'Without Lies or Deception': Oracular Claims to Truth in the Epistle to Titus*

J. ALBERT HARRILL
Department of History, The Ohio State University, 106 Dulles Hall, 230 Annie and John Glenn Ave., Columbus, OH 43210, USA. Email: harrill.5@osu.edu

The claim to communicate the divine 'without lies or deception' appears both in the Epistle to Titus and in contemporaneous debates about the truth value of oracles, but not because of any direct literary borrowings from an original source. The Epistle to Titus exemplifies a trend in the second century that created from oracular one-liners a literary discourse about divination, which defended traditional religious knowledge against the rise of unauthorised agents. Shared responses to contemporary phenomena best explain the parallels – and, for example, the quotation of a pagan oracle in the letter, 'All Cretans are liars' (Titus 1.12).

Keywords: Epistle to Titus, Greco-Roman oracles, intertextuality, Liar Paradox, one-liners, Second Sophistic

1. Introduction

The Letter to Titus provides a fascinating entrée into the question of how early Christian writings interacted with Greco-Roman literature. Under the pseudonym of a distant Paul,[1] the unknown author attacks opponents in his congregation by claiming that their lives and teaching exhibit the immorality and deceit described in a Greco-Roman proverb uttered by a local oracle famous to

---

* Sections of this essay received helpful criticism at an international conference on 'Literary Interactions under Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian', held at Boston University in June 2015, and at the annual meeting of the North American Patristics Society held in Chicago in May 2016.

1 Writing under the pseudonym of the apostle Paul, the author images a rhetorical situation in which Paul schools his young delegate Titus, left behind on Crete, on how to put the remaining missionary work in order. On the date and provenance of the work, see the excellent summary of the *status quaestionis* in J. W. Marshall, '"I Left You in Crete": Narrative Deception and Social Hierarchy in the Letter to Titus', *JBL* 127 (2008) 781–803, at 783–4, who joins an emerging critical consensus to give the Pastoral Epistles a later date range (*ca.* 100–40). R. I. Pervo (*The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) 83) offers specific dating within 120–5.

Crete, the rhetorical setting of the letter's conflict.[2] 'It was one of them', the author explains, 'their own prophet, who said, "Cretans are always liars, vicious beasts, idle bellies." This testimony is true. For this reason, rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound (healthy) in the faith' (1.12–13). What exactly, however, warrants confidence in the Cretan prophet is not explained beyond the apostolic trustworthiness of the author's own 'Pauline' voice.[3] The 'Paul' constructed in the letter can apparently be trusted on this matter, because his divine proclamation accords with 'piety' (εὐσέβεια), the 'knowledge of the truth' (ἐπίγνωσις ἀληθείας) and the promises of 'God free from all deceit' (ὁ ἀψευδὴς θεός, lit. 'the unlying god') (1.1–2). What did ancient audiences make of such claims? To answer this question, this essay draws a link between Titus' language and contemporaneous debates about the truth of oracles. The letter's link to these debates is best explained not from any direct literary inter-action with an original 'source', but from separate responses to shared cultural phenomena.

I make this argument in four steps. First, I survey the pagan oracle in patristic interpretation, from Clement of Alexandria to Origen and Jerome, in order to question whether seeking the register in an 'original' source necessarily deter-mines the meaning of the passage in Titus. Second, as a better contextualisation, I examine ancient discussions about the truth value of oracles in Greco-Roman culture, with attention to epigraphic evidence. Third, I analyse the functions of the Liar in this literary culture to stereotype an opponent as an idle talker – that is, a fake sophist. I then ground these findings exegetically by showing how the letter represents Paul as an oracle 'without lies or deception'. The letter's fashion-ing of the apostle thus belongs to wider efforts in the period of the Second Sophistic to create from oracular one-liners and protocols a literary discourse about divination that defends traditional religious knowledge against the rise of independent mantic agents.

2. All Cretans Are Liars (Titus 1.12): A Pagan Oracle in Patristic Interpretation

The presence of a 'pagan' oracle embedded in Paul's Letter to Titus gener-ated much exegetical debate in early Christian literary culture. Tracing the register

---

2 On the character of the polemic in Titus, which shares themes found also in 1 Timothy, see B. D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 367–84.

3 This emphasis on the epistolary Paul before the reader as *the* sole apostle and gospel herald whom one can trust appears throughout the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 2.7; 2 Tim 2.8–10); D. G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (WUNT 39; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986) 123.

of this verse from Clement of Alexandria to Origen and Jerome finds a diversity of meanings and 'original sources'.

Extant patristic commentary on the passage begins with Clement of Alexandria. His *Stromata* cites the text as an instance in the history of the Seven Sages, which shows each to have plagiarised God's wisdom as found in Moses. The charge of plagiarism enables Clement to defend the superiority of Christianity over classical culture, while also urging an education in Greek philosophy as the best preparation of the Greek convert for the gospel.[4] Clement explains:

> The Greeks say that after Orpheus and Linus, and the most ancient of the poets that appeared among them, the seven, called wise, were the first that were admired (θαυμασθῆναι) for their wisdom. Of whom ... the seventh, some say, was ... Epimenides the Cretan, whom the apostle Paul cites (οὗ μέμνηται ὁ ἀπόστολος Παῦλος) in the Epistle to Titus, where he speaks thus: 'It was one of them, their own prophet, who said, "Cretans are always liars, vicious beasts, idle bellies." And this witness is true.' You see how even to the prophets of the Greeks he attributes something of the truth (ὁρᾷς ὅπως κἂν τοῖς Ἑλλήνων προφήταις δίδωσί τι τῆς ἀληθείας), and is not ashamed, when discoursing for the edification (πρός τε οἰκοδομήν) of some and shaming (πρὸς ἐντροπήν) of others, to make use of Greek poems ... That the sages among the Greeks flourished after the age of Moses will, a little later, be shown. But the style of philosophy among them, as Hebraic and enigmatical (αἰνιγματώδης), is now to be considered. They adopted brevity (βραχυλογία), as suited for exhortation (ἡ παραίνεσις), and most useful (ἡ ὠφελιμώτατα).[5]

Clement identifies the literary origin of Paul's paraenesis on Cretan Liars as Epimenidian philosophy. He also makes a further claim that Paul knowingly cited (μέμνηται) a line from Epimenides. Paul, on this view, had read the sage's books. The 'Clementine Paul' was schooled in Greek philosophy and proud to show off his pagan learning. The bitter invective against Cretans thus becomes a 'useful' text for proving that the apostle had found some truth in Greek philosophy. This identification of Epimenides as the original author of the text comes to Clement as obvious, showing no signs that Clement is aware of any debate over the attribution.

Identifying the biblical quotation's source as the Greek sage Epidemides is important for Clement's struggle against intellectual currents within his own

---

4 On Clement and classical culture, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 252–3; and A. J. Droge, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture* (HUTh 26; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989) 139–49.

5 Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.14.59–60; text O. Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, vol. II: *Stromata Buch I–VI* (rev. L. Früchtel; GCS 15; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960³) 37–8; trans. W. Wilson, *ANF* II.179–80, altered.

