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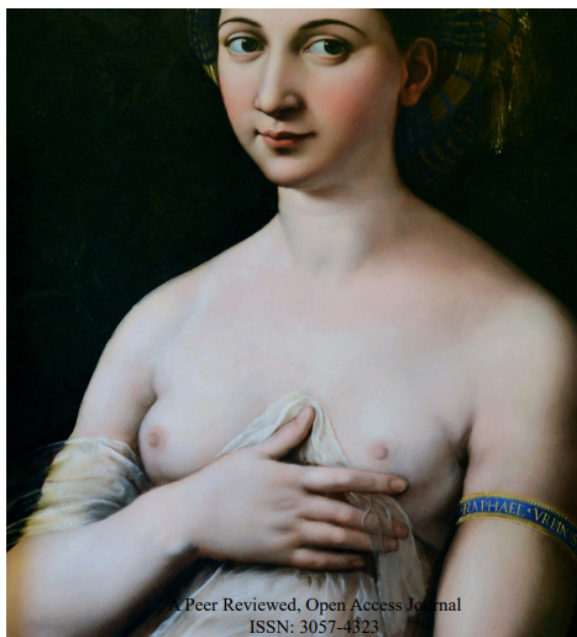
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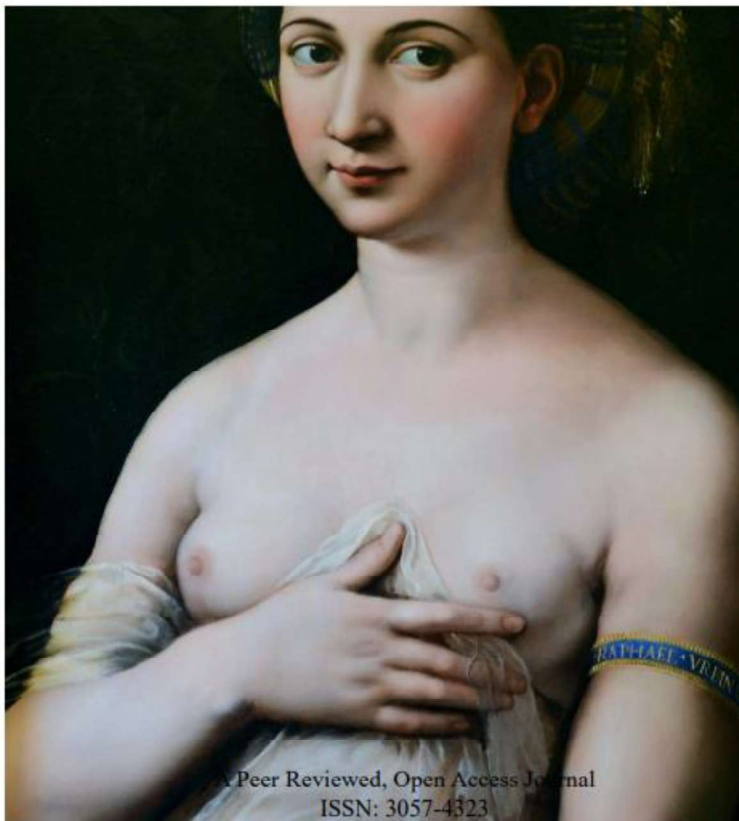
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## Half-Truths and Dubious Heraclitean Quotations: Clement's Rhetoric Against Orpheus, Apollo, and Dionysus

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### Abstract

This article examines specific passages from *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, focusing on rhetorical strategies for undermining the religious and cultural significance of Orpheus, Apollo, and Dionysus. It is argued that Clement employs half-truths, selective myth distortion and the appropriation of Heraclitean fragments to construct morally biased narratives aimed at persuading pagan audiences toward Christianity. Comparative analysis with authentic literary and historical sources reveals systematic misrepresentations, demonstrating Clement's possible manipulation of authentic sources, reinterpretation of festivals and insertion of new mythical narratives. The study employs a methodological approach to evaluate primary sources, detect historical and cultural inconsistencies, and identify stable narrative patterns to distinguish authentic content from rhetorical constructions.

