial religious thought.

Yet old paradigms die hard, and it is necessary to look briefly at the origins of those paradigms, for they have very much shaped much of the debate about Plutarch's contemporeity, and in particular, the Moralia. Two nineteenth-century scholars above all established the terms and limits of the debate about Plutarch's religious views: Octave Gréard, and Richard Volkmann. Both wrote in the 1860's, and their differences have defined much of the debate not only about Plutarch, but also about Roman imperial culture in general. Greard

1 R. H. BARROW, *Plutarch and His Times*, London, 1967, p. ix.

2 J. BOULOGNE, *Plutarque: Un aristocrat grec sous l'occupation Romaine*, Lille, 1994, p. 28.

3 See I. GALLO & B. SCARDIGLI (eds.), *Teoria e prassi politica nelle opera di Plutarco: atti del V Convegno plutarcheo (Certosa di Pontignano, 7-9 giugno 1993)*, ed, Naples, 1995; I. GALLO and C. MORESCHINI (eds.), *I generi letterari in Plutarco: atti del VIII Convegno plutarcheo, Pisa, 2-4 giugno 1999*, Naples, 1999.

viewed Plutarch as primarily a moralist, or as he put it, "a philosopher in a superior sense than that generally attached to the name"[4]. Although he acknowledged what he called Plutarch's "habitual" Platonism[5], he denied that Plutarch employed any systematic philosophical system[6]. On the contrary, his philosophical discourse was part of a general rhetoric of moral exhortation, which was, for Gréard, Plutarch's primary aim. Plutarch's moral aims were related to what Gréard considered a "crisis of paganism[7]" that arose from the general decline of society on the one hand, and the rise of Asian cultural influences on the other. Plutarch thus desired to restore morality and religion by a return to traditional Hellenic values that he championed. Plutarch was, for Gréard, fundamentally backward looking, and in the light of the rising new religion, Christianity, already consigned to the shadow of paganism's decline.

Richard Volkmann, writing only a few years after Gréard, presented a very different Plutarch. He sharply criticized Gréard for asserting, "Plutarch's view thus appears as mild, generalized reflection over the broad relationships of human life... He appears accordingly as a moralist"[8]. Volkmann, on the contrary, saw Plutarch as primarily a systematic, Platonic philosopher and philosophy as Plutarch's religion. Plutarch was a proto-Neoplatonist whose work looks forward to Plotinus, rather than back to the past glories of Greece[9].Volkmann was rather uninterested in the religion of sacrifices and oracles, and viewed such practices, to a large extent, as popular dross that offered Plutarch the opportunity to exercise his philosophical awareness through allegory and interpretation[10]. This philosophical view of paganism naturally influenced Volkmann's view of Christianity, which he characterized as a rising philosophy that stood only to gain from the late antique evolution of classical philosophy[11].

In the debate of these two scholars we can see the foundations of much of modern scholarship, not only about Plutarch, but also about late antique culture in general, and its religious culture in particular. Here we find raised questions in the person of Plutarch about the