Christian literary culture. He criticises the hostility to Greek philosophy in his con-
temporaries Theophilus of Antioch and Tatian, who want Paul to have nothing to
do with such paganism. Tatian's proof, for example, about the philosophy of
Christianity being more ancient than classical culture denies any interaction
between Christianity's sacred writings and Greco-Roman texts. In this regard,
Tatian finds the proverbial mendacity of Cretans to be one among many parade
examples of Greek wisdom contradicting itself, and so going nowhere. He asks
pagan intellectuals, rhetorically, why they condemn Christian philosophy for its
alleged impiety when their own books, in turn, also contain impieties: 'You
possess Leon's dissertations (τὰ ὑπομνήματα) but are annoyed by refutations
from us. Though you have among you Apion's opinions on the gods of
Egypt you exclude us from civic rights as if we were the most godless of men
(ὡς ἀθεωτάτους ἡμᾶς). You make an exhibition of what you say is the "tomb"
of Olympian Zeus, even if there is a saying that the Cretans are liars (κἂν
ψεύδεσθαί τις τοὺς Κρῆτας λέγῃ).'[6] Tatian combines the Cretan myth about
Zeus being buried in Crete with an unattributed proverb about the Liar.
Importantly, in comparison to Clement, Tatian leaves the proverb anonymous.
He does not care where the saying comes from but only that it was 'famous',
worked for his argument, and constituted what every educated Greek knew.
Perhaps Tatian consciously aimed to obscure a connection between the writings
of the apostle Paul and 'pagan' Greek literature.[7]

Yet, a literary tradition in early Christian apology offers a more plausible
reason for why Tatian left the proverb anonymous. The Cretan Zeus myth involves
the question of 'atheism', the same issue that concerned Tatian and one that
loomed large in pagan intellectual polemics against Christianity's legitimacy.
Another patristic author, Athenagoras, had responded to this charge with,
among other things, an argument from Euhemerism as proof that Christians
are no different from Greeks.[8] 'What reason is there to believe some stories and
not to believe others', pleads Athenagoras, 'seeing that the poets have given
such lofty accounts of them'?[9] One such myth concerns that of Zeus buried on
Crete:

---

6 Tatian, *Or. Graec.* 27.1; text and trans. M. Whittaker, *'Oratio ad Graecos' and Fragments/Tatian*
   (OECT; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 50–1. *The ὑπομνήματα of Leon* refers to a euhemer-
   ising account of the Egyptian gods as originally humans, by Leon of Pella (late fourth century
   BCE), memoirs in the form of a letter of Alexander the Great to his mother Olympias. Apion (*fl.*
   first century CE) wrote about Moses in Egypt.

7 Tatian, however, does know about 'Epimenides the Cretan', listing him in a catalogue of Greek
   writers appearing after Moses; Tatian, *Or. Graec.* 41.1 (Whittaker, OECT, 72–3).

8 On Athenagoras and the charge of 'atheism', see Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 241–2.

9 Athenagoras, *Leg.* 30.5; text and trans. W. R. Schoedel, *'Legatio' and 'De Resurrectione'/*
   Athenagoras (OECT; Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 74–5.

> 'The Cretans are ever liars! For thy tomb, O King, Have the Cretans contrived; and yet have you not died!'
>
> Although you believe, Callimachus, in the birth of Zeus, you do not believe (ἀπιστεῖς) in his tomb. Although you think that you will obscure the truth (νομίζων ἐπισκιάσειν τἀληθές), you proclaim him even to the ignorant (τοῖς ἀγνοοῦσι κηρύσσεις) as one who has died. Thus you look upon his cave, you call to mind his birth from Rhea; but if you view his tomb, you cast a shadow over the one who has died. You do not know that the uncreated God is alone eternal (μόνος ἀΐδιος ὁ ἀγένητος θεός). For either the popular myths about the gods recounted by poets are untrustworthy (ἄπιστοι) and the piety (εὐσέβεια) shown the gods useless (for they do not exist if the stories about them are false (οὐ γὰρ εἰσὶν ὧν ψευδεῖς οἱ λόγοι), or if these births, loves, murders, theft, castrations, and thunderbolts are true, then they no longer exist, they have ceased to be, since from non-existence they came into being (οὐκέτ᾽ εἰσίν, παυσάμενοι εἶναι, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐγένοντο οὐκ ὄντες).[10]

In a diatribal style, Athenagoras addresses the Hellenistic poet Callimachus to expose how much pagans are ignorant of the divine. If pagan myths are unreliable, as Callimachus claims here, then Zeus does not exist; but if pagan myths are true, then Callimachus must agree that Zeus has ceased to exist because of the very lines the poet quotes. Either way, just two lines of Callimachus prove from classical culture's own literature the futility of pagan worship. The evasive ironies and devaluation of truth in Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus* (285 BCE) undermine the pagan poet's authorial voice on religion. Greek intellectuals should not condemn Christians for denying the pagan gods, argues Athenagoras, when such pagan poets as Callimachus share the charge of 'atheism'.[11] This finding suggests that the story of Cretan Zeus entered early Christian literary culture separately from that of the Cretan Liar proverb, two independent explanations for why the pagan quotation appears in Titus.

That the Cretan Zeus myth entered early Christian literary culture separately from the Cretan Liar proverb finds confirmation when we revisit Clement. Clement treats the lines of Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus* in a fragmentary fashion, without the Liar proverb and unconnected to the previous passage (see above), which attributes that proverb to Epimenides. This other discussion aims to ridicule the absurd errors and contradictions of pagan fables (μῦθοι) for pedagogical

---

10 Athenagoras, *Leg.* 30.3–5 (Schoedel, OECT, 74–5).

11 D. W. Palmer, 'Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century', *VC* 37 (1983) 234–59, at 246. Athenagoras' sophisticated reading of Callimachus picks up the marked ambiguity to truth in the constitution of the poet's voice. The Cretan saying in Callimachus thus follows a trend in Hellenistic poetry which deliberately chose ambiguity as a rhetorical device to encourage intertextual reading practices; see S. Goldhill, 'Framing and Polyphony: Readings in Hellenistic Poetry', *PCPS*, n.s., 32 (1986) 25–52.

purposes, as learning opportunities for Greek readers. The ridicule includes mocking the fable of Zeus buried on Crete:

> The fable (ὁ μῦθος) is exposed before you … Are you looking for your Zeus? Ransack not heaven, but earth. The Cretan, in whose country he was buried, will show him to you – I mean Callimachus, in his hymns: 'For your tomb, O king, the Cretans fashioned!' For Zeus is dead (τέθνηκε), be not distressed, as Leda is dead, and the swan, and the eagle, and the lecher, and the serpent. And now even the superstitious (οἱ δεισιδαίμονες) seem although reluctantly, yet truly, to have come to understand their error in responding to the gods (ὅμως δ᾽ οὖν συνιέντες τὴν πλάνην τὴν περὶ τοὺς θεούς).[12]

In this passage, the idea of a Buried Zeus functions as an anonymous fable within a euhemeristic trope, which lacks the Cretan Liar. There is also no mention of the Epistle to Titus. Clement thus treats the Cretan Liar proverb and the Cretan Zeus myth separately, neither drawing the two texts together nor applying the latter to an interpretation of Titus. The literary disconnect of the two texts from each other and from the Pauline writings is probably due to the two Cretan texts entering separately into early Christian apologetic. The Buried Zeus was a rhetorical device responding to the specific charge of 'atheism' that predated the patristic use of the Cretan Liar proverb and the possible influence of the Pastoral Epistles.[13]

A later generation of patristic commentators, however, did not allow this textual disconnect of the Buried Zeus and the Cretan Liar to remain. This change emerged in response to the writings of the Platonist Celsus, initially in debates over the truth of the gospels. Celsus had read the early Christian apologists and denied that the Buried Zeus expressed pagan 'atheism'. He had aimed to turn their ridicule into ignorant readings of the myth, 'without knowing how and why' the Cretans worship Zeus this way and the 'hidden allegorical meanings' the myth of Zeus 'was invented to convey' (αἰνιττόμενος τροπικὰς ὑπονοίας).[14] Origen of Alexandria provided the highly influential response in his *Contra Celsum* (*ca.* 248). The Alexandrian Christian teacher accused his interlocutor Celsus of a hermeneutical error that shifts reading paradigms capriciously, without regard for the logical parity of Callimachus' story and that of the gospels. Though no stranger to allegorical interpretation himself, Origen found

---

12 Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 2.37.3–38.1; text O. Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, vol. I: *Protrepticus und Paedagogus* (rev. U. Treu; GCS 12; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1972³) 28; trans. Wilson, *ANF* II.181, altered.

