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Fabienne Jourdan

## Orpheus and 'Orphism' in the Christian Literature (in Greek) of the First Five Centuries<sup>1</sup>

The study of the use of Orpheus and Orphism in the Christian literature of the first centuries A. D. is hampered by a series of prejudices that are most of the time due to some modern and Christian projections on the ancient figure of Orpheus and on the religious movement Orpheus is supposed to have introduced. Contrary to the opinion of some scholars of the nineteenth and of the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the Christian writers of the first five centuries A. D. do not perceive Orpheus and Orphism as real rivals of Christ and Christianity. They do not see in the religious movement ascribed to Orpheus a kind of religion unified firstly around a "holy Scripture", as their own religion is around the Bible; or unified around a central myth, that of Dionysos or Zagreus, which would have contained in itself the principles of a theology characterized by an original sin, a suffering and then risen god and a message of redemption for humanity; neither do they see in this movement a religion unified around a prophet inaugurating a new religion set against the religion usually practised in the city of the time. In other words, for them, Orphism is not a kind of pre-Christianity.

Moreover, contrary to their followers, these Christian writers do not compare Orpheus' and Christ's descents into the underworld. Indeed, it was only in the Middle Ages that the focus on the journey into Hades to bring back Eurydice is used as an allegorical picture of Christ's journey into hell and his victory over death.<sup>2</sup>

They do not even draw any link between Orpheus and David, at least in their writings, (I will not mention the iconography here)<sup>3</sup> as being both marvellous singers and musicians – Clement of Alexandria is the first and only one (before the Middle Ages) to suggest such a link, but in a negative manner.<sup>4</sup> As to the link between Or-

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to leave this paper in its oral form. It consists in a summary of my previous research on Orpheus in the Church Fathers of the first five centuries (see Fabienne Jourdan, *Orphée et les chrétiens*, T. I–II, Paris, 2010–2011 and "Orpheus [Orphik]", *RAC* 26, 2014, 576–613). The full references to the Church Fathers and to secondary literature are fully listed there. Here I will just indicate a few references to the texts. I am grateful to Prof. Hartmut Leppin for his invitation to the symposium and to Philippe Charles for checking the English.

<sup>2</sup> See John Block Friedman, *Orphée au Moyen Âge*, French transl. by Jean-Michel Roessli, Paris-Fribourg, 1999 [Orpheus in the Middle Ages, Cambridge, Mass., 1970], 109–78.

<sup>3</sup> See Fabienne Jourdan, "The Orphic Singer in Clement of Alexandria and in the Roman Catacombs: Comparison Between the Literary and the Iconographic Early Christian Representation of Orpheus", to be published in *Studia patristica*, Jourdan, *Orphée et les chrétiens* (cf. fn. 1), I, 366–73 and Jean-Michel Roessli, "Assimilation chrétienne d'éléments païens: Construction apologétique ou réalité culturelle?", to be published in *Laval théologique et philosophique*.

<sup>4</sup> Clem. Alex. *protr.* I 5, 2–4.

pheus and Christ it is finally made only by the same Clement in his *Protrepticus* in order to exhort the Greeks to convert through a depiction of Christ as a new Orpheus. However, this portrait is an exception in late Antiquity. Something similar can be found only in Eusebius, who follows Clement in his *Eulogy of Constantine*,<sup>5</sup> and in the Roman iconography.<sup>6</sup> This portrait is based on the picture of Orpheus as singer that is rarely used by the Christian writers of that time.

So, what do these writers see in Orpheus when they mention him in their texts?

They retain four features of the figure. First, they focus on its religious nature, namely Orpheus' status as founder of Greek religious institutions and more precisely the Mysteries. More generally they see in Orpheus the founder of paganism itself. It is indeed striking for us modern scholars that they do not make of Orpheus the doctor of a small sectarian group, but the creator of the Greek religion itself. However, this picture is based on the pagan representation of the character and on considering the Mysteries as the most tangible pagan way to have contact with the gods. The second feature the Christian writers retain is the pagan presentation of Orpheus as a Barbarian because of his supposed Thracian origin. The Christians enhance this feature because, after the Jews, they were also considered as Barbarians (in both meanings of the word, that is as foreigners but also as uncultivated people). They could therefore use this origin of Orpheus to their own advantage. The same applies to the third main feature of Orpheus retained, namely his supposed journey to Egypt – the traditional journey to the land of Wisdom that the Greeks supposed every ancient philosopher and theologian had made. Finally, they resort to the Jewish legend born in Alexandria in the second century B. C. according to which Orpheus had become a convert to monotheism and written a poem revealing the Biblical message to his pupil Museus and therefore to the Greeks.<sup>7</sup>

My aim here is to show how the Christians make use of these features of Orpheus to nourish their polemics against the Pagans, but also against other Christians they consider heretics. For this purpose, I will be beginning by sketching the polemical context in which they mention Orpheus and his work. Then I will be describing how the features I have just named and others were used sometimes critically, sometimes positively according to the Christians' intentions.