4 O. GRÉARD, *De la Morale de Plutarque*, Paris, 1874, p. 49.

5 GRÉARD, 1874, p. 57.

6 GRÉARD, 1874, p. 54.

7 GRÉARD, 1874, p. 55.

8 R. VOLKMANN, *Leben, Schriften und Philosophie des Plutarch von Chaeronea*, Berlin, 1869, p. 5.

9 VOLKMANN, 1869, p. 248.

10 VOLKMANN, 1869, p. 254.

11 VOLKMANN, 1869, p. 274.

relationship of religion and philosophy, popular and elite understandings of religion, intellectual and social context, and even historical and philological approaches to literature. And if we have significantly advanced beyond our nineteenth-century forebears in addressing them, these remain the problems that still occupy much of scholarship today. Despite the differences between these scholars, however, they share at least one common viewpoint: that religion and politics do not mix. Volkmann has almost nothing to say about potential influences that the political context of imperial rule might have had on Plutarch. Given his sharply intellectual approach to Plutarch's philosophy, this is certainly understandable. Gréard, on the other hand, did attach some importance to Plutarch's political context, but only within the moral sphere, and only as a symptom of the moral decline that Plutarch contested, "Paganism followed also [this] decadence. But the decadence either political or religious to which a society is attached is in general slow"[12]. In a rather Gibbonesque way, Gréard subordinated the political to the moral, and saw the late first and early second centuries as a period of slow political decline consequent to its moral decline. Gréard did not recognize that the impact of imperial Roman ideology on the traditions of classical religion had transformed it, not weakened it.

The fact is, religion meant something very different during the Flavian and early Antonine periods than it did a century earlier, and it is critical for understanding Plutarch's religious views to recognize that the religious and cultural landscape had dramatically changed. We must disagree with D.A. Russell's assessment, "Similarly, in matters of religion: [Plutarch] belongs to the continuous tradition of Hellenic piety and Hellenic skepticism, not much affected by the great changes in religious feeling which he could sense in the world around"[13]. If Russell's assessment might remind us of Gréard's views, more recent scholarship might remind us of Volkmann in viewing Plutarch as the preparation for the religion of the Platonists down the road, "This is not so much traditional piety as pious traditionalism... The position looks forward to the holistic notion of polytheistic tradition developed in the third [*sic*] century by the emperor Julian, in that it implies a commitment to the notion that the edifice of custom that comprehends Greek thought, literature and identity is inseparable from the traditional cults"[14]. The use of Plutarch

[12] GRÉARD, 1874, p. 257.

[13] D. A. RUSSELL, *Plutarch*, London, 1973, p. 83.

[14] R. LAMBERTON, *Plutarch*, New Haven, 2001, pp. 56-57.

to promote this idea of second-century pagan universalism is hardly new. In 1920, Bernard Latzarius claimed, "Philosophical eclecticism and religious syncretism, these two tendencies, combined to form a universal religion," and that from this emerging late paganism, "political preoccupations were excluded"[15]. This sharp distinction between religion and politics is one of the methodological foundations upon which many scholars have understood Plutarch so that Plutarch's oft-noted traditionalism is more often taken as a rejection of contemporary political conditions than a reaction to them.

Whether there ever was a holistic polytheistic tradition that predated the second century is difficult to say, but I would like to suggest that the continuity of Hellenic piety was much affected by the fact of Roman rule, and that Plutarch's own religious views reflected not simply the continuity of past religious discourse, but the immediate impact of imperial rule, and the social consequences that arose from it: in particular, the increasing Romanization of the Mediterranean's elites, the consequent increasing identification of those elites with Rome and its imperial political and ideological structures, and the consequent breakdown of traditional local cults under the weight of the increasingly Mediterranean culture that was concomitant with those elites' increasing political identification. The first two points about the demographic and ideological shifts in the Roman Mediterranean elites have been amply demonstrated in Talbert's fine work on the imperial Senate[16]. It is the third point that I would like to examine.

Plutarch's work shows the tensions that such assimilation created, and might explain the apparent reluctance with which Greek elites entered Roman imperial service. His admiration for the Romans rested uneasily next to his Greek pride. One of his Roman Questions asks, "Why is Janus two-faced?" The answer is that he was originally a Greek, who by going to Rome either brought culture to the Romans, or was barbarized by them[17]. As we will see, Plutarch felt considerable respect for the accomplishments of Roman rule, but never felt that the Romans ever

[15] B. LATZARIUS, *Les idees religieuses de Plutarque*, Paris, 1920, p. 21. Later, (p. 50) Latzarius asserted that Plutarch consciously strove to create a universal religion.

[16] R. TALBERT, *The Senate of Imperial Rome*, Princeton, 1984, particularly pp. 29-38. While Talbert reasonably urges caution in considering percentages of Senators from the various parts of the empire, the demographic changes in the Senate from the first to the third century clearly indicate the growing role of provincial elites in the Roman administration.