**Keywords:** Clement of Alexandria, Rhetoric, Orpheus, Dionysian Mysteries, Heraclitus, Mythological distortion

### 1. Introduction

The fundamental tool of political discourse in the age of “post-truth” is not outright lies but rather half-truths. Half-truths circulate rapidly through social media, where they are enthusiastically commented upon and reproduced, since they serve the rhetorical function of producing plausibility. Unlike obvious lies, half-truths are more difficult to refute, because their rebuttal often requires the form of “yes, but,” thereby leading to an implicit acceptance of the first part, namely the “yes” (Gess, N., 2021: 1-2). Academic research on misinformation and the dissemination of fake news has focused primarily on the political sphere, examining narratives that involve xenophobic elements, intolerance toward the “other” and scientific inaccuracies, since such phenomena constitute a threat to democratic discourse. Within this context, the era of “post-truth” is often presented as a novel phenomenon. Yet this impression is mistaken: the broader strategy of distorting narratives through the technique of the half-truth has already been employed since antiquity. In particular, Clement of Alexandria has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, especially with regard

to his knowledge of the ancient Greek mysteries<sup>1</sup> and his efforts to persuade pagans to convert to Christianity<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, there have been raised certain doubts in the literature regarding the credibility of his rhetorical context. For example in his work *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments*, Kirk briefly examines the possibility that Clement speaks in his own words on behalf of the Stoics, rather than drawing them as a source (Kirk, 1954:309). Studies that are more recent, have explored Clement's further interventions regarding his use of Heraclitus to support the notion of punishment by fire for participants in the mysteries, as well as his association of mystery-cult serpents with the serpent of Genesis, identified by Christians with Satan (de Jaegerui, 2008:143, 131).

This article examines Clement of Alexandria's *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, focusing on his rhetorical strategies to undermine the religious and cultural significance of Orpheus, Apollo, and Dionysus. The methodology employed involves evaluating primary sources, detecting historical and cultural inconsistencies, while identifying stable narrative patterns to distinguish authentic content from rhetorical constructions, rather than purely linguistic-morphological features. In the first section of this article, the distortion of the image of Orpheus and a related myth concerning the Pythian Games are presented. Thereafter, narratives concerning Dionysian worship are examined, which reinforce Clement's biased schema. In the second section, two fragments of Heraclitus included in the chapter under study are analyzed as parts of a unified content rather than as discrete preserved texts.

## 2. The "Sophist" Orpheus and the Undermining of the Value of the Pythian Games

At the beginning of the *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Clement refers to Orpheus and his ability to pacify wild beasts through his odes, which, according to him, even transplanted themselves into the trees of nature. In this context, he characterizes Orpheus as a "sophist" (1919, 1.2:3). People of the Greco-Roman world attributed to the mythical poet Orpheus a number of poems in dactylic hexameter, written in a language akin to the Homeric dialect, and credited him with the establishment of numerous religious rituals (Edmonds, 2013:4). Although Plato's *Timaeus* does not extensively reference the Orphics, Plato, through the voice of Timaeus, asserts that respect must be accorded to those who claim divine descent. Since neither Homer nor Hesiod claimed divine origin, it follows that Plato was most likely referring to the tradition of Orpheus (Edmonds, 2013:16). However, why then did Clement characterize a mythical figure and founder of religious rituals as a "sophist"?

<sup>1</sup> On the use of Clement of Alexandria as a source for the ancient mysteries, see Kerenyi, C., & Manheim, F., (2020) *Eleusis*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See De Jaegerui, H.M. (2008) *The Protepticus of Clement of Alexandria: A commentary*, (PHD, diss, University of Bologna).

In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates employs a comparative analogy between gymnastics and cosmetology, stating that the former aims at well-being, while the latter focuses on appearance rather than physical health. In a similar manner, he equates the sophistic art with cosmetology (463a–463d), arguing that it also seeks to stimulate impressions (Thompson, 2002:33–35). In this way, Clement, while accurately citing some characteristics of Orpheus, labels him a “sophist,” seemingly intending to attribute to him the qualities of a deceiver lacking moral foundation, endowed solely with the ability to enchant—similar to the sophists who sought to captivate their audiences. One plausible explanation is that Clement was inspired by Plato's *Protagoras*, where Protagoras is described by Socrates (314e–315a) as a sophist who, in his travels from city to city, captivated his listeners with his voice, like Orpheus (κηλών τη φωνή ὥσπερ Ὀρφεύς). This, however, does not imply that Socrates equated Orpheus with Protagoras, nor that he designated the former as a sophist (Plato, *Protagoras*, 2019:64–67).

