

# Sceptic and Believer in Ancient Mediterranean Religions

Edited by  
BABETT EDELMANN-SINGER,  
TOBIAS NICKLAS,  
JANET E. SPITTLER,  
and LUIGI WALT

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

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443





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Janet Spittler, and Luigi Walt

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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	VII
CLIFFORD ANDO	
Disbelief and Cognate Concepts in Roman Antiquity .....	1
JAN ASSMANN	
Ancient Egyptian Disbelief in the Promises of Eternity .....	21
TIM WHITMARSH	
The Invention of Atheism and the Invention of Religion in Classical Athens .....	37
JAN N. BREMMER	
Youth, Atheism, and (Un)Belief in Late Fifth-Century Athens .....	53
MATTHEW A. FOX	
Disbelief in Rome: A Reappraisal .....	69
BABETT EDELMANN-SINGER	
“Who Will Worship This Man as a God, Who Will Believe in Him?” – Seneca’s <i>Apocolocyntosis</i> and the Hermeneutical Categories of Belief and Scepticism in Emperor Cult .....	93
KAI TRAMPEDACH	
Plutarch als Apologet des Orakels von Delphi .....	111
JANET DOWNIE	
Belief and Doubt in Aelius Aristides’s <i>Isthmian Oration: To Poseidon</i> .....	127
INGER N. I. KUIN	
Loukianos Atheos? Humour and Religious Doubt in Lucian of Samosata .....	147
TOBIAS NICKLAS	
Skepsis und Christusglaube: Funktionen, Räume und Impulse des Zweifels bei Paulus .....	165

DAVID P. MOESSNER Luke as Sceptical “Insider” – Re-configuring the “Tradition” by Re-figuring the “Synoptic” Plot . . . . .	185
BENJAMIN SCHLIESSER The Gospel for Sceptics: Doubting Thomas (John 20:24–29) and Early Christian Identity Formation . . . . .	203
ANNA VAN DEN KERCHOVE “Why Do You Doubt?” – Scepticism and Some Nag Hammadi Writings . . .	227
RICHARD L. GORDON Evading Doubt: Astrology and Magic in the Greco-Roman Period . . . . .	243
General Bibliography . . . . .	269
List of Contributors . . . . .	303
Index of Sources . . . . .	305
Index of Modern Authors . . . . .	321
Index of Names, Places, and Subjects . . . . .	329

## Introduction

The majority of the essays collected in this volume were presented and discussed during the conference “*Test Everything*”: *Sceptic and Believer in Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, which took place on October 18–20, 2017, at the University of Regensburg, Germany. The meeting was organized as a joint venture by the Regensburg chairs of Ancient History (Babett Edelmann-Singer) and New Testament Studies (Tobias Nicklas) together with Janet E. Spittler (University of Virginia). It was based on an idea first proposed by Margaret M. Mitchell (University of Chicago), who, unfortunately, could not be present at the conference. The meeting understood itself as a continuation of a 2011 symposium on different perspectives on the miraculous in ancient Mediterranean antiquity.<sup>1</sup> While the 2011 conference focused on the culturally and situationally conditioned borderlands between credibility and incredibility with respect to religious accounts, the 2017 meeting was interested in the expression of scepticism and disbelief towards one’s own tradition – a phenomenon we began to refer to with the shorthand “insider doubt.” It concentrated on a timeframe between roughly the second millennium BCE and the third century CE.

The main questions we wanted to approach – from a number of different perspectives, with diverse methodological and regional foci, and thus within a multidisciplinary atmosphere – were the following: If doubt (or scepticism) is present, what, specifically, is doubted? Where is doubt (or scepticism) acceptable? Where is this not the case? How is doubt expressed *within* a specific religious community, and what reactions does it provoke? How does “insider doubt” differ from the sceptical attitude of outsiders?

We are fully aware that this volume cannot cover the whole spectrum of issues related to the topic of “insider doubt,” not least because the 2017 meeting raised as many new questions as it answered. While the present volume includes and benefits greatly from essays kindly provided by Tim Whitmarsh (which were originally conceived for a project of his own),<sup>2</sup> we intend to fill still more gaps with a follow-up meeting, planned to be held at the University of Virginia within the next few years. Nevertheless, we are already able to formulate a first set of preliminary results:

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<sup>1</sup> Published in Tobias NICKLAS and Janet E. SPITTLER, ed., *Credible, Incredible: The Miraculous in the Ancient Mediterranean* (WUNT 321; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Tim provided us with the essays of Jan Assmann, Clifford Ando, and Matthew Fox that he planned to edit within a volume on *Disbelief in the Ancient Mediterranean*. We are extremely thankful for his generous support to our project.