[17] *Roman Questions* 269A. (All classical citations are from the Loeb volumes except where otherwise noted).

achieved the level of culture of which the Greeks boasted.

Indeed, 'barbarian' is a pejorative word for Plutarch, and he expressed his strong disdain for barbarians frequently. Herodotus he took to task for being too sympathetic toward barbarians[18]. And although the Romans had ultimately become civilized, Plutarch beheld with alarm the advancing tide of alien wisdom and its practices, a process that followed the growing cultural unity that evolved developed with increasing celerity throughout the principate. Juvenal's famous dictum, "The filth of the Orontes flows into the Tiber," was but one of many complaints about the growing influence that the east had on Rome. Plutarch was likewise disaffected by the growth of Roman universalism and its failure to exclude barbarity within the borders. In "On Superstition," he deplored the current fashion for foreign cults, pointing to the barbarity of the Scyths, Carthaginians and Gauls who practiced human sacrifices. Such practices represented a sort of cultural pollution that resulted in "'Greeks from barbarians finding evil ways,' because of superstition, such as smearing with mud, wallowing in filth, immersions, casting oneself down with face to the ground, disgraceful besieging of the gods, and uncouth prostrations...at the same time, by distorting and sullying one's own tongue with strange names and barbarous phrases to transgress the god-given ancestral [*patrion*] dignity of our religion"[19].

The ancestral importance of religion was more than just tradition, but was founded in Plutarch's, and his time's, notions of the relationship of culture and biology. That custom was born in man was essential to Greek ethnography, and to restricting cultural intercourse between *gene*. The near contemporary Pseudo-Plutarch "On the Education of Children" expressed this common ethnographic traducianism in its own way when it explained that if conception occurred when the father is drunk, then the child would be likely to be a drunkard[20]. Ultimately, Plutarch's Hellenic parochialism has to be referred back to this basic racialist principle of Greek ethnographic thought that dominated classical anthropology. Varro had explained that the correct choice of a slave required knowledge of the slave's racial background, "Therefore, we often say that two apples that are identical in appearance are not alike, if they are of different flavor; and we say that some horses of the same appearance are not alike if by breed they are different on their father's side. Therefore in buying human beings as slaves, we pay a high-

[18] *On the Malice of Herodotus* 857A.

[19] *On Superstition* 171B-C.

[20] *The Education of Children* 3.1.

er price for the one that is better by race"[21]. Diodorus Siculus had explained that rape was among the most heinous crimes because "...by a single unlawful act, [the criminal] was guilty of the three greatest crimes: criminal violation, permanent damage to the victim, and the confusion of off-spring"[22]. The mixing of races created degenerates, so that Velleius Paterculus had opposed planting colonies outside of Italy where Romans would likely be seduced by foreign harlots and habits[23], and Dionysius of Halicarnassus described how Romans abroad were corrupted by foreign habits[24]. Geography also played an important part in cultural and biological determinism, and was joined to ancestry in determining racial character. Thus, Florus explained the decline of the Gauls in Asia, "The race of the Gallo-Gauls, as their very name implies, is mixed and adulterated [*adulterata*]... And so, just as seeds of cereals degenerate in a different soil, so their natural ferocity was softened by the mild climate of Asia"[25].

These racialist principles were applied no less to religion than to other aspects of culture, and were one of the reasons why the classical world was extremely tolerant of indigenous religious practices. According to Pliny the Elder, "No man was ever charged with irregularity for worshipping the gods in whatever manner was within his power"[26]. So far as ancestral religion went, almost all customs were acceptable because almost all nomic mythology was generally attached to ancestral mythology. This was something quite well understood at the time. Diodorus Siculus, explained the origin of ethnic legal customs, "Also among several other *ethne* tradition says that this kind of device was used and was the cause of much good to those who believed it. They did this either because they believed that a conception which would help humanity was marvelous and wholly divine, or because they held that the common crowd would be more likely to obey the laws if their gaze were directed towards the majesty and power of those to whom their laws were ascribed"[27]. Often, of course, ancestral mythology identified the progenitor of the *genos* as a divinity, but even when this was not the case, as with Moses or

21 Marcus Terentius Varro, *On the Latin Language*, ed. GOETZ/F. SCHOELL, Leipzig, 1910, IX.92-93.

22 Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 1.78,4.