13 Further evidence of the Buried Zeus myth in early Christian apologetic without reference to the Cretan Liar appears in Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 22 (*ca.* 240), which incorporated earlier fragments of a debate between a pagan and Christian (perhaps in 170). On this work, see Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 291–3.

14 Celsus, *The True Doctrine* (*apud* Origen, *Cels.* 3.43); text M. Borret, *Contre Celse II/Origène* (SC 136; Paris: Cerf, 1968) 100; trans. H. Chadwick, *Contra Celsum/Origen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 157.

evidence in the poem supporting a literal interpretation of the Buried Zeus myth. His reasoning held that the myth's authority, Callimachus – who 'had read a vast number of poems and almost every Greek history' – had known 'no such allegorical interpretation of the story of Zeus and his tomb'.[15] In its full context, Callimachus' poem attacks the Cretans as 'always liars' because they worship a literal tomb of Zeus in Crete. The specific lie is the bogus tomb, not an erroneous declaration of Zeus's death:

> Since he (Callimachus) denied that Zeus was born in Crete because of the story of his tomb, he ought to have seen that he (Zeus) who was born in Acadia must also have died. About this Callimachus speaks thus:
>
>> Zeus, some say that you were born in Ida's mountains;
>> Zeus, others say that you were born in Arcadia.
>> Which, Father, have lied?
>> The Cretans are always liars (Κρῆτες ἀεὶ ψεῦσται)
>
> and so on.[16]

This close, literal reading picks up the link of the Buried Zeus and the Cretan Liar in the full context of Callimachus' poem. It does so, however, without invoking the derivation of the Cretan Liar in the Epistle to Titus. This absence may be due to the fact that, on the evidence in Origen, Celsus had not dealt with the Pauline letters and probably did not know them.[17]

Yet Origen's connection of Callimachus and Paul possibly appeared elsewhere, in his lost *Commentary on Titus*.[18] Jerome, his exegetical successor, probably preserved parts of it in his *Commentary on Titus* (*ca.* 386–8).[19] The Pauline exegesis in Jerome follows the agonistic paradigm of Greco-Roman rhetorical education, which fully understands that controversial texts could receive different interpretations.[20] The forensic questioning first eliminates

---

15 Origen, *Cels.* 3.43 (Borret, SC 136.102); trans. Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 157.

16 Origen, *Cels.* 3.43 (Borret, SC 136.102–4); trans. Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 158.

17 On the evidence for (later) pagan critique of Paul, see J. A. Harrill, *Paul the Apostle: His Life and Legacy in their Roman Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 116–18.

18 A commentary on Titus belongs to Origen's lost exegetical works; see J. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. II: *The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1986) 51.

19 T. P. Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries on Galatians, Titus and Philemon* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 8–9. On recovering Origen's Pauline exegesis from Jerome's Pauline commentaries, see the example of Ephesians in R. A. Layton, 'Recovering Origen's Pauline Exegesis: Exegesis and Eschatology in the *Commentary on Ephesians*', *JECS* 8 (2000) 373–411.

20 On this paradigm, see M. M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21–2; and K. Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and its Humanist Reception* (Yale Studies in Hermeneutics; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 7–19.

an Old Testament or otherwise Jewish prophet as the source of the quotation in Titus, 'since this brief hexameter verse is not found among the prophets who prophesied in Judea'. The source is thus marked as Cretan and so necessarily traceable to that island's most famous poet Epimenides. Paul, on this view, learned the verse not from a formal study of Greek poetry in a Greco-Roman education, however. After all, the apostle *erroneously* calls the speaker a 'prophet', says Jerome. Paul must have got this idea, Jerome reasons, by briefly reading the little verse in the famous figure's collection of prophecies, some kind of oracle-book anthology. After 'looking into' this oracle book 'to see what the divination of the pagans promised', Paul then mockingly used ('abused', Latin *abusum*) this verse to attack his opponents 'by means of an author from their own island'.[21] This interpretation remakes Epimenides into just one of many χρησμολόγοι (peddlers of oracles), a familiar figure in the Second Sophistic. In this period, such compilers and interpreters of genuine and fictitious oracles found a growing audience among the πεπαιδευμένοι, who sought to absorb oracles into literature as autonomous one-liners useful in debates over παιδεία.[22]

The agonistic exegesis yields this conclusion while fully acknowledging that a different attribution for the 'little verse' exists in patristic commentary. Jerome clarifies why such a debate over sources, however, is moot:

> There are those who think this verse has been taken from the poet Callimachus of Cyrene and to some extent they are not wrong. For in fact he himself, while repeatedly writing in praise of Jove against the Cretans, who boasted that they displayed a tomb, says, 'Cretans are always liars, who by their sacrilegious mind have fabricated even his tomb.' But, as we have said above, the apostle took the entire verse from the poet Epimenides. And his Callimachus made use of an introduction in his poem. Or, without plagiarism of someone else's work (*sine furto alieni operis*), he rendered into a meter a common proverb (*vulgare proverbium*) in which the Cretans were called liars.[23]

Jerome then reframes the debate into one of intertextuality:

21 Jerome, *Comm. Tit.* 1.12–14; text F. Bucchi, *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera, Pars I: Opera exegetica. 8, Commentarii in Epistulas Pauli Apostoli ad Titum et ad Philemonem* (CCSL 77C; Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 28–9; trans. Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries*, 303–4.

22 On the figure of the chresmologist in the Second Sophistic, see A. Bendlin, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of Divination: Oracles and their Literary Representations in the Time of the Second Sophistic', *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (ed. J. A. North and S. R. F. Price; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 227. See also M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary* (trans. P. Buttolph and A. Y. Collins; ed. H. Koester; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 136.

23 Jerome, *Comm. Tit.* 1.12–14 (Bucchi, CCSL 77C.30–1); trans. Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries*, 306, altered.

By one little verse (Paul) has affirmed (*per unum versiculum confirmavit*) not the whole work (*non totum opus*) of Callimachus or Epimenides, one of whom sings Jove's praises, the other of whom writes often of oracles; but he merely rebuked the mendacious Cretans for a vice that is characteristic of their nation (*gens*). He silences them by means of an author from their own country (*de proprio eos gentis auctore confutans*), not on account of that opinion by which they are convicted by the poets, but on account of their inborn readiness to lie (*sed ob ingenitam mentiendi facilitatem*).

But those who think that someone who uses a part of a book is obligated to follow the entire book (*qui autem putant totum librum debere sequi eum qui libri parte usus sit*) seem to me to be receiving among the Scriptures of the church the apocryphal Enoch from which the apostle Jude has cited a testimony in his epistle [Jude 14–15], and the many other things that the apostle Paul has spoken about recondite matters[24] … Far be it from me to drag his argument and scholarship from elegance into calumny in this way (*absit ut argumentum ex scholasticum elegantia in calumniam traham*).[25]

In this agonistic competition over source criticism, a larger winner emerges – Paul himself. The verse means what Paul's argument shapes it to mean intertextually, not what it might or might not have meant in an original source (whether Callimachus or Epimenides) before it flowed into Pauline invective. In short, context determines meaning.