The whole contribution will perhaps contain some repetitions, but they are part and parcel of the purpose: in order to give an overall view on the topic, I will be trying to expound two ways of considering it according to the perspective chosen, either according to the Christian general intentions or according to the way Orpheus and his work themselves are treated.

<sup>5</sup> Eus. *l.c.* XIV 4 f.

<sup>6</sup> See Jourdan, *Orphée et les chrétiens* (cf. fn. 1), I, 381–99 with updated bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> Concerning this legend and this poem, see Fabienne Jourdan, *Le poème judéo-hellénistique attribué à Orphée*, Paris, 2010, with updated bibliography.

## I. Polemical context and Christian strategies in the use of the figure of Orpheus

### A. Polemical context in which Orpheus is mentioned

The Christian writers of the first centuries evoke Orpheus to serve their offensive or exhortative purposes and they always mention him in the context of a debate with paganism, sometimes also with heterodoxy – the latter considered an imitation of paganism. In this context, they pursue two goals:

1. Some of them aim at criticising and condemning paganism (and also heterodoxy which is accused of imitating it), through the figure of its supposed founder;
2. Others (but sometimes also the same) want to show the presence in paganism, always through the intermediary of its founder, of an allusion to the Biblical message or of a prefiguration of the Christian one, sometimes even of the discourse considered as orthodox itself.

In all cases, Orpheus is mentioned in highly polemical contexts.

Because of these intentions, Orpheus appears in works directed at the Pagans, at the Christians recently converted and familiar with Hellenism and sometimes in passages aimed at the heterodoxes themselves.

More precisely, Orpheus is mentioned in the following types of works:

1. In texts with highly critical purposes, like the apologies,<sup>8</sup> the more or less direct answers to the Pagans,<sup>9</sup> the fictitious debates such as the one in the Pseudo-Clementine novel,<sup>10</sup> the aggressive discourses addressed to the Greeks such as Tatian's, and finally in works criticising the heterodoxes<sup>11</sup> – in the latter case the mention of Orpheus is used in order either to denounce the heterodox doctrine or to serve the so-called orthodox Christian view itself.
2. Orpheus also appears in works in which attacks are mixed with a call to conversion<sup>12</sup> or in which the attacks are mixed with the desire to convince and to teach the (Christian) readers,<sup>13</sup> and finally to attract them.<sup>14</sup> In this case and

<sup>8</sup> In Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum*; Athenagoras, *Legatio sive supplicatio pro Christianis*; Theodoret of Cyr, *Graecarum affectionum curatio*.

<sup>9</sup> In Origen, *Contra Celsum*; Gregory of Nazianzus and Cyril of Alexandria in their respective *Contra Iulianum*.

<sup>10</sup> *Homiliae Clementinae* and *Supplementum ad recognitiones Clementinas*.

<sup>11</sup> In Ps.-Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium*; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*; Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses*; Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Iulianum* and Didymus the Blind, *De Trinitate*.

<sup>12</sup> In Pseudo-Justin, *Cohortatio ad Graecos* – I will not mention here the book *De monarchia* because it could be the work of a Jew, see Christoph Riedweg, *Jüdisch-hellenistische Imitation eines orphischen Hieros Logos. Beobachtungen zu OF 245 und 247 (sog. Testament des Orpheus)*, Tübingen, 1993, 6 and id., "Justinus Martyr II", *RAC* 19, 2001, 848–73, 851.

<sup>13</sup> As in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* or Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica*.

in Gregory of Nazianzus' poems only, the figure of Orpheus as singer is enhanced. In his poems Gregory is indeed less concerned with a religious debate than with an attempt to establish the cultural superiority of Christianity.

## B. Three strategies served by the mention of Orpheus

In these different works, the mention of Orpheus serves three kinds of strategies.

### 1. The denunciation

First, the Christian writers aim at defending their peers against a series of religious and moral accusations and they use these very accusations against their adversaries. In this context, the attack against Orpheus and his works is a very efficient weapon. Orpheus' verses are quoted literally to prove the atrocity and impiety of the pagan traditions.<sup>15</sup> Moreover the pagan interpretations of these verses serve as targets first to denounce the sophistry the Greek allegorists use to defend their traditions<sup>16</sup> and on the other hand to justify the Christian use of allegory in the reading of the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

In this offensive context, Orpheus himself is also taken to task. He is sometimes accused of being a demon who turns the Greeks away from the Truth;<sup>18</sup> sometimes his coming after Moses is emphasized in order to prove, again through the supposed founder of the Greek religion, that the Greek religious traditions came after the Christian ones and are consequently inferior.<sup>19</sup>

In the other polemical context mentioned, Orpheus' verses are finally denounced for being used by the so-called heretics as models.<sup>20</sup>

All these kinds of criticisms can be found in Clement for instance

### 2. The highlighting of Orpheus' merits in order to denigrate the Greek traditions

In contrast to these criticisms, the second strategy using the mention of Orpheus consists in pointing out certain of his merits, with the view, however, to discredit Greek traditions. Two examples can be given here. First, his Barbarian origin is underlined

<sup>14</sup> In the *Protrepticus* of Clement of Alexandria.