23 Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 2.7,7.

24 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 9.62,2; 10.21,7.

25 Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 1.27,11,3-4.

26 Pliny, *Natural History* Pref., 11.

27 Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 1.94,2.

Abraham, the contractual association of the divinity and the progenitor was binding on the descendants.

But his same logic that permitted tolerance toward others' ethnic practices sharply limited tolerance for sharing ethnic practices. Dionysius of Halicarnassus noted that although the Romans were immensely respectful of others' gods, nonetheless, they allowed no foreign gods within their city, and what was more, only employed members of the appropriate race to tend to the sanctuaries of foreign gods that surrounded Rome[28]. Diodorus Siculus tells a story in a similar vein; when the Carthaginians perceived themselves to be cursed by the gods, and adopted the worship of Demeter and Kore in their city in order to placate them, they employed resident Greeks to serve the goddesses[29]. Plutarch's near contemporary Aulus Gellius explained that the periodic expulsion of philosophers from Rome was because they proposed "innovations in the *mos maiorum*"[30]. Plutarch was quite aware of this parochialism in Roman religious practice, when he described how the Romans, if they swore by Hercules, would do so outside of their houses, "Hercules is not one of the native gods, but a distant foreigner. For neither do they swear under a roof by Bacchus since his is also a foreign god"[31].

But the social and cultural dynamic of the second-century was wearing away such ethnic boundaries. Imperialism went hand-in-hand with universalism and the spread of Romanity. Pliny, described the life of the Chauci who lived in huts in the frozen north, ate dead fish left by the tide, drank rainwater, and reveled in their independence, "And these are the races that if they are nowadays vanquished by the Roman people say that they are reduced to slavery! That is indeed the case: fortune often spares men as a punishment"[32]. To be excluded from the *imperium* was to remain condemned to barbarity at the margins of the world. Greek historians had noted with admiration the Roman habit of granting citizenship to all. Dionysius of Halicarnassus maintained that Roman greatness originated in the wise policy that he attributed to Romulus, "And there was yet a third policy of Romulus, which the Greeks ought to have practiced above all others, it being in my opinion, the best of all political measures, as it laid the most solid foundation for the liberty of the Romans and was no slight factor in raising them to

[28] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, II19.5.

[29] Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 14.77,4-5.

[30] Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 15.11.

[31] Plutarch, *Roman Questions* 271B.

[32] Pliny, *Natural History* 16.2,5.

their position of supremacy. It was this...to send settlers thither to possess some part of [a conquered] country by lot, and to make the conquered cities Roman colonies and even to grant citizenship to some of them"[33]. The Greeks, furthermore, were quite aware of the cultural as well as the political success of this policy. Strabo, just to give one example, described how "The Turdetanians... have completely changed over to the Roman way of life, not even remembering their own language any more. And most of them have become Latins"[34]. Strabo, as a Pontine Greek, was quite uneasy about the allure and success of Romanization when he noted how many other tribes had been captured within Rome's cultural orbit[35].