From Clement to Jerome, this survey of patristic exegesis on Titus 1.12 has shown a diversity of conflicting interpretations attempting to explain the pagan oracle, which cautions us against presuming that the register of the passage was clear or otherwise obvious for ancient audiences across the board. The various authorities proposed as the source of the pagan oracle (Epimenides, Callimachus or anonymous classical tradition) and as the register of the two different tropes (the Cretan Liar proverb or the Cretan Zeus myth) became combined only later in patristic commentary. Even in that later commentary, Jerome (following Origen) challenged Pauline interpreters to seek the passage's meaning in its contemporaneous context, and not in an 'original' source. If Jerome is correct that context determines meaning, then we need to pay greater attention to how contemporaneous phenomena generated meaning in the text for ancient readers. Because Titus 1.12 raises the question of oracular truth, one such contextualisation would be in the contemporaneous debates about the truthfulness of oracles in late antiquity.

---

24 E.g. an iambic line of a comedy of Menander (1 Cor. 15.33, 'Bad company ruins good morals') here, and a half-line of the *Phaenomena* of Aratus (Acts 17.23, 'For we are indeed his offspring') there; Jerome, *Comm. Tit.* 1.12–14 (Bucchi, CCSL 77C.31); trans. Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries*, 305.

25 Jerome, *Comm. Tit.* 1.12–14 (Bucchi, CCSL 77C.31–2); trans. Scheck, *St. Jerome's Commentaries*, 307.

3. Contemporaneous Debates about the Truthfulness of Oracles

The truthfulness of oracles became an increasingly popular topic of discussion in the literary culture of the Greek East under Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian. The contemporary literary interest coincided with a resurgence of imperial building activity at Didyma, Claros, Delphi and other venerable oracular shrines throughout Greece and Asia Minor.[26] Discussion centred on the rhetoric of a specific oracular trope, namely, to communicate divine λόγοι 'without lies and deceit'. In the competition among cults, this trope featured in divine dedications, acclamations and epithets to praise a superior god as one who answers the doubts and uncertainties of inquirers; lesser gods fail to respond to criticism.[27] The claim to exclusive access to truth aimed to distinguish authentic oracles from fakes. The rhetoric attacked such religious frauds as independent mantic specialists operating outside the political and civic protocols of religious authority and traditional knowledge, who were on the rise in this imperial period.[28]

The Pythian dialogues by the moral philosopher Plutarch provide one of the best examples. Plutarch had served as a priest at Delphi and later became a magistrate in the Delphic Amphictyony during an important period of its revival under Trajan and Hadrian. As both a functionary and a philosopher, Plutarch stressed the importance of divination in his representations of the shrine as a site of cultural memory, negotiating Delphi's diplomatic connections among Greek cities and with Rome. His writings thus participated in the wider efforts by philosophers and other intellectuals to create a literary discourse about divination. In this regard, he addressed concerns about the Pythia's decline. Because the oracular verses had lost their hexameter versification, their aesthetic and stylistic dignity as literature had fallen in the eyes of the Greek urban πεπαιδευμένοι (the educated, cultured). In a response to his fellow πεπαιδευμένοι disassociating education (παιδεία) from traditional religious knowledge and from the superstition with which the ἰδιῶται (less educated) and βάρβαροι came to Delphi and its god, Plutarch wrote the Pythian dialogues.[29]

His dialogue *On the E at Delphi*, for instance, refocuses attention on the various interpretations of the golden letter E attached to the shrine's temple

---

26 On the rise of oracles and their new roles, see A. Busine, 'Oracles and Civic Identity in Roman Asia Minor', *Cults, Creeds and Identities in the Greek City After the Classical Age* (ed. R. Alston, O. M. van Nift and G. Williamson; Leuven: Peeters, 2013) 175–96.

27 A. Chaniotis, 'Megatheism: The Search for the Almighty God and the Competition of Cults', *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (ed. S. Mitchell and P. Van Nuffelen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 136–7, 176.

28 Bendlin, 'On the Uses', 212–13, 228.

29 Bendlin, 'On the Uses', 196, 198, 202–3. On this cultural meaning of παιδεία for the Greek πεπαιδευμένοι as a series of competitions over prestige and status, see T. Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire: The Politics of Imitation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 5–6, *et passim*.

wall. This dialogue ends with an impressive speech from Plutarch's Platonic teacher Ammonius, explaining the letter to be an apostrophe (Greek εἶ, 'you are'), a salutation to Apollo.[30] Plutarch writes the speech as follows:

> 'I am therefore of the opinion that the significance of the letter is neither a numeral nor a place in a series, nor a conjunction nor any of the subordinate parts of speech. No, it is an address and salutation to the god, complete in itself, which, by being spoken, brings him who utters it to thoughts of the god's power. For the god addresses each one of us as we approach him here with the words "Know Thyself", as a form of welcome, which certainly is in no wise of less import than "Hail"; and we in turn reply to him "Thou art", as rendering unto him a form of address which is truthful (ἀληθῆ), free from deception (ἀψευδῆ), and the only one befitting him only, the assertion of Being.'[31]

In other words, the salutation E indicates proper oracular protocol. Its ritual performance invokes the presence of truth and the departure of deceit in a verbal exchange ὡς ἀληθῆ καὶ ἀψευδῆ. Indeed, Plutarch affirms the genuineness of oracular encounters at Delphi in terms of a diplomatic exchange, with legitimate ambassadors being in strict adherence to correct etiquette and precedence. Crucial to the oracular salutation is its recognition of hierarchy. The Pythian addressee is not a human but a divine presence. Because divine truth operates on a higher level, human beings can seek but not realise the perfection articulated in the salutation. This is because truth resides exclusively with the divine. The contrast between divine perfection and human weakness, a major theme in Ammonius' final speech, is among the most important testimonies of Plutarch's Platonism. Plutarch's philosophy characterises truth not as an objective 'thing' a person's speech can actually possess but, rather, a mental posture towards the divine. Truth consists in searching for its uncontaminated, higher existence through oracular protocols.[32]

   This distinction between divine and human speech aims to defend oracular inspiration against its disrepute as having been in decline. Oracles' decline in prestige and influence, claims Plutarch, comes not from any loss of their truth but from a rise of unauthorised ritual agents (soothsayers, tricksters and other charlatans) who wander about the sanctuaries and spread their deceitful, all-too-human speech. Attempts to expose *Apollo* as a fraud originate from a false

---

30 Bendlin, 'On the Uses', 203.

31 Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi* 17, *Mor.* 391f–392a; text and trans. F. C. Babbitt, *Moralia/Plutarch*, vol. v (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 238–9.