(1) Starting with the contribution by Clifford Ando, all essays in this volume are (on different levels) concerned with problems of terminology and categorization. Most readers of this volume will be well aware of both the fact that our contemporary concepts of “religion,” “belief,” “faith,” “scepticism,” “doubt” or even “atheism” are not identical with the emic categories used in ancient sources and the difficulties this fact entails. That said, we are confident that these terms can be useful as long as they are well-defined and understood as etic categories. This is especially the case with the contemporary term “religion,” the use of which has been heavily criticized in recent years by authors such as Brent Nongbri, Carlin A. Barton, and Daniel Boyarin.<sup>3</sup> While the essays presented here vary somewhat in their definitions of terms like “faith,” “scepticism,” or even “atheism” (this diversity being related to the different sources dealt with), all of them understand the basic phenomenon of doubt as only comprehensible in complex relation to belief. Doubt, as we understand it, is always entangled with specific conceptions of faith, belief, and religious practice. To this another complex of terms must be added, namely the “polarity between knowledge and belief,” as it can, for example, be observed in the writings of Cicero and Augustine.<sup>4</sup> An even sharper antagonism is seen by Tim Whitmarsh, who explicitly relates the “invention” of atheism to the “invention” of religion and places this development in the Athens of the late 430s BCE.<sup>5</sup>

(2) The expression of doubt is only possible in contexts that offer space for aspects of personal, individual belief. While scholars have long connected the rise of individual belief to late Medieval and early Renaissance societies in the so-called West, Jörg Rüpke and others have recently dismantled this notion, revealing it to be a modern construction determined by the limited access to individual perception and belief afforded by our extant sources.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion is confirmed by many observations offered in the articles collected in this

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Brent NONGBRI, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013); Carlin A. BARTON and Daniel BOYARIN, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); and the criticism by Tim WHITMARSH, “The Invention of Atheism and the Invention of Religion in Classical Athens,” in the present volume.

<sup>4</sup> See Clifford ANDO, “Disbelief and Cognate Concepts in Roman Antiquity,” in the present volume. This also explains our decision to open the volume with Ando’s contribution, to signal how much of our modern terminology still depends on a set of categories germinated by the early Christian appropriation – and polemical adaptation – of the vocabulary of ancient Roman reflection on “religion.”

<sup>5</sup> See WHITMARSH, “The Invention of Atheism.”

<sup>6</sup> Cf., for example, Jörg RÜPKE, *Aberglaube oder Individualität? Religiöse Abweichung im römischen Reich* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); or IDEM, “Individualization and Privatization,” in *Oxford Handbook for the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (2nd edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 702–717; but cf. also the essays in the forthcoming volume by Maren NIEHOFF and Joshua LEVINSON, ed., *Self, Self-Fashioning, and Individuality: New Perspectives* (Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Graeco-Roman World; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

volume. Jan Bremmer's contribution, for example, highlights the emergence in late fifth-century Athens of a cluster of texts that show an increasing scepticism towards traditional forms of belief. However, even if they are related to wider historical trends and shifts, and even if such trends and shifts should not be underestimated, these texts are to be seen as witnesses of individual cases, not a monolithic movement.<sup>7</sup> Babett Edelmann-Singer's article, in turn, shows that one cannot answer the traditional question whether "the" Romans believed in the divinity of their living and their deceased emperors by a simple "yes" or "no." Instead, different individuals reveal different stances towards different aspects of the cult (and even Seneca the Younger, who is able to make fun of Claudius, should not too quickly be counted as a critic of the emperor cult *per se*).<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Inger Kuin shows how difficult it is to find even Lucian of Samosata's *real* attitude towards religion behind the many (partly contradictory) authorial masks he wears.<sup>9</sup>

(3) All essays in this collection confirm (and offer partly new material to) Tim Whitmarsh's thesis that doubt towards one's own religious tradition is not simply a "Western" post-Enlightenment phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Jan Assmann, for example, points to sources from the Middle Kingdom of Egypt, which demonstrate clear signs of scepticism towards Egyptian ideas about the afterlife (and the importance of being buried in a proper tomb).<sup>11</sup> And while several contributions deal with aspects of Greco-Roman religion, it becomes clear that even Christianity is able to include aspects of doubt and scepticism in its system.<sup>12</sup> Matthew Fox's article goes even further, arguing that Enlightenment criticisms of religion (and related forms of atheism) are not an isolated phenomenon, but can be traced to the Renaissance re-discovery of Greco-Roman antiquity, demonstrating the extent to which arguments developed by Cicero (mainly in *De natura deorum*) were re-used and integrated into Enlightenment discourses.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Jan N. BREMMER, "Youth, Atheism, and (Un)Belief in Late Fifth-Century Athens," in the present volume.