I would suggest that Plutarch's traditionalism must be seen as a reaction to the shifting social and cultural dynamics of Romanization in the late first- and early second-century, that eventually resulted in the development of Roman cultural, as well as political, universalism. His avid Hellenism is, I would suggest, not simply a nostalgic longing for the glories of Greece's past, but a realization of the threat of contemporary social evolution to continuing ethnic claims of Greek cultural superiority. Plutarch is a transitional figure, not fully assimilated into the increasingly dominant imperial culture. The tension in imperial Greek literature over the assimilatory power of Rome had a long history. A century before Plutarch, Dionysius of Halicarnassus attempted in his own way to address the same issue, asserting that Rome should be considered a Greek city, in his own way trying to address the need of the Greek elites to reconcile their anomalous relationship with a culture not their own[36]. But by the end of the second century, Aelius Aristides could assert that imperial rule had divided all mankind in two: the Romans and the rest. "You have caused the word 'Roman' to be a label, not of membership in a city, but of some common race [*genos*], and this not just one among all, but one balancing all the rest. For the categories into which you now divide the world are not 'Greeks' and 'barbarians'... The division which you have substituted was Romans and non-Romans[37]. Such use of ethnographic categories was unconventional by Greeks since generally citizenship for Greeks did not trespass the traditional ancestral boundaries of ethnicity. But this roundabout way of expression was the means by which Aristides could address the

[33] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.16,1.

[34] Strabo, *Geography* 3.2,15.

[35] *op. cit.* 12.4,6,34.

[36] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.89,1.

[37] Aelius Aristides, *To Rome* 63.

growing sense among the Greek elites of their Roman identity. The growth of Roman universalism throughout the second century transformed the vocabulary of ethnography itself by investing citizenship with the qualities of ethnicity.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus stands at one end of this process: Aristides at the other. Plutarch stands in the middle, uneasily aware of the process of political, and ultimately cultural, assimilation, but not yet ready to embrace it. He used his explanation of why the Romans allow battle spoils to rot as a metaphor of Roman rule, "As time makes dim the memorials of their dissension with their enemies, it would be invidious and malicious to restore and renew them"[38]. Romans did not simply vanquish their enemies and subject them, but in the end, subjects joined with conquerors as equal citizens. "Slave today, citizen tomorrow" as Persius quipped. The transformation of aliens into citizens was not always swift. New citizens tended to have a harder time listening to learned lectures than those born in Rome[39].

If *De Superstitione* represents his concern over the encroachments of barbarian culture, *On the Fortune of Alexander* reflects the rhetoric of Roman universalism, for like most good rhetoricians, Plutarch was able to argue both sides of the question. Although the work has been seen as an early rhetorical exercise, its rhetorical character implies that it represents a recognized mimetic rhetoric. Indeed, the use of Alexander as a model of Roman rule was well-known by the second-century. Dio Chrysostom's second and fourth Discourses on Kingship are dialogues of Alexander, the one with his father Philip and the other with the philosopher Diogenes. In both, Dio sets forth the model of the ideal ruler, who happens to be possessed of contemporary stoic virtues. The parallel lives of Alexander and Caesar suggest that this comparison was not unknown to Plutarch. Unfortunately, we do not have the comparison of Alexander and Caesar, but Plutarch's comparison of Romulus and Theseus clearly has contemporary politics in mind. "Both Theseus and Romulus were by nature meant for rule. But neither lived up to the true character of a king, but fell off, and ran into, on the one hand, the desire for popularity, and on the other hand, tyranny"[40]. The passage is a commonplace in panegyric for the praise of a good emperor, and doubtless Plutarch was well aware of this. In short, the *Lives* reflected the politics of Plutarch's time, and figures of the past could certainly be employed as commentaries on the present.

But Plutarch had a broader and more insightful view of Alexander that employed him as a model of Roman

[38] *Roman Questions* 273C-D.

[39] *On Listening to Lectures* 2.1.

[40] *Comp. Theseus and Romulus* 2.