Later, Protagoras (316d) agrees with Socrates that it is dangerous for one to attempt to persuade the young to abandon their families and friends in order to improve under his guidance, due to potential envy and hostile dispositions. Based on this observation, he situates the sophistic art within an earlier historical stage, arguing that poets such as Homer and Hesiod (316d), wishing to protect themselves from such dangers, employed their poetic craft as a cover (Plato, *Protagoras*, 2019:72–73). Actually, Protagoras uses this association between didactic mythical poetry and sophistry primarily to legitimize his art as a continuation of an older tradition. Within the same framework, he incorporates the rituals and followers of Orpheus, without implying that such instrumental use entails that Orpheus can be termed a “sophist.” Consequently, under the assumption that he may have read *Protagoras* and misinterpreted Socrates' analogy between Protagoras and Orpheus.

Following this introduction, Clement narrates a myth concerning the guitarist Eunomus from Locris and the cicada, stating that a Greek festival was organized in honor of a deceased dragon, to which Eunomus dedicated a funeral ode (Clement, 1919, 1.2:3). In 582 BCE, the Pythian Games were a local musical celebration held every eight years in Delphi, later transformed into a Panhellenic festival conducted every four years under the presidency of the Amphictiones. The central event in the musical program was a hymn dedicated to Apollo's victory over the Python, performed with lyre accompaniment. The prize consisted of a wreath of laurel leaves collected by a boy whose parents were still alive, while the principal religious ceremony was conducted along the Sacred Way to the temple of Apollo (Sandys, 1915).

Although the Pythian festival was a hymn celebrating Apollo's victory, Clement reinterprets the Pythian festival as being in honor of the Python, whom he describes as ‘mournful,’ thereby shifting the narrative away from its traditional celebration of Apollo. In effect, through his interpretation, Clement transforms the positively charged nature of the festival into something negative, further posing the

question: “If the ode was a hymn or a lament to the serpent, I have nothing to say” (Clement, 1919, 1.2:4–5). At this point, the dilemma oscillates between two false scenarios, as the historical fact remains that the hymn was in honor of Apollo. Thus, within a few lines, Clement reiterates his reinterpretation of the festival as homage to a serpent, which obscures the central role of Apollo in the original celebration. Clement then recounts a story about Eunomus:

“Eunomus was playing the lyre in the heat of the day, at the time when the grasshoppers, warmed by the sun, were singing under the leaves along the hills. They were singing, you see, not to the dead serpent of Pytho, but to the all-wise God, a spontaneous natural song, better than the measured strains of Eunomus. A string breaks in the Locrian’s hands; the grasshopper settles upon the neck of the lyre and begins to twitter there as if upon a branch; whereupon the minstrel, by adapting his music to the grasshopper’s lay, supplied the place of the missing string. So it was not Eunomus that drew the grasshopper by his song, as the legend would have it, when it set up the bronze figure at Pytho, showing Eunomus with his lyre, and his ally in the contest. No, the grasshopper flew of its own accord, and sang of its own accord, although the Greeks thought it to have been responsive to music.”

(Clement, 1919, 1.2, trans. Butterworth:5)

Clement repeats for the third consecutive time his claim that Eunomus played the lyre and sang for the dead serpent, contrasting the cicadas that sang for the Biblical God, stating that their song was “better than the measured songs of Eunomus.” He also suggests that the myth and the setting of a bronze effigy depicting Eunomus and Pythikos glorify the former’s music over the “natural divine sound” of the latter. From this perspective, the impression is formed that the Greeks held an anthropocentric worldview, neglecting the other elements of nature.

One historical source against which Clement’s narrative can be compared is the sixth book of Strabo’s *Geographica*, which was completed around the 2nd century CE. According to Strabo, Timaeus reports that at the Pythian Games, Eunomus once competed with Ariston of Rhegium, and they had a dispute over the lots. Ariston requested the help of the Delphians, as his ancestors had rendered many honors to Apollo, contributing greatly to the city’s foundation. Eunomus declared that he did not even have the right to participate in a singing contest, as the cicadas, the beings with the sweetest voices in his view, were silent that day. Ultimately, he won, as a cicada landed on his lyre and completed the broken string with its sound (Roller, 2014:280).