<sup>8</sup> See Babett EDELMANN-SINGER, "'Who Will Worship This Man as a God, Who Will Believe in Him?' Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and the Hermeneutical Categories of Belief and Scepticism in Emperor Cult," in the present volume.

<sup>9</sup> See Inger KUIN, "Loukianos Atheos? Humour and Religious Doubt in Lucian of Samosata," in the present volume.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Tim WHITMARSH, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 2015), 4–12.

<sup>11</sup> See Jan ASSMANN, "Ancient Egyptian Disbelief in the Promises of Eternity," in the present volume.

<sup>12</sup> This, in a certain sense, seems to go against WHITMARSH, *Battling the Gods*, 11 and 241–242. However, the concrete question of whether monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam allow space for doubt and criticism or even need it, has to be deepened and will be a crucial topic for the follow-up meeting.

<sup>13</sup> See the closing lines of Matthew Fox, "Disbelief in Rome: A Reappraisal," in the present

(4) Doubt towards one's own religious tradition finds particularly fertile ground in communities and societies that offer room for a distanced reflection on religious practice and belief. This is usually not the case in contexts that focus primarily on religious practice and where the transmission of this practice functions via forms of imitation of earlier generations. The emerging world of books, moreover, with its related opportunities for theoretical study, paves the way for forms of reflection that can lead to doubt and scepticism. And indeed, many of the sources discussed in this volume are authored by highly educated intellectuals engaging with this world of books: Cicero, Ovid, Seneca, Plutarch, Aelius Aristides, Lucian of Samosata, and others. Yet one should not go so far as to imagine that "insider doubt" and "scepticism" are *only* to be found in circles of highly learned "intellectuals":<sup>14</sup> as underscored by Tobias Nicklas in his essay, the early Christians' idea of a "discernment of spirits" – related to the understanding of phenomena within their own religious movement – is something that is expected not just of a certain elite, but of every believing person.<sup>15</sup>

(5) At least some religious traditions offer opportunities and contexts wherein aspects of doubt are not just tolerated but are accepted, perhaps even expected. In his contribution, for example, Jan Assmann identifies literary genres related to certain events in a person's life (like a widow's lament over her dead husband) wherein scepticism can find a regular expression. Janet Downie speaks about Plutarch and others who regarded "some measure of rational doubt" as "necessary for a healthy religious attitude."<sup>16</sup> And several systems indicate limits of accepted scepticism or distance: while the post-mortem "image" of emperor Claudius allowed a distanced attitude towards his cult, the question of how far this distance and even scepticism could go was in the hands of the ruling emperor; and, of course, a figure like Paul, for whom "faith in Jesus Christ" was a key of his theology, could not accept disbelief towards the basic assumptions of his "gospel."

(6) In many cases, doubt and scepticism towards certain religious ideas or aspects of belief also served as a motor for creative reinterpretation of those ideas. This is the case for many aspects of early Christian theology and Gnostic thought, examined here by David P. Moessner, Benjamin Schliesser, and

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volume: "The entire notion of intellectual freedom which is fundamental to the modern academy is built upon a sharpening of intellectual tools, which is in no small part a response to the ideas of freedom from doctrinal authority. The Roman discussion of disbelief is a fundamental part of that tradition, and the Enlightenment encounter with it is where our own aspirations to freedom of thought coalesce with the Roman exploration of that idea."

<sup>14</sup> The term "intellectual" is, of course, a problematic one.

<sup>15</sup> See Tobias NICKLAS, "Skepsis und Christusglaube. Funktionen, Räume und Impulse des Zweifels bei Paulus," in the present volume.

<sup>16</sup> See Janet DOWNIE, "Belief and Doubt in Aelius Aristides's *Isthmian Oration: To Poseidon*," in the present volume.