<sup>15</sup> In Athenag. *leg.* XVIII 3 and 6; XX 4f; Tat. *orat.* VIII 4; Clem. Alex. *protr.* II 17, 2; 21, 1; Eus. *p.e.* II 3, 23 and 34 (= Clem. Alex. *protr.* II 17 and 21); Theod. *affect.* III 54, for instance.

<sup>16</sup> Athenag. *leg.* XXII; Orig. *Cels.* I 18; Eus. *p.e.* III 9; *Hom. Clem.* VI 17–19; *Clem. recogn. suppl.* X 29f and 35f.

<sup>17</sup> Orig. *Cels.* IV 17.

<sup>18</sup> Clem. Alex. *protr.* I 3, 1; cf. II 13, 3; 13, 5; *Hom. Clem.* VI 17, 1; 18, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Tat. *orat.* XXVII 2; XLI 1f; Clem. Alex. *strom.* I 14, 59, 1; 14, 60, 1; Eus. *p.e.* IX 27; Aug. *civ.* XVIII 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ps.-Hippol. *haer.* V 20, 4f; Epiph. *haer.* XXXI 4, 8–10.

by Tatian to show to the Greeks that their supposed cultural superiority is fake because the inventor of their culture was not Greek himself (and it cannot be forgotten in this context that Tatian was Assyrian and not Greek).<sup>21</sup> The second example concerns Tatian as much as his alleged pupil Clement. Both emphasize the anteriority of Orpheus as poet, who, according to them, came even before Homer and Heraclitus, in order to assert that the whole Greek culture, namely poetry, religion and philosophy, plagiarizes Orpheus' production.<sup>22</sup> This accusation is brandished to denounce the Greeks as villainous,<sup>23</sup> but also serves another purpose than mere criticism: Clement makes use of it to claim that the whole Greek culture was influenced by the Biblical message because it is copied from Orpheus who knew this message.

### 3. Orpheus as a model

This attitude leads to the third way the Christian writers make use of Orpheus, namely presenting him as a model. This presentation is inseparable from the use of the Jewish legend according to which Orpheus had converted to monotheism and written a sacred poem to teach it to Musaeus. The Christian writers take up and continue this legend in order to prove to the pagans that their religious founder had already 'sung' in agreement with the Biblical message and to exhort them consequently to convert as he himself did.<sup>24</sup> This strategy turns out to be an efficient tool. That is why the Christian writers do not always hesitate to write new verses themselves that they attribute to Orpheus, and this not only to prove that the poet sings in agreement with the Christian message itself this time, but with the presumed orthodox one, as we can read in Didymus about the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

These three general attitudes, namely the pure denunciation of Orpheus, his praise in order to denounce the rest of the Greek traditions and finally his being presented as a model, are not exclusive. They can be found in the same writer and even in the same work, as is the case in Clement and Eusebius for instance.

Now, this use of Orpheus can also be presented in another way that outlines how each feature ascribed to the figure was effectively used in the Christian polemics of the first five centuries A. D.

21 Tat. *orat.* I 2; XXVII 2; XLI 1f.

22 Tat. *orat.* XLI 1f; Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 116, 1f; VI 2, 5, 3f; 2, 17, 1f; 2, 26, 1f; 2, 27, 1f; cf. Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* XVII 1; XXXVI 4.

23 In Clem. Alex. *strom.* VI (cf. fn. 22).

24 Such an exhortation can be found in Clem. Alex. *protr.* and *strom.* and in Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* for instance. On this text, see Jourdan (cf. fn. 7), with complete bibliography and references.

25 Didym. *trin.* II 27 (PG 39, 753, 15–756, 4).

## II. The treatment of Orpheus and his work by the Christian writers

A synthesis of the Christian treatment first of Orpheus and then of his work will show how each feature serves the condemnation of paganism or on the contrary how it is taken up by the Christians in favour of Christianity itself.

### A. Orpheus

The Orpheus mentioned by the Christians is essentially the theologian and mystagogue, sometimes the singer and citharist, and in a few cases the hero of some other episodes of his pagan legend.

#### 1. The theologian and mystagogue

Many aspects of the figure of the theologian are used by the Christian polemicists.

##### a. The founder of the Greek mysteries and religion

First, because of his status as founder of the Greek mysteries and by extension of the Greek religion itself, Orpheus is the target of criticism as well as the object of praise.

On the one hand, this status explains his denunciation as an impious person who introduced a sacrilegious representation of the gods;<sup>26</sup> as a deceiver responsible for the moral ruin of humanity,<sup>27</sup> and consequently as a servant of the Devil.<sup>28</sup> In the context of the polemics against heterodoxy, Orpheus is even considered as the instigator of its mistakes because it is said to have supplied it with the seeds of its misleading myths.<sup>29</sup> By extension, this status as theologian, associated with the image of the citharist, leads to condemning Orpheus as a sophist, a charlatan, and finally as a magician or sorcerer<sup>30</sup> – all kinds of condemnations which were also turned against the Christians at that time.