In this version of the myth, Eunomus expresses profound admiration for the cicadas, distinguishing them above all beings for the sounds they produce. He even considers himself unworthy to compete in their absence. Modern research has demonstrated that the presence of various orthopteran species positively affects

humans, as it has been concluded that they provide psychological, restorative benefits and contribute to the quality of the soundscape within the ecosystem (Tokue et al., 2022). Thousands of years ago, people may have empirically appreciated this psychological effect, and the reference to the sound of the cicada may not be incidental, as the species thrives in Greece. Eunomus thus expresses deep respect for a creature, possibly indicating its influence on his mental tranquility, which would also assist him in producing music. In contrast, his competitor Ariston believed he should be favored solely because his parents had dedicated many honors to Apollo, presumably referring to material offerings.

Why then, does Clement persist in portraying the ode as directed to a deceased serpent, contrasting it with the natural divine song of the cicadas and thereby recasting the festival in a morally negative light?" In Mesopotamian, Canaanite, Egyptian, and Greek cultures, the serpent symbolized a dual nature: on the one hand as a chthonic element of the underworld, and on the other as a symbol of fertility, regeneration, and healing. While there exist venomous and non-venomous serpents in nature, the Bible mentions only the viper and the cobra, thereby forming a negative archetypal image (Sylenthini, Rajeev, 2020:49,54). Clement appears to reconfigure the serpent's dual semantic significance within the polytheistic tradition, shifting it toward an exclusively negative interpretation within a Christian hermeneutical framework.

### 3. On the "Forbidden Love of Dionysus"

In the second chapter, Clement begins a narrative that, according to his account, explains the origin of phallic symbols. In his account, Dionysus wished to descend into Hades but did not know the way, so he sought the help of a man named Prosymnus, who requested in exchange a sexual favor (*ἀφροδίσιος*). Upon returning, Dionysus found Prosymnus dead and unable to fulfill the favor, took a fig, shaped it into the size of a phallus, and performed a ritual (Clement, 1919, 2.30:72–73). Before commenting on Clement's mythical narrative, it is instructive to briefly review the Dionysian character and its qualitative features. In ritual contexts, Dionysus acts as an equalizer and "boundary-breaker," allowing his followers—free individuals, slaves, men, women, young and old to see themselves elevated to a state of equality. In this context, the phallus represents a driving energy with a tendency toward possession, perceived as an independent, zoomorphic entity. In the Athenian Dionysia, and later in Italian practices, the phallus functioned as a symbol of fertility and plenitude, as Dionysus was understood as a god of the fluidity of life (Craspo, 1997:260; Gorain, 2019 :13).

Dionysus was depicted with phallic attributes, contrasting with his effeminate aspects, in an era when other deities were sparsely clothed and embodied athletic ideals. Until the 4th century BCE, he is not shown carrying a phallus, nor is he depicted naked, and erotic entanglements in myths concerning him are rare (Craspo,

1997:261). "Clement likely inserts a narrative concerning a 'sexual liaison of Dionysus with another man,' notably featuring the fig, into his writings. The fig, as a representative symbol for the Jews, receives a curse in the New Testament due to their refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah (Burkett, 2002:170–171). Clement's intent appears to be to disparage the value and liberated character of the Dionysian deity by associating it with the commission of a "homosexual sin."

In Plato's *Republic*, it is stated, "tragedy appears altogether wise, and Euripides differs in this," implying that Euripides was not merely regarded as a dramatic poet but also as a bearer of wisdom (Plato, 1991, 568a:247). Such an observation suggests that Greek philosophical thought was aligned with the essence of Euripides' writings, and that a shared understanding of the mysteries existed between them. Based on this likelihood, grounded in ancient literature, four points are noteworthy from Euripides' *Bacchae*:

1. Euripides presents Dionysus appearing in human form and introducing himself as the guide of the Maenads, calling the women to follow him (Eur., 2015, *Bacche*, 1-40:5,7).
2. Upon Pentheus' return, he recounts the many calamities that occurred in Thebes during his absence, such as the women fleeing their homes to the mountains and forests for the sake of the new god, Dionysus. They honor him with dances, wine, and troupes, and retire to secluded areas to consort with men under the pretext of being Maenads (Eur.,2015, *Bacche*,215-227:21).
3. When Pentheus encounters the incarnate Dionysus, he comments on the god's striking appearance, noting it as a charm for women, simultaneously referencing the goddess Aphrodite (Eur.,2015, *Bacche*, 453-459:37)
4. Pentheus expresses suspicion toward the incarnate Dionysus regarding the nocturnal performance of the mysteries and the potential danger of female participation. When Dionysus refuses to reveal the secrets of the mysteries to King Pentheus, he learns of the impending penalty: the removal of his hair. (Eur.,2015,*Bacche*,485-494:41).