Anna Van den Kerchove.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Janet Downie's contribution shows how a second-century author like Aelius Aristides developed criteria which allowed him to rework and rewrite myths to adapt them to the requirements of rational reflection, while Kai Trampedach deals with Plutarch's apology for the oracles, which he understands as an implicit but very clear witness of increasing insider doubts concerning the truthfulness of the Delphic Oracle. Interestingly, Plutarch manages to cope with the serious objections raised, but at the same time needs to completely re-configure and re-interpret decisive aspects of the tradition.<sup>18</sup>

(7) At least in some cases, special historical circumstances can be related to waves of doubt and scepticism towards traditional beliefs. Whereas, for example, Jan Assmann regards it as possible that the Amarna experience – “the incredibly bold step of Akhenaten to discard the whole traditional belief system in favour of a radically new one”<sup>19</sup> – provided a decisive impulse for scepticism against traditional Egyptian beliefs, Jan Bremmer relates the development of a cluster of “sceptical” texts in late fifth-century Athens to “the trials of that time.”<sup>20</sup> These observations indicate a path that could be followed more thoroughly in future meetings and volumes.

(8) Even sources that evince techniques for avoiding or counteracting any kind of doubt concerning a religious practice, belief, or system, reveal indirectly that they are in fact confronted with doubt and scepticism, even as they reject such attitudes. As Richard Gordon illustrates in the essay that closes the volume, magical and astrological systems allow doubt only as a criticism of other experts within the same system; thus criticism that could be expressed as “insider doubt” is redirected towards the development of strategies “for coping with possible or claimed disconfirmation.”<sup>21</sup> The possibility of doubt is, in a sense, frontloaded in the opaque complexity of an adequate preparation of a horoscope or a magical recipe: the superior expertise required of the astrologer or magician and the intricacy of the calculations and recipes integrate the possibility of failure, channelling any doubts towards the competence of the practitioner and away from the system itself.

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<sup>17</sup> See, respectively, David P. MOESSNER, “Luke as Sceptical ‘Insider’: Re-configuring the ‘Tradition’ by Re-figuring the ‘Synoptic’ Plot”; Benjamin SCHLIESSER, “The Gospel for Sceptics: Doubting Thomas (John 20:24–29) and Early Christian Identity Formation”; and Anna VAN DEN KERCHOVE, “‘Why Do You Doubt?’ Scepticism and Some Nag Hammadi Writings,” in the present volume.

<sup>18</sup> See Kai TRAMPEDACH, “Plutarch als Apologet des Orakels von Delphi,” in the present volume.

<sup>19</sup> ASSMANN, “Ancient Egyptian Disbelief.”

<sup>20</sup> BREMMER, “Youth, Atheism and (Un)Belief.”

<sup>21</sup> See Richard GORDON, “Evading Doubt: Astrology and Magic in the Graeco-Roman Period,” in the present volume.

(9) While a monotheistic religion like Christianity straightforwardly rejects serious signs of “atheism,” and from its earliest period develops a creed that must be accepted by all its followers, it is certainly not immune to “insider doubt.” Early Christianity not only integrates aspects of scepticism, it in fact owes important parts of its self-reflection, that is, its theology, to forms of doubt and scepticism that can already be found at its roots. This is shown – in different ways – by each of the three contributions related to early Christianity in our volume: David Moessner understands Luke as a sceptic who critically screens the traditions transmitted to him and is thus able to come to a radical revision of the material which was handed down to him; Benjamin Schliesser suggests looking at the Gospel of John as a “Gospel for sceptical believers”; and Tobias Nicklas argues that even the apostle Paul, who in his extant letters never shows traces of doubt or tolerance towards unbelief, is able to integrate scepticism towards different phenomena (such as glossolalia, prophecy etc.) found in the new movement. These initial observations on Christianity certainly require further discussion; we hope, in future conferences and volumes, to turn more deeply to related phenomena in Jewish and Islamic sources.

Finally, among the many new questions and paths for further research that emerged at the conference itself and through the planning and editing of this volume, we would highlight the following:

(1) What can be said about the relationship between increasing textualization or scripturalization<sup>22</sup> and the emergence of “insider doubt”?

(2) Why do some systems allow and even integrate some aspects of doubt while others seem unable to tolerate it?

(3) To what extent do historical developments cause “waves” of “insider doubt” and to what extent does this relate to different “systems” of belief? And to what extent is “insider doubt” a dynamic promoter of historical development?