32 M. Bonazzi, 'L'offerta di Plutarco: teologia e filosofia nel De E Apud Delphos (Capitoli 1–2)', *Philologus* 152 (2008) 205–11.

perception of reality. Philosophers and other intellectuals should, therefore, continue to search for truth by oracular protocols.[33]

Plutarch's effort to create from oracular protocols a literary discourse about divination picks up a weighty religious theme across ancient Mediterranean thinking. In Greek tragedy, Aeschylus depicts confidence in the omens of prophecies by a seer (ὁ μάντις) with 'unerring skill' (ἀψευδεῖ τέχνῃ) (*Sept.* 21–6), from the mouth of Zeus knowing 'not how to utter falsehood' (ψευδηγορεῖν γὰρ οὐκ ἐπίσταται στόμα τὸ Δῖον) (*Prom.* 1032–3), and of the oracle of Apollo as 'never been proven false before' (μάντις ἀψευδὴς τὸ πρίν) (*Cho.* 559). Similar avowals appear in Euripides.[34]

The historian Herodotus affirms such belief in the infallibility of the gods to be a worldwide cultural phenomenon, but also to be flexible. The new pharaoh in Egypt, Amasis, for example, after deposing his predecessor, wilfully neglected the temples of the gods whose oracles he disliked, as 'utterly worthless, their oracles being wholly false' (ὡς οὐδενὸς ἐοῦσι ἀξίοισι ψευδέα τε μαντήια ἐκτημένοισι), while giving excessive honour to those whose oracles he fancied, as 'being true gods and their divination without deception' (ὡς ἀληθέων θεῶν ἐόντων καὶ ἀψευδέα μαντήια παρεχομένων) (Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.174).[35] This flexibility appears also in the notorious assertion of the 'noble lie' (γενναῖον ψεῦδος) in Plato's *Republic* (414c), for the Platonic Socrates speculates on what grounds (κατὰ τί) falsehood might be serviceable to the divine (τῷ θεῷ τὸ ψεῦδος χρήσιμον) (382c–83c). A series of affirmations, however, declare the common sense that the idea of a 'lying god' is an absurd proposition: 'there is no motive for god to deceive' (οὐκ ἄρα ἔστιν οὗ ἕνεκα ἂν θεὸς ψεύδοιτο); 'there is no lying poet in god' (ποιητὴς μὲν ἄρα ψευδὴς ἐν θεῷ οὐκ ἔνι); and 'the divine and the divinity are free from deceit' (ἀψευδὲς τὸ δαιμόνιόν τε καὶ τὸ θεῖον) (382e). According to the Platonic Socrates, poets such as Homer

---

33 Plutarch, *On the Failure of Oracles* 25, *Mor.* 407a–f; S. Schröder, *Plutarchs Schrift De Pythiae oraculis: Text, Einleitung und Kommentar* (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 8; Stuttgart: Teubner, 1990) 398–401. Plutarch aims to deflect a specific charge against the Delphic oracle, namely, that the introduction of clarity in its oracular sayings, no longer weaving them in epic verse, has somehow removed their truth and dignity. Similar apologetics against unauthorized diviners recur in Plutarch's biographies (*Cic.* 17.4; *Mar.* 42.4–5). See also Bendlin, 'On the Uses', 228.

34 Euripides: Νηρέως προφήτης Γλαῦκος, ἀψευδὴς θεός (*Orest.* 364); ἐν ἀψευδεῖ θρόνῳ (*Iph. taur.* 1254), an epithet for the Pythian tripod; and, in scholia, Ζεὺς ἐν θεοῖσι μάντις ἀψευδέστατος (A. Nauck, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1983²) no. 1110), perhaps a fragment of Archilochus (C. Collard and M. Cropp, *Fragments: Oedipus-Chrysippus, Other Fragments/Euripides* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 617).

35 See also Croesus' acceptance of the Delphic oracle's verse about him as 'divination without deceit' (μαντήιον ἀψευδές) (Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.49), and Psammetichus' consultation of 'the most infallible oracle' (μαντήιον ἀψευδέστατον) in Egypt (*Hist.* 2.152).

and Aeschylus abuse this truism of the divine having no deceit (θεῖον ἀψευδές) to seduce audiences into accepting the lies of mythology (383b). Be that as it may, this evidence shows the affirmation's long-standing appeal before Plutarch.[36]

A good index of the theme's significance for ancient audiences in the second century is the epigraphic record. The affirmation of an 'unlying god' expressed a specific type of social communication in the Roman epigraphic habit, which celebrated ties and access to an undoubted source of divination. The famous inscription honouring Opramoas of Rhodiapolis in south-east Lycia provides one of the best examples. The honorific decrees advertise Opramoas' donations to the Lycian League in a list that includes financial support for the ancient Apollonian sanctuary at the coastal town of Patara, an oracle described explicitly as 'venerable and infallible (ἀψευδές)'.[37] The cash was timely. After a long silence the sanctuary had begun to give its oracles again, in time for its annual Panegyris festival over which Opramoas personally presided (*ca.* 139 CE).[38] The political elite of Lycia set up the tomb's honorary decrees as a public archive advertising to contemporaries the importance of this moment when the Apollo of Patara began to speak again. The decrees based the authority of the oracle's prophecies on the antiquity of a shrine being merely in renewal, in the shared elite language of civic benefaction, and on conventional assurances that the Apollonian divination lacked deceit. In his excellent analysis, Andreas Bendlin explains the social communication involved in the inscription's epigraphic programme:

> ... according to the inscription, the oracle explicitly speaks 'without lies and deception': it is ἀψευδές. This adjective is already used in Greek literature from the archaic and early classical periods to legitimate the authority of oracles and of their god Apollo. Also in imperial times, the worshippers accept

36 Additional evidence: Theocritus, *Id.* 24.65; biblical literature (Num 23.19; Wis 7.17); *Sibylline Oracles* 3.701 (*OTP*, I.377); Philo of Alexandria (*Drunkenness* 139; *Migration* 190; *Heir* 4; *Dreams* 220–1; *Joseph* 95–6; *Moses* 2.280–5); Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 4.2; Ovid, *Fast.* 425; Strabo, *Geogr.* 10.1.3; Pausanius, *Descr.* 1.34.4, 7.21.12 and 9.23.6; as well as in papyri (e.g. *PSI* x.1102 (Oxyrhynchos, *ca.* 217–72 CE)). See also Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 11.125; 32.13 and 35.22 (cf. Pausanius, *Descr.* 22.3–4); with L. Kim, *Homer between History and Fiction in Imperial Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 85–139. In polemic against false oracles: *Sibylline Oracles* 4.1–5 (*OTP*, I.384); Philo, *Spec. Laws* 4.52; Josephus, *A.J.* 1.15–16; Strabo, *Geogr.* 9.2.11; and Artemidorus, *Interpretation of Dreams* 2.69. See Dibelius and Conzelmann, *Pastoral Epistles*, 131.

37 Ch. Kokkinia, *Die Opramoas-Inschrift von Rhodiapolis: Euergetismus und Soziale Elite in Lykien* (Antiquitas 3/40; Bonn: Habelt, 2000) 56 (no. 54, XIII D 1), 97 (trans.). This very large inscription arranges numerous official documents (thirty-two honorary decrees and thirty-eight official letters, all dating to between *ca.* 120 and 60 CE) into a monumental collage honouring the impressive dossier of Opramoas' euergetism in the cities of Lycia. Bendlin, 'On the Uses', 175–8.

38 B. Burrell, *Neokoroi: Greek Cities and Roman Emperors* (Cincinnati Classical Studies, n.s., 9; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 255.

Apollo's prophecies as ἀψευδές: for example, the people of Rhodes dedicated a statue of their own Rhodian Apollo to the oracle-giving god of Didyma, because he had given them truthful prophecies from his 'deceit-free tripod' in the past.[39]

Such assurances of oracular trustworthiness may have resonated with many visitors to the renewed shrine. Yet, as we saw above, ancient discussions about the truthfulness of oracles included also a critique of their so-called lack of lies and deceit, their so-called infallibility (ἀψευδές).

A fragmentary treatise against oracles by Oenomaus of Gadara provides one such counter-example.[40] Written in the first half of the second century CE, Oenomaus' *The Exposure of Frauds* draws on Cynic philosophical critique of divination. It goes beyond merely 'philosophical' criticism of religion, however. It remakes the divine instance of Apollo, whose voice most contemporaries accepted as being 'without lies and deceit', into a *human* object of criticism, which the narrator then confronts in a dialogue. Oenomaus thus exposes Apollo as an idle sophist, an all-to-human figure of religious fraud.[41] Representing both the narrator and Apollo as human rejects the very distinction necessary for contemporaries like Plutarch to create a literary discourse about divination out of oracular protocols. The Cynic representation of Apollo as a human sophist, an idle talker who naturally lies, opposes Plutarch's literary representation of Apollo as a divine, unfailing oracle.