universalism. Plutarch presents Alexander as the apostle of Greek culture whose missionary work was done with a sword. "Alexander's new subjects would not have been civilized had they not been vanquished... For by establishing cities in these places, savagery was extinguished and the worse element, gaining familiarity with the better, changed under its influence"[41]. The civilizing power of Alexander must certainly be seen as a metaphor of Roman imperial rule, since the Romans said much the same about themselves. Indeed, Plutarch's presentation of Alexander could be seen as a precursor to Aristides' division of mankind, "He brought together all men everywhere into the same unity, just as if in a loving cup, mixing lives, habits, marriages, their manners of life. He bade them consider as their father land the whole inhabited earth...as kin to them all good men, and as foreigners [*allophylous*] only the wicked"[42]. Like Aristides, who distinguished between the Romans and all others, explaining that all virtues belonged to the Romans, so also Plutarch distinguished between the virtuous and the others who were not brought under Alexander's rule. Most importantly, from Plutarch's point of view, Alexander made all equal under his rule, "For Alexander did not follow Aristotle's advice to treat the Greeks as a leader, and barbarians as a despot, to the one as if friends and relatives, and the other as if plants and animals"[43]. In this treatment of Alexander, we see Roman assimilation. Alexander did not succeed (if he had ever truly tried) in transforming Persians into Greeks, but the Romans very much succeeded in transforming Greeks into Romans.

The seeming contradiction in Plutarch's treatment of barbarians is only a concern if we conceive of him as a systematic thinker. But clearly, this was not Plutarch's aim. Rather, he presented the ideas he found around him, and within the cultural discourse of the second century, there were contradictions so that we should not be surprised to see those reflected in Plutarch's own work. Even if one were to say that *De Fortuna Alexandri* was a rhetorical piece, and not representative of Plutarch's own views, the text nonetheless speaks to his awareness of the rhetoric of assimilation, and strongly implies that he reacted to it. Thus, when considering Plutarch's religious views, we must keep this general question in mind: to what extent were Plutarch's views influenced by the changing cultural landscape about him? How did the emerging cultural consequences of the political evolution of Roman universalism affect Plutarch's 'traditional' views of religion?

41 *On the Fortune of Alexander* 328F.
42 *Op. cit.* 329C.
43 *Op. cit.* 329B.

Plutarch is, with Lucian, our best informant for the state of Roman religion in the second century, and in particular, the condition of the shrine at Delphi of which he was priest. Two practical concerns at Delphi drew his attention: the first was the perceived decline of the oracle, and the second was the initiation of the Pythia, Clea, into the rites of Isis. The later event seems to have created some controversy over the inappropriate initiation of a Greek priestess into a foreign cult, and inspired one of Plutarch's longest and most prolix, essays. *De Iside et Osiride* is a remarkable blend of variegated subjects whose aim to legitimate Clea's action. The details of the work are not our concern, but one of Plutarch's main points is that the cult of Isis is actually a Greek cult. The names Isis and Tryphon are, according to Plutarch, Greek words[44], and the rites of the Egyptians are in accordance with the wisdom of Homer, the Stoics, Plato, and the highest virtues of Hellenic wisdom. In fact, Plutarch's perspective assigns that which is best in Egyptian religion to Greek influence. The names of the gods went forth from Greece, and consequently, "There is no occasion to be surprised at the revamping of these words into Greek. The fact is that countless other words went forth in company with those who migrated from Greece, and persist even to this day as strangers in strange lands; and, when the poetic art would recall some of these into use; those who speak of such words as strange or unusual falsely accuse it of using barbarisms"[45]. Plutarch argues in effect that the cult is originally Greek, and that it has returned to Greece in an unrecognizable form after its foreign sojourn. Clearly, Plutarch is attempting to right the perceived wrong done to Greek culture by Herodotus who suggested that Greek religion originated in part from Egypt. But no less important, Plutarch is trying to defend the integrity and superiority of Greek culture while at the same time addressing the cultural dynamic that was moving all Mediterranean cultures (at least at the level of the educated elites) toward a syncretistic unity. Isis and Osiris could not be fenced out, but Plutarch was trying to define their entry into Greek culture on terms that would maintain his claims of Greek cultural superiority.

This is the context in which we must understand Plutarch's use of philosophy: to recognize the true meaning of myth and cult. Plutarch's attacks on Euhemerus and Eudoxus are well known, although Plutarch himself often uses methods that seem very similar in interpreting the "historical" origins of Isis and Osiris. Indeed, his attack on Euhemerus caps a long discussion of the historical narrative of the Osiris myth that seems on its surface to be

[44] *Isis and Osiris* 351F.