It would not be appropriate to conclude this introduction without expressing our gratitude to the different people who made this conference possible. We are grateful to the Regensburger Universitätsstiftung Hans Vielberth for a grant which offered the financial means to organize the conference at Regensburg. The concrete organization of the meeting was in the hands of Gertraud Kumpfmüller, secretary at the chair of New Testament Studies, whose work went far beyond what one can usually expect. A whole team of helpers before,

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<sup>22</sup> For critical discussion on these two terms, cf. recently Vincent L. WIMBUSH, ed., *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Joachim SCHAPER, ed., *Die Textualisierung der Religion* (FAT 62; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); and James W. WATTS, ed., *Iconic Books and Texts* (Sheffield and Bristol: Equinox, 2013); cf. also Duncan MACRAE, *Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Guy G. STROUMSA, *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2016).

during, and after the conference made this publication possible. We would like to mention Judith Bauer, Judith König, Elena Köstner, Felix Schmutterer, and members of the University of Regensburg Centre for Advanced Studies “Beyond Canon” (DFG-Kollegforschungsgruppe FOR 2770). We would also like to thank the publishing house Mohr Siebeck, especially Dr. Katharina Gutekunst and Elena Müller, for taking care of the process of publication.

Regensburg, Munich, and Charlottesville, May 2019

*Babett Edelmann-Singer, Tobias Nicklas, Janet E. Spittler, and Luigi Walt*



# Disbelief and Cognate Concepts in Roman Antiquity

*Clifford Ando*

## 1. Introduction

The epistemology of religion in ancient and late ancient Mediterranean religions has been a burgeoning field of study in recent years. In particular, much valuable work has been done to explore and elaborate a distinction drawn already in antiquity, between religions that understood themselves as empiricist in orientation and so based on knowledge, and others that posited a basis beyond verification and so claimed to rest upon the belief of their adherents. Jan Assmann has suggested that this distinction has historically been drawn at those moments when religions he terms secondary sought to separate themselves from the primary religions that populated their context: primary religions are polytheistic, empiricist, knowledge-based, porous, international, and open to translation. Secondary religions separated themselves by identifying certain axes of analysis as salient and making strong claims to distinction along them: they might be monotheistic, oriented to belief, closed and exclusive.<sup>1</sup>

This is not the place to discuss Assmann's broader claims in detail, the focus of this essay and volume being on epistemology. However, it merits observation that Assmann's project coheres with others in the history of late antiquity, focused on acts of distinction between Judaism and Christianity, on the one hand, and Christianity and Islam, on the other.<sup>2</sup> In these cases, it is not any simple distinction between primary and secondary religions, or between monotheism and polytheism that was at stake. Rather, this body of scholarship demonstrates that the clarity of the boundary between cultural systems – indeed, their status *as* separate systems – as well as the severity with which that boundary was policed,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a crude representation of what Assmann has termed “the Mosaic distinction,” first fully elaborated in Jan ASSMANN, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), a learned and elegant work. Assmann has responded to the enormous literature it generated in *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); and *The Mosaic Distinction or The Price of Monotheism* (tr. Robert Savage; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel BOYARIN, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and Thomas N. SIZGORICH, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), are among the most ambitious works in this domain.

all rested upon political concerns in the contexts in which the boundary was first drawn, even as their subsequent re-articulations have reflected the contingent concerns in the contexts of those iterations. Importantly, the contexts are ones of sameness: the need to draw the boundary arises out of an anxiety about the potentially same, for whom, and about whom, one does not wish to be mistaken.<sup>3</sup>

Two points of relevance to the present inquiry follow from this observation. First, in order to be effective, many such acts of distinction can and should be understood as parasitic upon emergent polarities within the wider context. What is more, in many contexts, boundary-drawing by one group causes the group from which the one withdraws to take up, in an ideologically charged way, the same or similar distinctions.<sup>4</sup> We should therefore be conscious of the form and limits of the historical understanding achieved when we excavate and chart “their” use of the distinction between knowledge and belief. No doubt, such archaeological work is essential to proper understanding of the institutions they established and practices they employed for the authentication and contestation of religious information, as also for the policing of individual or communal compliance with assorted norms. The openness of Romans, for example, to revision of their rites follows upon the security they ascribed to the intelligence obtaining at the moment of initial performance, as well as the modes they possessed for assessing the effectives of subsequent performances.<sup>5</sup> The very different methods employed by pagan and Christian Romans and, indeed, their very different ambitions, in policing compliance are likewise expressions of particular epistemic commitments, and I shall say a word about these later in this chapter. But there is nevertheless also a danger that, by proceeding in this way, we will merely rehearse in our own language the nodal points of an ideologically-motivated discourse.

The second point to issue from my observations about the historical structures of acts of distinction in general, and from those concerning the ideological nature of the languages of religious epistemology in particular, follows upon the first: additional understanding would no doubt accrue by adducing conceptual frames from historical epistemology outside those employed by, or derived from, the discourses of classical antiquity. The otherness of any given analytical frame-

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<sup>3</sup> Let me be clear that the perception of “sameness,” like any assertion of radical difference, is itself an ideological act, however much the parties committing such acts seek to grant them ontological security by framing the distinction as “natural” (for example), which recursively endows their own act with the status of observation.