On the other hand, when the Christian writers want to prove the possibility of an agreement between their traditions and the pagan ones, they mention this status of theologian to assume that the famous founder of the Greek religion was showing this

<sup>26</sup> Athenag. *leg.* XVIII 3–6; XX; XXXII 1; Clem. Alex. *protr.* I 3, 1; II 13, 3–17, 2; 21, 1; VII 74, 3; *Hom. Clem.* VI 17, 1; 17, 3; *Clem. recogn. suppl.* X 35, 1–3; Orig. *Cels.* I 17; VII 54; Epiph. *haer.* XXXIII 8, 7–11.

<sup>27</sup> Clem. Alex. *protr.* I 3, 1; II 13, 3; 13, 5; Orig. *Cels.* I 18; *Hom. Clem.* VI 17, 2; *Clem. recogn. suppl.* X 35, 2f; Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* XXXVI 3f; Epiph. *haer.* XXXIII 8, 7–11.

<sup>28</sup> Clem. Alex. *protr.* I 3, 1; *Hom. Clem.* VI 17, 1; 18, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ps.-Hippol. *haer.* V 20, 4f; Epiph. *haer.* XXXI 4, 8–10.

<sup>30</sup> Clem. Alex. *protr.* I 1, 1; 3, 1 for instance.

agreement in his own work. In this case, they underline that Orpheus was the *first* theologian of the Greeks.<sup>31</sup>

In Clement moreover, the figure of the mystagogue is endowed with a specific role. Since the *Protrepticus* presents the mysteries as centred around the figure of Dionysos, in this book Orpheus becomes the servant and priest of a kind of unique god.<sup>32</sup> Of course, Clement first criticises this presentation, but it prepares the portrait of Christ as a new and better Orpheus, the hierophant and great priest of the one and only God.<sup>33</sup>

#### b. The fiction of the conversion

For the Christians, the theologian is also the person who, according to the Jewish-hellenistic legend, converted to monotheism after being instructed by the Egyptian pupils of the Hebrews<sup>34</sup> or by Moses himself.<sup>35</sup> This legend is welcomed as proof of the validity of Christianity: If the founder of the pagan religion himself converted, how could his pupils, the Greeks, hesitate to convert in their turn?<sup>36</sup>

However, this legend also served the criticism of Orpheus. This criticism can be soft, as in Clement who notes that this conversion is not complete<sup>37</sup> or in the *Ad Graecos* in which it is pointed out that it does not result from a personal choice, but from a decision of the Providence who made use of Orpheus as a tool for its own project.<sup>38</sup> However the criticism can also be more aggressive: the legend serves the denunciation of Orpheus as the author of a vain and impious work – the introduction of polytheism – he is said to have abandoned himself later,<sup>39</sup> or as a semi-prophet unable to transmit clearly the truth he had a glimpse of.<sup>40</sup> Theodoret goes so far as to reverse the legend and denounces Orpheus as an apostate who first knew the truth, but made a bad use of it in order to deceive the Greeks and lead them to idolatry.<sup>41</sup>

#### c. The chronological status

A feature often linked with the figure of the theologian is its chronological status. The Christian writers insist on the fact that Orpheus was said to have preceded Homer in

31 Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 116, 1; VI 2, 5, 3 and 2, 26, 1f; Eus. *p.e.* X 4, 10; Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* XXXV 1 4; Kyr. Alex. *c. Julian.* I 35 (cf. Ps.-Just. *monarch.* II 4); Didym. *trin.* II 27; Lact. *inst.* I 5, 4.

32 See Jourdan, *Orphée et les Chrétiens* (cf. fn. 1), I, 178–225.

33 Clem. Alex. *protr.* XII 120, 2–5.

34 Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* XIV 2.

35 Artapan in Eus. *p.e.* IX 27.

36 Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* XXXVI 4.

37 Clem. Alex. *protr.* VII 74, 4.

38 Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* XV 2.

39 Theoph. Ant. *Autol.* III 2, 2.

40 Aug. *civ.* XVIII 14; *c. Faust.* XIII 2 and 5.

41 Theod. *affect.* II 32f.



time. This statement serves two kinds of argumentation: the denunciation of paganism as a whole through its presumed founder;<sup>42</sup> or, on the contrary, the exhortation to monotheism using the same founder of paganism, but presented as a convert.<sup>43</sup> However, this primacy in time is also sometimes questioned in order to discredit the pagans' pretensions to superiority because they pretend to have come first.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Christian writers also insist on the fact that Orpheus came after Moses in order to show that all kinds of culture and religion ultimately derive from the Prophet.