In the second century, therefore, the truth value of oracles rose in literary and cultural circles as a popular topic in which to debate the proper role of the sophist. Plutarch illustrates the attempt to defend the operations of public oracles from associations of fake sophistry, shifting such a charge towards the so-called divinations of independent mantic specialists. Analogous concerns to renew the public trust in civic oracles as infallible appear in the Opramoas inscription. The very oracular epithet of ὁ ἀψευδὴς θεός, however, played into the hands of its philosophical critics. The Cynic philosophy of Oenomaus represents a refashioning of such oracular protocols into a rival literary discourse about divination that exposed its lie, by exploiting the negative associations of the 'sophist' as an idle talker.[42]

---

39 Bendlin, 'On the Uses', 178, with references to *IDidyma* 83 (third century CE, after Caracalla); found also in R. Merkelback and J. Stauber, *Steinepigramme aus dem griechischen Osten*, vol. I: *Die Westküste Kleinasiens von Knidos bis Ilion* (Stuttgart/Leipzig: Teubner, 1998) 94. Cf. also LSJ s.v. ἀψευδής.

40 This work, entitled Γοήτων φώρα, is preserved extensively in Eusebius, *Prep. ev.* 5.18–36 and 6.7. See J. Hammerstaedt, *Die Orakelkritik des Kynikers Oenomaus* (Athenäum Monografien, Altertumswissenschaft 188; Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1998); and A. Busine, *Paroles d'Apollon: pratiques et traditions oraculaires dans l'Antiquité tardive (IIᵉ–VIᵉ siècles)* (Religions of the Graeco-Roman World 156; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 333–4.

41 Bendlin, 'On the Uses', 230–1.

42 For a further satire of oracular 'truth' and its protocols, see Lucian of Samosata, *Alexander the False Prophet*. C. P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 133–48.

4. The Cretan Liar as Idle Talker and Fake Sophist

A paradigmatic figure in this debate over sophistry was the idle talker known as the Cretan Liar. Greco-Roman book and reading culture knew the artifice of this proverbial character from, among other sources, its prominence in the Hellenistic poetry of Callimachus – the opening lines of his *Hymn to Zeus* – evidenced by the patristic reading circles (see above). As with so many passages of Callimachean poetry, these lines provided a rich precedent to explore the power of literary allusion to be multifaceted, both connecting to and distancing from its referent.[43] The scene evokes a royal court symposium, in which the poet invites a libation but first must ask a formal question of protocol: how to address Zeus correctly, as Dictean or Lycaean? That is, should the poet invoke the location of Zeus's nativity to be on Crete or in Arcadia? The efficacy of the libation, and that of the hymn itself, depends on getting the genealogy right. The answer comes in the form of an apostrophe, an ancient device of sacred Greek hymns:

> Zeus – what else could be better to sing at his libations than the god himself, always great, always lordly, driver of the Pelagonians, wielder of justice over the Ouranids? How then shall we sing of him – as Dictaean or Lycaean? My heart is much in doubt, since his birth is a matter of strife. Zeus, they say you were born in the mountains of Ida, but Zeus, they also say in Arcadia. Which of them have committed a lie (ἐψεύσαντο)? 'Cretans are ever liars' (Κρῆτες ἀεὶ ψεῦσται) – for the Cretans have constructed a tomb for you; and you did not die, for you are always. And in Parrhasia it was that Rhea bore you (....)[44]

Apostrophising Zeus, the poet opts for Arcadia on proverbial grounds – 'Cretans are always liars' – but just as the audience settles into this Arcadian salutation, Callimachus shifts the ancestral home of the newborn Zeus back to Crete (Callimachus, *Hymn.* 1.42–5). Uniting two alternative nativities into one enables the Alexandrian poet to de-centre the myth from old Greece, to geographies further south, namely, Ptolemaic realms under King Ptolemy II Philadelphus, whose coronation while still a child, as co-regent with his father Ptolemy Soter, this poem celebrated. The move illustrates how Callimachean poetics produces

---

43 On the Roman Callimachus, see B. Acosta-Hughes and S. A. Stephens, *Callimachus in Context: From Plato to the Augustan Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). On reflexive allusions, see A. Barchiesi, *Speaking Volumes: Narrative and Intertext in Ovid and Other Latin Poets* (ed. and trans. M. Fox and S. Marchesi; London: Duckworth, 2001) 117–19.

44 Callimachus, *Hymn.* 1.1–10; trans. M. Cuypers, 'Prince and Principle: The Philosophy of Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus*', *Callimachus II* (ed. M. A. Harder, R. F. Reguit and G. C. Wakker; Hellenistica Groningana 7; Leuven: Peeters, 2004) 95–6. 'Ida' names a mountain in Crete and 'Parrhasia' the region of Arcadia.

unfamiliar versions of myth, names and places as learning that leads a reader down familiar paths differently.[45]

Communicating this Callimachean theogony is the apparently straightforward assertion of a one-liner, 'Cretans are ever liars', which gives the effect of a strong quotation. Not exactly a proverb, this literary text from an authority of great ancient lore appears in the poem already inscribed in a tradition. The authority is Epimenides of Crete; yet the tradition goes back to a famous line from Hesiod's *Theogony* that had become a standard for elucidating the poet as *liar* (ὁ ψεύστης) – its *locus classicus*. Testimonia tag Epimenides with the famous line, 'Cretans, ever liars, wretched creatures, mere bellies (γαστέρες οἶον)'.[46] This line echoes the hymnic rebuke in the opening invocation of Hesiod's *Theogony*, by which the Muses encountering Hesiod herding sheep consecrate his poetic vocation: 'Shepherds of the wilderness (ἄγραυλοι), wretched things of shame (κάκ᾽ ἐλέγχεα), mere bellies (γαστέρες οἶον), we know how to speak many false things as though they we true (ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα); but we know, when we will, to utter true things (ἀληθέα).'[47] Like a hall of mirrors multiple reflexive allusions open up before the reader: Callimachus apostrophises Zeus quoting Epimenides who, in turn, parodies Hesiod. The complex overlay of intertextual echoes undermines the one-liner's constitution as a direct and transparent authorial voice.[48] Even a 'strong' quotation, such as this one-liner, rings out echoes recalling the sound in another text but not necessarily its 'original' meaning.[49] Likewise, when we turn to the exegesis

---

45 S. Barbantani, 'Callimachus on Kings and Kingship', *Brill's Companion to Callimachus* (ed. B. Acosta-Hughes, L. Lehnus and S. Stephens; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 182–89; Acosta-Hughes and Stephens, *Callimachus in Context*, 149–51.

46 This saying is an apostrophe of Truth and Justice speaking to Epimenides in a dream during his long sleep in the cave of Zeus; M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) 44–53. Testimonia: *FGrH* 457 T 1–2, 4.

47 Hesiod, *Theog.* 26–8; trans. H. G. Evelyn-White, *Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homerica/Hesiod* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 81. An excellent study of the invective in the rebuke is J. T. Katz, '"Mere Bellies"? A New Look at *Theogony* 26–8', *JHS* 120 (2000) 122–31. See also H. H. Koning, *Hesiod, the Other Poet: Ancient Reception of a Cultural Icon* (Mnemosyne Suppl. 325; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 299–304.