<sup>4</sup> The related problem, that such polarities remain available to be mobilized in acts of policing internal to any given community – by Jews against Jews, or by Christians against Christians – is raised by Assmann; see also Clifford ANDO, “Scripture, Authority and Exegesis, Augustine to Chalcedon,” in *Dans le laboratoire de l'historien des religions. Mélanges offerts à Philippe Borgeaud*, ed. Francesca Prescendi and Youri Volokhine with the assistance of Daniel Barbu and Philippe Matthey (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2011), 213–226.

<sup>5</sup> On this point see Clifford ANDO, *Roman Social Imaginaries: Language and Thought in the Context of Empire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 53–81, building on IDEM, *Roman Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 12–13.

work to the landscape in question could operate to reveal aspects of that landscape not visible when it is viewed through a lens crafted and employed by those who created its contours.

Classical Roman paganism being (in Assmann's terms) a primary religion, it represents itself as empiricist and thus founded upon knowledge.<sup>6</sup> This self-understanding was affirmed in explicitly contrastive terms when Christian Romans began to assert the basis of their own system in belief. Hence, in classical Rome, as belief played no normative role in discourses on religion, so disbelief had no purchase as a form of conduct or epistemic position. That said, knowledge and belief, together with the forms of argument each subtends, reason and authority, were already figured as binarisms in the first and most influential work on religious epistemology to be written at Rome: Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*. In consequence, a vocabulary of disbelief is already apparent in the earliest non-Scriptural works of Christian Latin. Given the role played by prior ideological structures in the emergence of antinomian ones, this is scarcely surprising. Nonetheless, it does suggest, as regards the topic of the present essay, that one can scarcely write a simple developmental history of discourses of disbelief. This essay therefore proceeds by a double movement, first examining the particular use made by Cicero and Augustine of the polarity between knowledge and belief, and then examining the apparent emergence of Christian "disbelief" (if that is what it should be named) out of a vocabulary whose primary referents in the classical period concerned intersubjective ethics.

## 2. Authority and Reason in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*

Cicero foregrounds the problem of epistemology from the very start of *On the Nature of the Gods*. What is more, he does so in a fashion that draws attention to the form taken by his work, to wit, a dialogue, as well as to his own choice not to appear in it. He knows, of course, that some will want to know what he himself thinks about the topic but declines to give them what they want. His view, he fears, would be accepted because it is his, and not because it is cogent.

For in philosophical argument it is not the weight of authority but that of reason that must be sought (*non enim tam auctoritatis in disputando quam rationis momenta quaerenda sunt*). Wherefore the authority of those who profess themselves teachers often stands in the way of those who wish to learn, for students cease to put forward their own judgment and hold as decided whatever they see adjudged by those whom they admire.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For work on Rome conducted along similar lines see ANDO, *Roman Religion*, 1–15.

<sup>7</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.10. Translations of Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* are adapted from Harris RACKHAM, ed. and tr., *Cicero: De Natura Deorum. Academica* (LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933).

In consequence, although *On the Nature of the Gods* contains a preface by Cicero *in propria persona*, he does not speak in his own voice. As we shall see, the contrast with Augustine could not be starker.

The polarity of authority, which issues in uncritical acceptance, and reason, which argues from facts and issues in knowledge, occupies a superordinate place throughout the dialogue, whoever the speaker. The speakers are three: Velleius, an Epicurean; Balbus, a Stoic; and Cotta, an Academic, who happens also to be a priest. Indeed, the choice to make the sceptic a priest is a fascinating one, to which we shall shortly return. The dialogue contains expositions of Epicurean and Stoic theology by Velleius and Balbus, respectively; and each receives a formal response by Cotta.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing at the start that Cicero nowhere seriously canvases the possibility of atheism. Instead, he largely affects via silence a normative denial of the possibility of such.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the most radical positions that Cicero attributes to historically-attested philosophers are varied theories of divine impassivity:

For there are and have been philosophers who maintain that the gods have no oversight whatsoever over the affairs of human beings. But if the opinion of these men is true, how can piety or reverence or religious sentiment exist? For all these things must be rendered in pure and chaste fashion to the numen of the gods for these reasons alone, that the gods take notice of them, and that some benefit has been rendered by the immortal gods to the race of humans beings.<sup>9</sup>

That said, the more extreme possibility of nonexistence is raised by the Academic Cotta, first in his response to Velleius.