#### d. The status of Barbarian

Fourthly Orpheus the theologian is considered as a Barbarian. This feature, as was already pointed out, serves the criticism of the Greek culture as borrowed from foreign countries,<sup>45</sup> but it is also used to the advantage of Orpheus himself, who is thus placed at the origin of the Greek culture<sup>46</sup> and connected to other Barbarians, namely the Jews and Christians themselves.<sup>47</sup>

#### f. The journey to Egypt

Finally, the last feature linked to the status of Orpheus as theologian is the fiction of his journey to Egypt. It serves argumentations similar to the previous ones. On the one hand, it is used to discredit the primacy of the Greek culture because it was supposedly borrowed from Egypt.<sup>48</sup> In this context, Egypt is either seen as the country of idolatry *par excellence*<sup>49</sup> or, on the contrary, as the depository of the Hebrew religion.<sup>50</sup> In both cases, the fiction contributes to denouncing Orpheus as a plagiarist.<sup>51</sup>

42 Athenag. *leg.* XVII 1; XVIII 3; Tat. *orat.* XLI 1f; Clem. Alex. *protr.* I 3, 1; *strom.* I 21, 131, 1; Epiph. *haer.* XXXIII 8, 9; Aug. *civ.* XVIII 14 and 37.

43 Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* XXXVI 4 (cf. *monarch.* II 4); Kyr. Alex. *c. Iulian.* I 35; Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 116, 1; VI 2, 5, 3 and 2, 26, 1f; Eus. *p.e.* X 4, 10; cf. Didym. *trin.* II 27 and Lact. *inst.* I 5, 4 (though he never used the fiction himself).

44 Tat. *orat.* XLI 2 attributes Orpheus' work to Onomacritus and Clement of Alexandria follows him (*strom.* I 131, 1–5), adding that some Pythagoreers wrote a part of it (*strom.* I 15, 66, 2); see also Eusebius against Porphyry: Eus. *p.e.* III 9, 14; X 4, 4.

45 Tat. *orat.* I 2; XXVII 2; XLI 1f; Theoph. Ant. *Autol.* II 30; Clem. Alex. *strom.* I 15, 66, 1; Theod. *affect.* I 21; 114; II 30; 95; Epiph. *haer.* IV 2, 6f.

46 Tat. *orat.* I 2; XXVII 2; XLI 1f.

47 This underlies Tatian's and Clement of Alexandria's reasoning.

48 Eus. *p.e.* III 9, 12; Theod. *affect.* I 21f; 96, 4f; Epiph. *haer.* IV 2, 6f.

49 Eus. *p.e.* X 8, 1–16.

50 Theod. *affect.* II 32.

51 Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 125, 1–126, 1.

On the other hand, this journey is used as a proof of the encounter of Orpheus, directly or not, with Moses.<sup>52</sup>

## 2. The singer and citharist

The second main feature of Orpheus mentioned by the Christian writers is the figure of the musician, and more precisely of the singer and citharist. This figure is firstly the target of different accusations we have already seen. (Orpheus the singer is also accused of being a sophist, a charlatan and an instigator of sacrilegious myths.<sup>53</sup>) It is not sure that Ephrem discredits the miracles of Orpheus' songs in the underworld in comparison with the miracles of Christ victorious over Death.<sup>54</sup>

However, the figure of the singer is the one which has been the most used to link Orpheus and Christ, as Clement and the Roman iconography show. The evocation of the powers of the Orphic song enables Clement to enhance in contrast the efficiency of the Word.<sup>55</sup>

## 3. Other legends

There are still four episodes in the legend of Orpheus, but they are rarely evoked by the Christians, and when they are, it is always in an unfavourable manner.

First, the presence of Orpheus in the expedition of the Argonauts is just mentioned in chronological argumentations in order to insist either on Orpheus anteriority compared with other theologians<sup>56</sup> or on the contrary to underline his coming after Moses.<sup>57</sup>

The descent into the underworld and the fact that Orpheus is murdered are only mentioned by Origen. But in doing so, Origen just replies to Celsus who pretended to make use of both these episodes to compare Orpheus and Christ at the disadvantage of the latter.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, the lack of virility or the pederasty attributed to the figure is just alluded to by Clement who uses these features as images to expose the idolatrous in Orpheus.<sup>59</sup>

52 Ps.-Just. *coh. Gr.* IX 3f; XIV 2; Eus. *p.e.* IX 27; X 8, 1-16; Theod. *affect.* II 30 and 32; cf. Clem. Alex. *strom.* I 15, 66, 2 about Pythagoras to whom Clement links Orpheus' doctrine (*strom.* I 21, 131, 3-5).

53 See fn. 30.

54 *Carm. Nisib.* XXXVI 5, 11.

55 This is the project achieved in Clem. Alex. *protr.*, see Jourdan, *Orphée et les Chrétiens* (cf. fn. 1), I.

56 Lact. *inst.* I 5, 4.

57 Tat. *orat.* XLI 1; Clem. Alex. *strom.* I 21, 131, 1; Theod. *affect.* II 47 and 49; III 29.

58 Orig. *Cels.* II 55f; VII 53.

59 Clem. Alex. *protr.* I 3, 1.

## B. The literary and religious production attributed to Orpheus

The Christian writers, however, don't make use only of the figure of Orpheus itself, but also of Orpheus' work, precisely of the theologian and mysteriological work ascribed to him and sometimes of the moral prescriptions he is said to have made. In all cases, the evocation of this work serves the criticism as well as the praise or the Christian appropriation of his lore.