[45] *Op. cit.* 375E-F.

Euhemeristic; his attack on Euhemerus is clearly apologetic[46]. Plutarch's aim is to understand the gods through their myths and rites without becoming an atheist on the one hand, or superstitious on the other. "For some go completely astray and become engulfed in superstition; and others, while they fly from superstition as from a quagmire one the other hand, unwittingly fall, as it were, over a precipice into atheism"[47]. The aim of philosophy is to mediate between these two extremes. Philosophy is therefore in its goal what we would call religious. The oft-quoted citation that "Philosophy must be the Mystagogue to Theology" is not, perhaps, a call to rationalism, but a rejection of academic philosophy. In fact, Plutarch's image of the philosopher is not at all academic, "It is a fact, Clea, that having a beard, and wearing a coarse cloak does not make a philosopher, nor does dressing in linen and shaving the hair make votaries of Isis; but the true votary of Isis is he who, when he has legitimately received what is set forth in the ceremonies connected with these gods, uses reason in investigating and in studying the truth contained therein"[48]. Plutarch rejected the image of the philosopher in the cynic style, but rather identified the true philosopher, as the true votary of the gods, with ascertaining the deeper truth behind myth and ritual. Theology, the understanding of divine wisdom, was the goal of philosophy. Reason was to be employed with the clear recognition that "we will cease the incredulity [*apistounta*] of Eudoxus"[49] and receive the wisdom of the gods. Like his contemporaries Apuleius and Justin Martyr, who sought the perfect philosophy that would guide them to understand the mysteries of the gods, Plutarch, certainly by the end of his life, saw philosophy through the contemporary lens of divine wisdom that man had to discover through the understanding of divine mysteries.

Thus, the myths and rites of Isis were one means by which the gods communicated with man. Oracles were another. But the type of communication that oracles imparted was quite different in kind than the theology of Isis. "When I take into account the number of benefactions to the Greeks for which this oracle has been responsible, both in wars and in the founding of cities, in cases of pestilence and failure of crops, I think it is a dreadful thing to assign its discovery and origin not to God and Providence, but to chance and accident"[50]. Oracles were a source of practical knowledge by which

[46] *Op. cit.* 360A.
[47] *Op. cit.* 378A.
[48] *Op. cit.* 352C-D.
[49] *Op. cit.* 377A.
[50] *On the Obsolescence of Oracles* 413E.

the gods led man in worldly affairs. Their authenticity was beyond question, and he excoriates the Epicureans for their skepticism. Sadly, charlatans had abused the oracles. "The thing that most filled the poetic art with disrepute was the tribe of wandering soothsayers and rogues that practiced their charlatanry about the shrines of the Great Mother and of Serapis, making up oracles, some using their own ingenuity, other taking by lot from certain treatises oracles for the benefit of servants and womenfolk, who are most enticed by verse and a poetic vocabulary"[51]. Like Lucian, he was outraged by the antics of 'holy men' like Alexander of Abunoteichus, but this in no way extended to skepticism about the shrine at Delphi. "The fact is that the man who holds that the obsolescence of such of the oracles as have ceased to function has been brought about by some other case and not by the will of a god, gives reason for suspecting that he believes that their creation and continued existence was not due to the god, but was brought about in some other way"[52]. On the contrary, the worth of the oracles had been repeatedly proven when the gods needed to guide men in times of crisis.