In an inquiry such as this, that is, one concerning the nature of the gods, it must first be asked whether or not the gods exist. “It is difficult to deny.” I believe that it would be, were the question asked in a public assembly, but it is very easy in a conversation and gathering of this kind. As a result, I, who am a *pontifex*, who thinks that the rites and religious scruples of state cult should be protected with the highest degree of piety – I should like very much to be persuaded of this first thing, that the gods exist, not simply as a matter of belief but also as a matter of fact (*non opinione solum sed etiam ad veritatem*).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Jan BREMMER, “Atheism in Antiquity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11–26, largely concludes that no first-person advocacy of atheism survives from Graeco-Roman antiquity: atheism was something with which one smeared one’s opponents, not a position one claimed for oneself. Tim WHITMARSH, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), by contrast, discovers a remarkably sophisticated range of skeptical religious positions, although, as he allows, these did not coalesce into points of advocacy for specific communities. Rather, the history of atheism was constructed in hindsight through ancient modes of intellectual history. “The doxography of atheism is particularly significant because of the relative marginality of atheism in antiquity. To be an atheist was, for most, to be a member of a virtual rafter than a face-to-face community” (208).

<sup>9</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.3.

<sup>10</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.61.

We shall have to wait until the third book to see whether Cotta's scepticism is met by the arguments of his friends.

In each pair of speeches, Cicero attends with enormous care to the very different epistemic bases of each school. In the case of Velleius, this is true both of his positive statements of Epicurean doctrine and of his criticisms of philosophical competitors. For example, the Epicureans were atomists; Platonic claims on behalf of a transcendent demiurge therefore struck them as ridiculous. How did Plato acquire any information about this *opifex*, this world-creator, asks Velleius, Was it with *oculis animi*, the eyes of his mind?<sup>11</sup> The sarcasm directed at theological metaphor is palpable; its potency is great.

For his part, Balbus offers two forms of evidence of the existence of the gods and their involvement in the governance of the world. The first type of evidence derives from observation of natural order, nature here being non-Epicurean in that it does not contain the gods; rather, it is ordered by gods who in agency transcend it.<sup>12</sup> "What could be more clear or more perceptible, when we look upon the heavens and contemplate the stars, than that there must be some godhead of most outstanding mind by which they are governed?"<sup>13</sup> The second body of evidence cited by Balbus are historical records: evidence in human history, on the terrestrial rather than heavenly plane, of divine order. If what is at stake might in framework be described as divergent doctrines of immanence – to Epicurus's impassive deities Balbus opposes "present gods who often display their power" – each also relies upon different forms of evidence, differently privileged.

Cotta demolishes the arguments of Balbus in several ways. The agency of the gods in historical events, for example, is mere hearsay, deriving as it does from suppositions about cause that Balbus cannot vindicate. Cotta retorts: "You fight me with rumours (*rumoribus*), Balbus, but I seek from you reasons (*rationes*)."<sup>14</sup> Cotta reviews Balbus's examples seriatim and in each case urges that mere human agency is sufficient to explain them. Generals may have invoked the gods to encourage their soldiers, but those were stratagems only.

The fault lines separating Velleius and Balbus – and ultimately Cotta – are multiple, and they must be properly distinguished in order sufficiently to un-

<sup>11</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 1.19.

<sup>12</sup> Observation of order in the natural world, particularly in the heavens, plays a similar role in the Stoic argument for the human perception of right order in book 1 of Cicero's *On the Laws*; see, e. g., *Leg.* 1.58–62. This likewise is an issue to which we shall return.

<sup>13</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 2.4. This moment in the dialogue may be profitably contrasted with Plato, *Leg.* 10: there, each side, which is to say, the atheists as imagined by the interlocutors in the dialogue, as well as the interlocutors themselves, takes its stand by reference to the same body of evidence, to wit, the observation of order in the natural world, which finds its highest expression in the motion of the stars. The two sides differ in the need felt by the religionists to describe that order as the hypostatic expression of the agency of a transcendent prior, to wit, "a soul possessing all virtue" (Plato, *Leg.* 898c6–8).

<sup>14</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 3.13.

pack and understand their separate roles in this and later debates. On one level, the positions of the two are remarkably similar. Velleius and Balbus alike assert that the truth of their claims about the gods can be verified by others through observation of the world. Both therefore believe themselves to be committed to a correspondence theory of truth. Those two disagree, however, about the materiality of the gods and, as a related matter, they are committed to quite different theories of immanence.