### 1. The Orphic theology

#### a. Orpheus' theology and theogony

First of all, Orpheus' verses are often quoted or paraphrased in order to prove the impiety of the Greek theology because they offer many examples of atrocities (for instance the series of incests evoked in the Orphic theology<sup>60</sup> or the presence of the figure of the snake emphasized by Athenagoras, Clement and Tatian<sup>61</sup>). Moreover, this poetry is a very good opportunity to criticise the materialism and immanentism inherent in the Greek religion.<sup>62</sup> As a consequence Orpheus' theological work is mostly evoked in a manner that is unfavourable to the Greeks, but it cannot be forgotten that the *Hymns*, on the contrary, are quoted by Clement to show that they contain conceptions of the Divine similar to the ones described in the Bible.<sup>63</sup> However, in this case, Clement resorts mostly to texts that have already been transformed by his Jewish and perhaps Christian predecessors.

#### b. Pagan interpretations of this theology

This Orphic theology had already been commented on by the pagans and the Christians don't omit to evoke these commentaries.<sup>64</sup> They do so to justify the right to read the Bible allegorically, as Origen does.<sup>65</sup> But they also support the view that paganism is synonymous with materialism because the Christian authors point out that these interpretations often lead to assimilating the gods with the four elements.<sup>66</sup> Clement is an exception when he uses previous Stoic and Pythagorean interpretations of Orphic verses which he adapts to his own Christian eschatological views.<sup>67</sup>

60 Athenag. *leg.* XX 1-4; Tat. *orat.* VIII and X; Clem. Alex. *protr.* II 16, 1.

61 Athenag. *leg.* XX 1-4; Tat. *orat.* VIII; Clem. Alex. *protr.* II 12, 2; 16, 3.

62 Athenag. *leg.* XIX 1; XX 4f; Eus. *p.e.* III 9; Hom. Clem. VI 17; Greg. Naz. *or.* IV 115.

63 Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 122, 2; 14, 128, 3.

64 Athenag. *leg.* XXII; Hom. Clem. VI 17-19; Clem. *recogn. suppl.* X 29f and 35f; Orig. *Cels.* I 18; Eus. *p.e.* III 9.

65 Orig. *Cels.* IV 17; cf. I 18.

66 Athenag. *leg.* XXII; Hom. Clem. VI 12 and 24; Eus. *p.e.* III 9; Theod. *affect.* III 44 and 54; Arnob. *nat.* V 32-45; Firm. *err.* I 1-7.

67 Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 8, 45, 5f; 8, 46, 4; 8, 49, 3f.

### c. Motives of the Orphic theology used by the Christian writers

But the most interesting in this use of the Orphic theology is the choice of a series of motives that serves a Christian appropriation of the Orphic lore.

#### c. 1. Motives of this lore

First, the monism that impregnates this poetry is certainly the main reason for this appropriation and it had certainly already contributed to the choice of Orpheus by the Jews as author of the so-called *Testament*.<sup>68</sup> Even when real pagan verses are quoted, the monism displayed by them is emphasized in order to show the agreement with the biblical message, such as in Clement.<sup>69</sup>

A series of other, less recurrent motives, is also used and transformed by the Christians.

The most noticeable are the following:

- The motive of the breath present in these verses: in the Pseudo-Clementine novel, it is pointed out in order to show a parallel with the breath of the *Genesis*<sup>70</sup> and Didymus the Blind resorts also to this motive present in a rewritten verse in order to read it as a prefigurative hint at the Holy Spirit and therefore at his doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>71</sup>
- A second motive is that of the god, Phanès or Protogonos, who, when appearing, makes all things appear with him: Lactantius, for instance, sees in him an image of the Creator<sup>72</sup> and in the *Theosophy of Tübingen* this figure is associated with the Only Son, that is the *Monogenes*, seen as the agent of Creation.<sup>73</sup>
- The motive of the bisexual god (Zeus or Phanès, according to the version of the myth mentioned), is also used as image of the Creator in Clement<sup>74</sup> (Lactance, however, denounces this motive as unsuitable to describe the birth of the Son<sup>75</sup>).
- The story of the swallowing of Phanès by Zeus and the regurgitation of all the gods by the same Zeus is mentioned by Clement who gives to it an eschatological meaning.<sup>76</sup>
- More generally, the fact that all the meaning of this poetry is supposed to be concealed and that Orpheus would have made a sharp distinction between the initiates and the non-initiates is evoked not only by Clement, but also by Theodoret

<sup>68</sup> See Riedweg, *Jüdisch-hellenistische Imitation* (cf. fn. 12).

<sup>69</sup> Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 122, 2; 14, 128, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Clem. *recogn. suppl.* X 32, 1.

<sup>71</sup> Didym. *trin.* II 27.

<sup>72</sup> Lact. *inst.* I 5, 4; cf. *epit.* 3.

