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Tatian the Assyrian (c. 120 – c. 180 AD) was an Assyrian early Christian writer and theologian of the 2nd century. This work includes, "Tatian's Address to the Greeks". Enjoy this classic! Produced by Beloved Publishing

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Tatian: Early Gnostic Christian Apologist and Heresiarch

By Johannes Platonicus

The Text: Tatian's Oration to the Greeks is an eloquent, terse and compelling piece of Christian apologetic literature, charged with a polemical impetus not unworthy of the spirit of his teacher, St Justin. In the Oration, defense of doctrine is not Tatian's main objective; his assault is waged, instead, upon pagan philosophy and culture. Thus, in the Oration, Tatian takes the offensive and ridicules the pagan deities, shows no toleration to Greek philosophers and the multitude of their opinions (something Justin would not have approved) and exposes the enormities of the stage and the brutality of the arena. One of the most fascinating aspects of the Oration, not counting his sonorous eloquence, is Tatian's formulation of perhaps the first systemized demonology in patristic literature. Tatian tells us it was the Logos that fashioned the angels; he gave them material bodies, being of an "airy" or "fiery" substance, animated with spirit. The first angel to defect from goodness seduced ranks of other angels with "illusions," to which they imitated and thus became a "host of demons (ch 7)." Through the agency of matter, the demons deceive men with like "illusions," drawing them down to a material existence and inciting them to create idols of beasts, for instance, which not surprisingly correspond to their ferocious, demonic and animalistic natures. Also, demons do not just allot fates, but they are the creators of Fate itself, since fate is completely divorced from Divine Providence. And Tatian calls the "life" of demons this: "while living they practice the ways of death, and die themselves as often as they teach their followers to sin." Overall, Tatian, despite his heretical leanings (which will be discussed at length below), fits comfortably in the great caste of 2nd century Christian apologists, with St Justin Martyr and Athenagoras the Athenian. The Oration to the Greeks will be a rewarding read to anyone hoping to broaden their understanding of Christianity in the sub-apostolic era.

Tatian's Life and Legacy: Tatian of Nisibis (110-177 AD), once an initiate of the Eleusinian mysteries, converted to Christianity in the middle of the 2nd century while at Rome. He tells us that in Rome he "met with certain barbaric writings [the Holy Scriptures]" which were "too old for the opinions of the Greeks, and too divine to be compared with their errors." Upon reading the Scriptures, Tatian was moved by their genuineness of style, by the veracity of the prophets, by the excellent moral precepts and by the concept of the providential governance of the world by a single God (Oration to the Greeks, ch. 29). As the reward of his conversion, while at Rome, he became a pupil of St Justin Martyr and reaped the fruits of that great teacher's labors. However, the martyrdom of Justin signaled a drastic turn in the direction of Tatian's faith. St Jerome remarked that Tatian was "distinguished as long as he did not leave his master's side. But afterwards, inflated by a swelling eloquence, he founded a new heresy...the Encratites (Illustrious Men, 29.)." And Clement of Alexandria, (Stromatasies, ch. 1) remembers that he was privileged to hear Tatian's "vigorous and animated discourses," but later in the same work, Clement denounces him for his heresies.

This novel Encratitic heresy was the child of his extravagant ascetic practices, and doctrinally, they were product of mutations which Tatian contrived from the catholic teachings of St Justin. (1.) Thus, Tatian preached against the sanctity of Christian wedlock, (2.) he bound members of his sect to absolute abstention from meat and wine, (3.) he believed that God utterly stripped Adam of the "image and likeness of God," seeming to place Adam beyond the hope of redemptive grace. (4.) Tatian also littered heaven with the Gnostic "Aeons" and held to the Docetic Christology, which understood Christ's body to be "phantom-like," not actual flesh. (4.) Moreover, he anticipated Arius by viewing Logos and Spirit to be graded emanations of the Father, envisioning them as personified abstractions of the Father, instead of recognizing the consubstantial unity of the tripartite persons of the Godhead. Ultimately, Tatian's break with the Universal Church is clearly implied at the close of his Oration where he states "I present myself to you...concerning my doctrines." Here he is obviously not pointing to those teachings and practices that were handed to him by way of Justin and tradition, but of those he independently constructed.

However, we would do Tatian an injustice not to highlight his virtues and vindicate him for his sincere religious fervor, even as unorthodox as he was. It must be considered that many famous early Christians took to the straying path. Great ones indeed, like the sublime Origen and the venerable Tertullian--father of ecclesiastical Latin--also lapsed, not being immune to the deleterious novelties they imbibed. In Tatian's case, had he not imposed his strict ascetic on others and made following them a general norm, he would have been a paragon of late antique virtue and his memory would not have been so darkened. Yet his light, shining out from the past into the present, is his immortal contribution to Christian scholarship, the Diatessaron. In principle, the work is a harmonization, or amalgamation, of the four canonical Gospels, not a critical comparison of them. Although, this was an unprecedented feat, owing to the fact that the Diatessaron was the first "life of Christ" at a time when there was no established canon to date. Ultimately, his scholarship left an indelible mark upon considerations which impacted the formation of the canon.

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