But the times in which Plutarch lived no longer had crises. Diodorus Siculus had already noted the general decline of oracles and sibyls –particularly the shrine of Ammon– but explained that since the Romans were quite satisfied with their own oracular sources, they had no desire to consult others[53]. Indeed, the Romans had every reason to be satisfied with their own methods, since, as Cicero had long before pointed out, the success of the imperial enterprise proved that that they worked[54]. Thus, when Gibbon spoke of the Antonine 'golden age' he was faithfully repeating his sources. Tacitus, in his dour way, grudgingly admitted the success of imperial rule, "No one must compare my annals with the writings of those who have described Rome in the old. They told of great wars, of the storming of cities, of the defeat and capture of kings, or whenever they turned by preference to home affairs, they related, with free scope for digression, the strifes of consuls with tribunes, land and corn-laws, and the struggles between the commons and the aristocracy. My labors circumscribed and inglorious; peace wholly unbroken or but slightly discerned, dismal misery in the capital, an emperor careless about the enlargement of the empire, such is my theme"[55]. Plutarch, no less than

51 *On Why the Oracles at Delphi Are No Longer Given in Verse* 407C.

52 *On the Obsolescence of Oracles* 413E.

53 Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 17.1,43.

54 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 3.2,5.

55 Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals* 4.32-33.

other early imperial authors employed this rhetoric of the *Pax Romana* to explain, in part, the transformation of the oracles. "For my part, I am well content with the settled conditions prevailing at present, and I find them very welcome, and the questions that men now put to the god are concerned with these conditions. There is, in fact, profound peace and tranquility; war has ceased, there are no wanderings of peoples, no civil strifes, no despotisms, nor other maladies and ills in Greece requiring many unusual remedial forces. Where there is nothing complicated or secret or terrible, but the interrogations are on slight and commonplace matters, like the hypothetical questions in school: whether one ought to marry, or to start on a voyage"[56]. The divine providence that cared for men no longer needed to employ oracles to stave off wars or famines. That providence was now dispensed through imperial hands. Although Plutarch clearly understood the brutality with which the Romans had achieved the *Pax Romana*, nonetheless, he was most assuredly a man of his times in recognizing, even if only rhetorically, the *Pax Romana*'s virtues. In a sense, there remained a need for oracles, but that need no longer was pressing. The gods' providence had not changed, only the means by which it was carried out. Like his contemporary Tacitus, who lamented the passing of the age of great deeds, Plutarch lived in a time when the need for oracles that gave guidance for great deeds, had past.

In conclusion, Plutarch seems far more a man of his times, than one of past times. His nostalgia for the past cannot be separated from his awareness, and perhaps, concern, for the present. In his own way, he sought to provide an apologetic for a Greek culture that no longer existed, but whose cultural construction came sharply into conflict with the realities of second-century Roman transformation. We can admire his efforts to address these transformations with the power of his rhetoric, but at the same time, recognize that his cultural parochialism was giving way to a new imperial, universalist model. As an apologist for Greek cultural superiority, Plutarch closes in some way the classical tradition; as a thinker beginning, however uneasily, to come to grips with the union of Hellenicity and Romanity, he opens in some way the Byzantine tradition.

Bibliography

Barrow, R. H.,
- *Plutarch and His Times*, London, 1967.

Boulogne, J.,
- *Plutarque: Un aristocrat grec sous l'occupation Romaine*, Lille, 1994.

Gallo, I. & Scardigli, B. (eds.),
- *Teoria e prassi politica nelle opera di*

[56] *On Why the Oracles at Delphi Are No Longer Given in Verse* 408C-D.

Plutarco: atti del V Convegno plutarcheo (Certosa di Pontignano, 7-9 giugno 1993), ed, Naples, 1995.

GALLO, I. & MORESCHINI, C. (eds.),
- *I generi letterari in Plutarco: atti del VIII Convegno plutarcheo, Pisa, 2-4 giugno 1999*, Naples, 1999.

GRÉARD, O.,
- *De la Morale de Plutarque*, Paris, 1874.

LAMBERTON, R.
- *Plutarch*, New Haven, 2001.

LATZARIUS, B.
- *Les idees religieuses de Plutarque*, Paris, 1920.

RUSSELL, D. A.
- *Plutarch*, London, 1973.

TALBERT, R.
- *The Senate of Imperial Rome*, Princeton, 1984.

VOLKMANN, R.,
- *Leben, Schriften und Philosophie des Plutarch von Chaeronea*, Berlin, 1869.