<sup>73</sup> II 9 Beatrice = 61 Erbse.

<sup>74</sup> Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 125, 1–126, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Lact. *inst.* IV 8, 4 and 6.

<sup>76</sup> Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 122, 2f.

who mentions it in order to justify the necessity of faith as a preliminary to gaining access to the knowledge about God.<sup>77</sup>

### c. 2. Pythagorean and Stoic (rather than Orphic or specifically Orphic) motives

Although two other motives are more familiar, I would however tend to consider them Pythagorean and Stoic rather than Orphic (or specifically Orphic), namely the image of the body as grave of the soul – Augustin uses it as a good prefiguration of the Christian notion of the Original Sin;<sup>78</sup> and the conception of the transmigration of the souls: Clement considers it as an image of the Last Judgement.<sup>79</sup> As for the doctrine of the reincarnation, it is condemned by all Christian writers who mention it.<sup>80</sup>

### c. 3 Motives adduced by the Christian writers

In addition, with their interpretation and rewriting of Orphic verses, the Christian writers themselves introduce new motives in this poetry. We have seen the introduction of the image of the Creator and of the Holy Spirit, but Clement even quotes a forged verse mentioning a relationship between Father and Son, showing that the core of the Christian faith is also present in a prefigurative way in this poetry.<sup>81</sup>

### c. 4. Presumed or “modern” Orphic motive: the Death of Dionysos

Finally, there is a motif that must be evoked because it is actually more pointed out by modern scholars than by the Christian writers themselves in order to compare Orphism and Christianity, namely the story of Dionysos, his murder and resurrection, – a story, which does not actually specifically belong to the Orphic lore. Justin is the only one who sees a pagan plagiarism of biblical stories in it and he doesn't link it to Orpheus.<sup>82</sup> Neither Clement, nor Arnobius or Firmicus who mention this story makes any comparison between it and Christ's lot<sup>83</sup> and it is not sure whether any of them tries to conceal the possibility of such a comparison. The parallel between the eating of Dionysos and the Eucharist or the comparison between the murder of the god and his consequences on humanity and the Original Sin is actually first of all the result of modern projections.<sup>84</sup> The aim of such projections is to recon-

<sup>77</sup> Theod. *affect.* I 114; II 86.

<sup>78</sup> Aug. *c. Iul.* IV 15, 78; 16, 83.

<sup>79</sup> Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 8, 45, 5f.

<sup>80</sup> Clem. Alex. *strom.* III 3, 13, 3; Greg. Naz. *carm.* I 1, 8, 22–52 (PG 37, 448–450); Aug. *c. Iul.* IV 16, 83.

<sup>81</sup> Clem. Alex. *strom.* V 14, 116, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Just. *dial.* 69; *apol.* I 54.

<sup>83</sup> Clem. Alex. *protr.* II 17, 2–18, 2; Arnob. *nat.* V 19; Firm. *err.* VI.

<sup>84</sup> On this topic, see for instance Radcliffe Edmonds, “Tearing Apart the Zagreus Myth: A Few Disparaging Remarks on Orphism and Original Sin”, *Classical Antiquity* 18, 1999, 35–73; Fabienne Jour-

struct orphism as a coherent system prefiguring – or at least having affinities with – Christianity or even sometimes with Protestantism. Even when Firmicus considers Dionysos as a sacrificial victim, his words are to be taken as an *interpretatio christiana* of the Greek episode he comments on.<sup>85</sup>

## 2. The foundation of the mysteries

The second work attributed to Orpheus, after his theology, is the foundation of the mysteries. The mention of these cults serves first of all the criticism of the impiety of the Greek traditions.<sup>86</sup> However, the notion of mystery itself is welcomed in the Christian literature. Clement makes a rich use of it in order to exhort the pagans to convert and Theodoret takes up the same notion in order to justify his call to faith.<sup>87</sup>

What is more interesting here is that the Christian writers totally ignore the eschatological aspect of the Greek mysteries and the idea that they were conceived as a means of getting into contact with the gods. This concealment is certainly due to their own intention to underline these aspects in their own practices.<sup>88</sup> At least, they don't make the parallels drawn by some scholars of the nineteenth and of the beginning of the twentieth centuries who wanted to compare the mysteries and the Christian practices by pointing out the supposedly similar topics of death and resurrection, divine lineage, revelation, salvation, communion, and so on. All these topics have different meanings according to the framework in which they appear.<sup>89</sup>

dan, "Manger Dionysos. L'interprétation du mythe du démembrément par Plutarque a-t-elle été lue par les néo-Platoniciens?", *Pallas* 67, 2005, 153–174 and Jourdan, *Orphée et les chrétiens* (cf. fn. 1), I, 195–8 and 217–20 with updated bibliography.

<sup>85</sup> Firm. *err.* VI 5.

<sup>86</sup> Tat. *orat.* VIII 6; X 1; Clem. Alex. *protr.* II 12–22; Eus. *p.e.* II 3, 23–34; Greg. Naz. *or.* IV 115; V 31; XXXIX 5; Theod. *affect.* I 114; Epiph. *haer.* IV 2, 6f; Aug. *civ.* XVIII 14.