The primary concern regarding Dionysian worship, particularly the mysteries, centered on the disruption of women's morals, achieved through the impressiveness of the god's external appearance. Pentheus' apprehension is unsurprising, as Dionysus deliberately assumes a specific material form to attract the opposite sex and propagate the essence of his mysteries. Beyond guiding the Maenads, Dionysus embodies the advent of sacredness and ecstasy as distinct phenomena. The suspicions of both Pentheus and Clement converge on a common perception of Dionysian worship as a carnal and erotic act. Had Euripides depicted Dionysus exclusively summoning men, this might have provided Clement with a "logical" impetus for his references to homosexual acts. Primary sources from *Bacchae*, however, reveal no suggestion of homosexual activity, in contrast to Clement's mythical narrative. Had there been



concern about homosexual acts during Dionysian mysteries, Euripides would likely have expressed it through Pentheus' character.

In ancient literature, a therapeutic dimension of the Dionysian experience appears in Book Six of Plato's *Laws*. Athenaios, addressing Cleinias on child-rearing, mentions the unskilled lullabies of mothers to soothe infants through motion and song, associating this practice with the Bacchantes. He analyzes this effect, noting that the soul's internal fears are calmed by the external influence of movement and song (Plato, 2016, 790d–791a:246-247). According to this interpretation, one may either sleep or remain awake in a beneficial state of alertness. Thus, witnessing these rites, under this view, would confer a psychological release upon the spectators. Consequently, one may conclude that the representation of Dionysian worship in the works of Euripides and Plato, is in effect subverted in a negative manner by Clement's mythical narrative.

#### 4. The Use of Heraclitus and the Condemnation of Dionysian Mysteries

Following Clement's dubious mythical narrative regarding Dionysus' "homosexual sin," he cites the words of Heraclitus, which have been classified as one of the extant fragments<sup>3</sup> of the Ephesian philosopher. Clement states:

“For if it were not Dionysus that they held solemn procession and bear sang the phallic hymn, they would be acting most shame of shamefully”, says Heraclitus; “and Hades is the same as Dionysus, in whose honour they go mad and keep the Lenaeon feast”.

(Clement, 1919, 2.80, trans. Butterworth:73)

It is worth examining the interpretive implications that emerge when the passage above is read in isolation from the broader context of Clement's work. Kahn's interpretation is oriented toward a conception of the desire for death that ultimately affirms the continuity of life through imagery of fertility (Kahn, 1979:265). Heraclitus' sayings had long been accepted as authentic, facilitating their instrumental use by Clement (Butterworth, 1919:xiii). Does he appropriate Heraclitus' schema of opposites (Dionysus=Life/Hades=Death) to shape his own narrative, thereby giving the impression that it is Heraclitus speaking?

Clement continues, claiming that these ritual festivals do not occur for the liberation of the mind [οὐ διὰ τὴν μέθη τοῦ σώματος], but for the indecent nature of their acts [διὰ τὴν ἐπονείδιστον τῆς ἀσέλγειας ἱεροφαντεῖαν] (Clement, 1919, 2.30:72–73).

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<sup>3</sup> DK 31 B 127, as numbered by Diels, Hermann and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Band: (Berlin Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1960) p.154-155

Clement's rhetoric appears to obscure the essential Dionysian aspect—the relaxation of daily inhibitions—by conflating it with the constructed myth of “sexual sin.” In a previous paragraph, Clement cites a view of Heraclitus, according to which the Ephesian philosopher predicts posthumous punishment for participants in mystery cults. Clement states:

“Against whom Heraclitus of Ephesus utter this prophecy? Against night roamers, magicians, Bacchants, Lenaeon revelers and devotees of the mysteries. For them fire is foretold, because contrary to common religious practices, they are initiated in an unholy matter”<sup>4</sup>.