48 Barchiesi, *Speaking Volumes*, 117–18. See also N. Hopkinson, 'Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus*', *Classical Quarterly* 34 (1984) 139–48, at 140; Goldhill, 'Framing', 27–30; K. L. G. Lüddecke, 'Contextualizing the Voice in Callimachus' "Hymn to Zeus"', *Materialai e discussioni per l'analisti dei testi classici* 41 (1998) 16; S. A. Stephens, *Seeing Double: Intercultural Poetics in Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003) 79–114; and J. Klooster, 'Apostrophe in Homer, Apollonius and Callimachus', *Über die Grenze: Metalepse in Text- und Bildmedien des Altertums* (ed. U. E. Eisen and P. von Möllendorff; Narratologia 39; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013) 168.

49 Helpful to my analysis is the study of intertextuality proposed by R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 14–33, even if I complicate his clear distinctions between citation, allusion and echo.

of Titus, we should move beyond the limited hermeneutical framework of the 'origins' of the quotation's language towards a study of its function within the argument of the letter itself.

That function is invective. We know the Liar to be a figure of Greco-Roman invective because Greco-Roman literature identifies it as such. Cicero lists 'the Liar' (*mentientem*; ψευδόμενον) among the old rhetorical traps used by Stoics to trip up an opponent; like other famous fallacies, it is mere verbal sophistry for use in debate rather than in genuine inquiry into the truth.[50] Seneca, a Stoic philosopher distancing himself from use of the figure, calls it the refuge of a pedant whose superfluous quibbling implicates one to be a pseudo-intellectual. He writes, 'Why do you bore me with that which you yourself call the "liar" fallacy, about which so many books have been written?'[51] Such complaints about the overabundance of speeches and books on the topic provide important evidence of the figure's widespread use and familiarity in classical literary culture.[52] Indeed, Aulus Gellius identifies the Liar as a well-known device of 'sophistry' (*sophismatis*) (*Attic Nights* 18.10–11), as does Plutarch, who writes:

> It is quite necessary that in formulating questions the questioner should accommodate himself to the proficiency or natural capacity of the speaker, to those matters 'in which he is at his best'; not forcibly to divert one who is more concerned with the ethical side of philosophy, by plying him with questions in natural sciences or mathematics, or to drag the man who poses as an authority on natural science into passing judgment on the hypothetical propositions of logic or solutions of quibbles like the Liar Problem (ψευδόμενος).[53]

To do otherwise draws an audience into disputes merely for effect, not truth, and so tags a teacher as an idle talker, among the 'sophists and charlatans' (σοφισταὶ καὶ ἀλαζόνες) who 'in their disputes with eminent men write with shameless arrogance'.[54] Fondness for such trivial pursuits characterises sophomoric beginners and other posers who, 'like puppies, delighting to pull and tear ..., go in for the disputations, knotty problems, and quibbles'.[55] According to Plutarch, beginners to philosophy 'straightway stock themselves up for the practice of sophistry' by collecting 'apothegms and anecdotes', and then always 'foolishly taking

50 Cic. *Div.* 2.11; cf. *Acad.* 2.95; 2.147–8; .

51 Sen. *Ep.* 45.10; text and trans. R. M. Gummere, *Epistulae morales/Seneca*, vol. I (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 296–7.

52 Additional evidence: Arr. *Epict diss.* 2.7.34; 2.18.18; 2.21.17; 3.2.7; and 3.9.21; Plut. *Mor.* 1059d, 1070d.   Related references in J. A. Harrill, 'Accusing Philosophy of Causing Headaches: Tertullian's Use of a Comedic Topos (*Praescr.* 16.2)', *StudPatr* 65 (2013) 359–65.

53 Plutarch, *On Listening to Lectures* 11, *Mor.* 43c; text and trans. F. C. Babbitt, *Moralia/Plutarch*, vol. I (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 232–3.

54 Plutarch, *Reply to Colotes* 29, *Mor.* 1124c; text and trans. B. Einarson and P. H. De Lacy, *Moralia/Plutarch*, vol. XIV (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 292–3.

55 Plutarch, *Progress in Virtue* 7, *Mor.* 78f; text and trans. Babbitt, *Moralia*, I.418–19.

account and inventory of their literary stock'.[56] Real philosophy, by contrast, brings discussion and judgement that have acquired a 'sound (healthy) stability'.[57] Plutarch aims to disassociate the sophistic diatribe (σοφιστοῦ διατριβῆς), on the rise in this imperial period, from the oracular truth at the Tripod.[58]

The one-liner of the Cretan oracle attacked verbose sophistry as pedantic pseudo-intellectualism. It became an efficient, standard tool to draw the reader's attention towards a string of well-known anecdotes about the Liar and its associated apothegms, to encourage intertextuality as a reading practice in the debate. A Greco-Roman evoked such anecdotes, above all, to mock one's rival in a competition over truth. Such rivalry became intense during the so-called Second Sophistic, when contemporary literary interests in the Greek East coincided with a perceived decline in the dignity of oracles as cultural institutions of learned truth. Plutarch, for example, created from oracular protocols a literary discourse about public divination which aimed to rehabilitate its traditional truth and authority. However, using the same trope, the Cynic philosophy of Oenomaus of Gadara condemned such oracles as no better lying sophists. In this cultural mix, the figure of the Cretan Liar thus received much parody.

While as a general aphorism the 'one-liner' might appear to be an obvious quotation of a transparent and specific authoritative voice, in the case of the Cretan Liar it guided Greco-Roman readers towards a more complicated intertextuality. More an echo than a quotation, the Cretan Liar signalled referents of function rather than of authorial origin. It recalled oracular protocols. Such protocols identified a debate over truth, which parodied rival teachers as idle talkers and so illegitimate sophists, a stock scene familiar to ancient audiences. That the Cretan Liar in the Epistle to Titus is an example of this broader phenomenon of intertextuality is the subject of my next section.

5. Oracular Claims to Truth in the Epistle to Titus

Parody offers a plausible context in which ancient audiences would have read the Cretan Liar oracle in the Epistle to Titus. The intertextuality is not on a literary level (such as allusion or direct borrowing) but rather on a cultural one: it shares the content of the thinking in such parodies of opponents. In other words, the Cretan oracle quoted in the letter comes from the common currency about the figure of the Liar in Greco-Roman culture, not from any citation of a particular literary source on the part of the author.

The literary device functions to tag the opponents as 'idle bellies' (that is, 'lazy gluttons', γαστέρες ἀργαί) (Titus 1.12). By this parody, the letter constructs

---

56 Plutarch, *Progress in Virtue* 7, *Mor.* 79a; text and trans. Babbitt, *Moralia*, I.420–1.
57 Plutarch, *Progress in Virtue* 7, *Mor.* 79b; text and trans. Babbitt, *Moralia*, I.420–1.
58 Plutarch, *Oracles at Delphi* 29, *Mor.* 408d.

Paul's truth as oracular, 'without lies or deceit', over against a pedantic sophistry in the teachings of the opponents, mocked in ways recognisable to ancient audiences. The reader of the Pastoral Epistles thus faces an oracular Paul, whose 'saying is sure' even when the apostle quotes a foreign literary text across a religious divide.

The 'oracular' Paul opens the letter. Speaking the 'knowledge of truth', he utters knowledge conforming to 'godliness' and the promises of God 'who does not lie' (Titus 1.1). This diction repeats the protocols proper for addressing a deity in oracular verbal exchanges, such as we saw in Plutarch's Pythian dialogues, the Opramoas inscription, and a host of other sources. This emphasis on an oracular Paul, an authority without lies or deception, corresponds also to similar constructions throughout the Pastoral Epistles. In 1 Timothy, the author gives instructions 'in accordance with the prophecies made earlier' (1 Tim 1.18). 'I am telling the truth', the Pastoral Paul declares, 'I am not lying' (1 Tim 1.7).