<sup>87</sup> Theod. *affect.* I 114; II 86.

<sup>88</sup> See Clem. Alex. *protr.* XII 119f.

<sup>89</sup> See, *contra* Alfred Firmin Loisy, *Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien*, Paris, [1914] 1930<sup>2</sup>, who tried to draw many such parallels, André Boulanger, *Orphée. Rapports de l'Orphisme et du Christianisme*, Paris, 1925, 84–116; André Jean Festugière, *L'Idéal religieux des Grecs et l'Évangile*, Paris, 1932, 133–62; Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der Griechischen Religion II* (*Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft* 5.2), München, [1941] 1974<sup>3</sup>, 685–93; Hugo Rahner, *Mythes grecs et mystère chrétien*, French transl. by Henri Voirin, Paris, 1954 [*Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung*, Zürich, 1945], 18–60; Arthur D. Nock, "Hellenistic mysteries and christian sacraments", *Mnemosyne* 4<sup>th</sup> ser. 5, 1952, 178–213; the summary of the state of the research on this topic in Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, *Orphism and Christianity in Late Antiquity*, Berlin, 2010; and my positions in Jourdan, *Orphée et les chrétiens* (cf. fn. 1), I, 160f.

### 3. The ascetic way of life

Orpheus is not only the author of a religious work, but is also supposed to have prescribed a specific way of life and diet. The most famous element of this diet is the ban on eating meat. This aspect of Orpheus' work is generally ignored by the Christians. I have found just one allusion to it by Hieronymus who praises Orpheus for having introduced vegetarianism – this allusion occurs in the context of the refutation of Jovinianus who denounces this practice.<sup>90</sup>

### 4. A religion of the Book?

Finally, a description of Orphism as a religion based on written lore could have been an expected thing, followed by a comparison with Christianity as the religion of the Book. This was indeed one of the most famous *clichés* prevailing until a few decades ago. However, this comparison is only suggested by Origen, and this in order to reply to Celsus who uses Orphic lore to support his views.<sup>91</sup> On the contrary, Origen asserts that all Orphic writings have disappeared at his time of life in contrast with the Bible. He does not suppose that Orphic texts could have been a kind of Greek canon. This comparison has only a polemical value and must not be used to reconstruct a so-called Orphism.

## Conclusion: Motives used for the Christian appropriation of Orpheus and for the depiction of Christ as a new and better Orpheus

As a conclusion the motives can be pointed out that contributed to the Christian appropriation of Orpheus and more precisely to the specific use of Orpheus by Clement to depict Christ as a new and better Orpheus. To me, there are four such motives: the existence of the Jewish-hellenistic discourse in which Orpheus praises monotheism; the status of Barbarian, which likens Orpheus to the Christians; the status of the very first theologian, which permits to assert that the seeds of Christianity are present at the beginning of the Greek religion itself; and finally, the image of the singer endowed with marvellous powers, leading to the link with the efficiency of the Word through the biblical image of the new Song. Clement adds the figure of David in his emphasis on the power of the Song, and even if he denies any comparison between the pagan citharist and the Psalmist, he paves the way for a development that will be made in the Middle Ages.

<sup>90</sup> Hier. *adv. Iovin.* II 14 (PL 23, 304c).

<sup>91</sup> Orig. *Cels.* I 18 (cf. Theod. *affect.* II 111).

**Fabienne Jourdan: Orpheus and 'Orphism' in the Christian Literature (In Greek) of the First Five Centuries**

Contrary to the modern perception of the possible link between Orpheus and Christianity, the Christian writers of the first five centuries did not focus on Orpheus' travel into the underworld to compare it to Christ's descent into Hell. Neither did they consider Orphism as a kind of religion of the Book or a small sectarian group in competition with their Faith based on the Word at the heart of the Bible. For them as for the Pagans of their time, Orpheus was firstly the founder of the Mysteries and more generally of the Greek religion itself. Moreover, because of his Thracian origin, they considered him a Barbarian as they were themselves considered. This feature, together with the traditional journey to Egypt attributed to him, contributed to taking for granted that Orpheus was acquainted with the Ancient Wisdom and more precisely with the Mosaic doctrine. By the same token, the Jews had already ascribed to Orpheus a poem praising the One and Only God. The only thing the Christians had to do was appropriate these lines and use them for their own purposes to claim that the famous poet sang in agreement with their belief. Orpheus's marvelous song was the last feature they adopted to describe and enhance Christ's Word as a new and better Orphic song. The article shows in detail how they used these features of Orpheus and his Work in their polemics with the Pagans, sometimes to criticise this tradition and its followers (the Pagans, but also some "Heterodoxes"), sometimes to appropriate it and include it into their own discourse and their exhortations in favour of Christianity. In doing so, they outlined a portrait of Orpheus different from the one transmitted to us through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance where the picture of the Lover of Eurydice prevails.