(Clement, 1919, 2.80, trans. Butterworth:45)

The issue with this perspective is whether the idea conveyed in this passage corresponds with the broader framework of the Greek religious worldview. A reliable point of reference is Homer, who depicts Odysseus descending into Hades to consult Tiresias and learn of future events. Poseidon's challenges at sea, the prohibition of harming the Sun's cattle, and his solitary return to Ithaca, culminating in a peaceful death near the sea (Homer, 2007, 11.90–11.134:486–490). Oracles were also issued prior to military campaigns, such as those given to the Spartans, confirming that they would neither be destroyed nor lose a king, a subsequent oracle instructed Xerxes to pay the price at any cost (Kindt, 2016:63). Prophetic pronouncements within the Greek religious worldview had no connection to posthumous consequences for their recipients, unlike in Christian ethics and theology, concepts which appear to have been absent in the historical milieu of Heraclitus. To illustrate this point, a passage from the New Testament may provide a useful comparison.

“But the cowards, faithless, detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters and all liars — their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

(The Holy Bible, Revelation 21:8, CSB trans.: 1103)

The Revelation passage, compared with the Heraclitus fragment presented by Clement, differs little beyond minor formal variation. For Clement, Dionysian worship as analyzed in the first part of this article is “sexually immoral,” whereas worship of the “sophist” Orpheus is a deception. According to the perspective of the passage above, as a Christian, Clement likely believed that those who are sexually immoral and deceitful should ultimately face a posthumous punishment by fire. It could be hypothesized that Clement cites Heraclitus in order to criticize the followers of the Greek mysteries, suggesting that he tacitly agrees with Heraclitus regarding the conception of fire, which is why it would be useful to compare Clement's understanding of fire with his view of Heraclitus' conception of this natural element.

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<sup>4</sup> DK 21 B 124-125 as numbered by Diels, Hermann and Walther Kranz, Ibid, p.154.

Clement, in his work *The Instructor*, draws an analogy between signs and their corresponding causes, noting that just as smoke demonstrates the presence of fire, and a healthy complexion and regular pulse indicate physical well-being, so too can attire reflect the habits and character of the individual (Clement, 1867: 314). How does this analogy relate to his interpretation of the Heraclitian conception of fire? In his work *Exhortation to the Heathen*, he articulates his perspective on how the Greek philosophers understood the elements of nature, using the following words:

“Pamenidis of Elia introduced fire and earth as gods, one of which, namely fire, Hippasus of Metapontum and Heraclitus of Ephesus supposed a divinity. Empedocles of Agrigentum fell in with a multitude and in addition to those four elements, enumerates disagreement and agreement. Atheists surely these are to be reckoned, who through an unwise wisdom worshipped matter, who did not indeed pay religious honour to stocks and stones, but deified earth, the mother of these, — who did not make an image of Poseidon, but revered water itself.”

(Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, trans. Rev. William Wilson, M.A., 1867: 66)

Clement includes Heraclitus in his critique of the aforementioned Greek philosophers, describing them as 'atheists' because, in his view, they worship the natural elements as deities. How is it possible that someone considered an 'atheist,' like Heraclitus, is at the same time presented as a 'prophet who values the posthumous purification of sinners' in the works of Clement?" This question raises the hypothesis that Clement may have adapted the passage from Revelation in order to reframe it as reflecting Heraclitus' opinion on the Greek mysteries.

## 5. Conclusion

Comparative analysis of specific passages from Clement's *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, raises significant questions about the validity of his narratives. His use of half-truths, selective quotations and inventive reinterpretations—particularly regarding figures such as Orpheus, Eunomus, and Dionysus—reveals a rhetorical strategy aimed at discrediting Greek religious traditions while reinforcing Christian moral and theological frameworks. Clement's appropriation of Heraclitus and selective reinterpretation of myths suggest an instrumental use of sources, blending philosophical authority with Christian didactic aims. These strategies illuminate his intellectual and rhetorical methods, yet the precise extent of his adaptation and the broader impact of these reinterpretations on early Christian thought remain uncertain. Further research could examine comparative studies with other early Christian authors, investigate Clement's reinterpretation of myth and philosophy in greater depth, and analyze the reception of his works in later literature.

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