The teaching is practical. It imparts training (παιδεύουσα, Titus 2.12) that defines 'truth' in terms of the content of belief rather than in order to encourage philosophical inquiry. Promoting speculation is characteristic of the erroneous teachings of the opponents, and stands in sharp relief against the apostolic trustworthiness of the author's own 'Pauline' voice (see 1 Tim 1.4). Opponents in the community have 'rejected the truth' (Titus 1.14), split away from the true Pauline tradition, and from their independent agency are 'upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain' (1.11). The letter offers advice on how to deal with such crisis caused by false teachers, in a handbook fashion.[59]

The deceit of the teachers includes monetary fraud typical in stock accusations against sophists.[60] Further tags of the opponents in the stock type of the sophist include their quarrelsomeness, hypocrisy and pedantry. Their words do not match their deeds: 'They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions' (Titus 1.16). They are 'rebellious people', 'idle talkers' and 'deceivers' (1.10). The invited reader must behave in an opposite manner: avoiding 'stupid controversies', 'dissentions' and 'quarrels'. These tags remake the local conflict into a wider contest of genuine παιδεία ('traditional', oracular, not 'human' teaching) against fraudulent παιδεία (all-too-human teaching). The letter thus upholds traditional religious knowledge as the pedagogical norm, over against sophistic lies on offer by such unattached religious frauds split off from the congregation. In other words, it is the oral performance of traditional religious knowledge, and not that of freelance divination, which should return to oracles as the

---

59 On the form of the ancient handbook tradition in deutero-Pauline writings, see J. A. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 97–103.

60 Ridicule of the opponents as mere sophists runs throughout the Pastoral Epistles; see Dibelius and Conzelmann, *Pastoral Epistles*, 21, 66, 68, 113, 119, 120, 135, 151.

norm of divine communication in the community.[61] Both the diction and the rhet-
orical context of letter thus resemble the diplomatic protocols of an oracle con-
sultation, which were widespread in the Greco-Roman world and best
exemplified by Plutarch.

Sandwiched within this polemic typecasting the opponents as sophists
appears the Cretan oracle:

> It was one of them, their own prophet, who said,
>> 'Cretans are always liars, vicious beasts, idle bellies.'
> This is true testimony. For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may
> become sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths, or command-
> ments of those who reject the truth. (Titus 1.12–13)

The quotation shows no signs of literary engagement with Epimenides,
Callimachus or the philosophical speculation about the Liar Paradox because
the reply, 'This testimony is true' (ἡ μαρτυρία αὕτη ἐστὶν ἀληθής, 1.13),
repeats the certitude opening the letter – 'God who never lies' (1.2). The
Pastoral Paul teaches the ability to know piety (εὐσέβεια), full acquaintance
with the truth (ἐπίγνωσις ἀληθείας, 1.1), and how to 'confute those who contra-
dict' (τοὺς ἀντιλέγοντας ἐλέγχειν) the sound (healthy) teachings (1.9).[62] The
oracular one-liner functions as such lines often do in Second Sophistic discourse,
to distinguish authentic παιδεία from the fakes. Indeed, the author of Titus
denounces his opponents as religious frauds, mere sophists who peddle 'Jewish
myths' that amount to atheism (ἄπιστοι, 1.14–15).[63]

The exchange in Titus resembles contemporaneous debates about oracles,
best exemplified by Plutarch. Just as Plutarch invokes the presence of truth and
the departure of deceit in a verbal exchange ὡς ἀληθῆ καὶ ἀψευδῆ, so too
does the author of Titus invoke the presence of ὁ ἀψευδὴς θεός and the depart-
ure of deceitful charlatans. Just as Plutarch affirms the genuineness of oracular
encounters at Delphi to be with not a human but a divine presence, so too
does the author of Titus affirm divine truth operating on a level higher than

61 In this regard, the portrait of Paul in Titus provides an instructive contrast to that in his
    undoubted letters, where he offered himself as the very model of a freelance religious
    expert; see H. Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman
    Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 146–89.

62 Cf. A. C. Thiselton, 'Does the Bible Call All Cretans Liars? "The Logical Role of the Liar Paradox
    in Titus 1:12, 13: A Dissent from the Commentaries in the Light of Philosophical and Logical
    Analysis"', *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: Collected Works with New Essays* (Grand Rapids:
    Eerdmans, 2006) 217–28 (first published in *BibInt* 2 (1994) 207–23).

63 On recognisable one-liners in the repertoire of Second Sophistic writers, see G. Anderson, *The
    Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1993) 79.
    Cf. the figure of the chresmologist (Bendlin, 'On the Uses', 227) that Origen and Jerome see in
    the passage.

corrupted (μεμιαμμένοι) human beings (1.15). And, like Plutarch, the author of Titus explains the decline in the Pastoral Paul's prestige and influence as coming not from any loss of their truth but from a rise of unauthorised ritual agents (the opponents) who wander about the congregation and spread their all-too-human deceit that upsets whole households (1.11). The rhetoric of each author denounces those who operate outside his centre of religious authority and traditional knowledge.

The intertextuality of these denunciations lies in their function, as separate responses to shared cultural phenomena. The phenomena in question were the widespread linguistic norms and protocols of oracular truth. Such efforts revive classicising ideals for a new παιδεία. The Epistle to Titus thus participates in a literary world similar to that of the Second Sophistic, which aimed to construct from one-liners a literary discourse that brought the present into a mimetic relationship with the past.[64]

6. Conclusion

Understanding why the Epistle to Titus contains oracular one-liners means going beyond the limited hermeneutic framework of an original source. Rather than being particular allusions, the one-liners represent shared responses to wider debates concerning the truth value of oracles in the second century. In comparison with the Opramoas inscription and Plutarch's Pythian dialogues, the Epistle to Titus displays more the Plutarchian trajectory. Like Plutarch, the Paulinist author creates from oracular protocols a discourse about divination that rehabilitates its traditional truth and authority.

Yet, in this thesis, I want to be clear. We need not conclude that the author of Titus had read Plutarch. That would be 'parallelomania', which overdoes 'the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying a literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction'.[65] Investigations of intertextuality best begin by examining the phenomenon in Roman literary culture of which the New Testament might be an example. In this context, the Epistle to Titus is not simply 'parallel to' but an instance of a trajectory in other Greek writings in the second century that incorporate oracular one-liners to defend the authority of oracles as clearly not in decline.

---

64 On the multiple ways in which diverse authors in the Second Sophistic created a mimetic form of literature both to construct and challenge cultural links with the classical past, see Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature*, 41–89.

65 S. Sandmel, 'Parallelomania', *JBL* 81 (1962) 1–13, at 1. See also the helpful critique of D. Frankfurter, 'Comparison and the Study of Religions of Late Antiquity', *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques: controverse et propositions* (ed. C. Calame and B. Lincoln; Collections Religions 1; Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2012) 83–98.

Jerome's reframing of the question into one of intertextuality (probably a reading he received from Origen) thus offers an important lesson for current scholarship on this verse. Rather than being preoccupied with 'correctly' identifying the 'original source' of the Cretan oracle (whether Callimachus, Epimenides or both), commentary can benefit from widening the scope of our inquiry. Such a wider approach gives us access to more interpretative possibilities and a greater array of ancient evidence. Although the search for direct literary interaction is understandable given the apparent fame of the Cretan Liar in classical antiquity, as a historical reading it is unhelpful in solving the crux because it obscures the diversity that was ancient intertextuality.