As I have emphasized, despite the role he plays as interrogator of the two philosophical theologies, Cotta is not a mouthpiece only of scepticism. He is also a priest. Balbus had in fact ended his speech by appealing to Cotta's status as pontifex and denounced the Academic practice of arguing for and against all positions as unproductive and, where religion is concerned, evil and impious. Cotta opens by responding to this appeal.

I am considerably influenced by your authority (*auctoritate tua*), Balbus, and by the plea you put forward at the conclusion of your discourse, when you exhorted me to remember that I am both a Cotta and a pontiff. This no doubt meant that I ought to uphold the notions (*opiniones*) about the immortal gods that we have received from our ancestors, and the rites and ceremonies and duties of religion (*sacra caerimonias religionesque*).

For my part I always shall uphold them and always have done so, and no eloquence of anybody, learned or unlearned, shall ever dislodge me from the notion (*opinio*) as to the worship of the immortal gods that I have inherited from our ancestors.<sup>15</sup>

Cotta continues emphatically to underline the distinction, always implicit in his vocabulary, between the epistemic basis of his commitment to the practice of worship as institutionalized within his community and the basis to which theological discourse aspires:

There, Balbus, is the opinion of a Cotta and a pontiff. Now, Balbus, oblige me by letting me know yours. You are a philosopher and I ought to receive from you a reasoned account of religion (*rationem religionis*), whereas I must trust our ancestors even without such an account being given (*maioribus autem nostris etiam nulla ratione reddita credere*).<sup>16</sup>

Cotta then challenges Balbus to vindicate a claim made earlier, to the effect that any sound inquiry into the nature of the gods should (i) show that the gods exist; (ii) describe their nature; (iii) show that the world is governed by them; and (iv) demonstrate that they care for the welfare of humans. Balbus is flustered and stalls for time by asking what specifically Cotta wants to know.

Then Cotta said, "Let us examine the first topic, and if we take that to be first regarding which there is agreement among all except the *impii*, namely, that the gods exist – although for me, at any rate, it is not possible that this should be shaken from my soul – nevertheless, this very thing of which I have been

<sup>15</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 3.5.

<sup>16</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 3.6.

persuaded on the authority of our ancestors, you teach me not at all why it should be so.”<sup>17</sup>

Balbus’s immediately subsequent attempt to advance arguments Cotta meets with disdain: “You despise authority and fight with reason,” but his arguments are shallow. For Cotta, one argument only was sufficient, “that it had been handed down by our ancestors. But you despise authorities and fight with reason.”<sup>18</sup> What is more, the form of Cotta’s argument would appear generalizable: the content of statements about the gods being admitted (albeit problematically) to stand outside the possibility of proof, the argument (for him, at least) turns on the question of their acceptance, their propositional content being more or less wholly bracketed.<sup>19</sup>

Cicero thus positions Cotta not simply as a sceptic in regard to the philosophical theologies of the Epicurean and Stoic. Through him, Cicero also provides a positive account of the epistemology subtending what Varro might have called civic theology, the theology of any given (political) community. In such religions, constituted as they are by institutions and practices elaborated over time among ancient peoples (to use Varro’s language), what is accepted as truth has, or, at least, needs to have no more than a narrowly testimonial basis, and in any event its object is social cooperation. The ontology ascribed to the objects of knowledge in such a system can therefore be remarkably limited; its metaphysics are vastly less grandiose than in those presupposed by the Platonizing Stoics or, as we shall see, Platonizing Christians.

### 3. Transcendent Authority and Earthly Error in Early Augustine

Augustine’s philosophical and doctrinal writings from his conversion to his assumption of the episcopacy have distinctive flavour.<sup>20</sup> Not yet subject to the moral, pastoral and institutional pressures that he felt so deeply as a bishop, Augustine wrestled more open-endedly with philosophical and doctrinal ques-

<sup>17</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 3.7.

<sup>18</sup> Cicero, *Nat. d.* 3.10.

<sup>19</sup> I frame the matter in this way to gesture at its relevance to issues that lie outside the scope of this essay, concerning not simply the nature of epistemology in primary religions as regards other primary religions (a problem raised by Jan Assmann) but also the specific form taken by Roman arguments for tolerance, which were avowedly functionalist in ambition and based on remarkably narrow social epistemology. On these latter issues see Clifford ANDO, “Die Riten der Anderen” (tr. Gian Franco Chiai, Ralph Häussler, and Christiane Kunst), *Mediterraneo Antico* 15 (2012), 31–50 (now available in an expanded version in English as “The Rites of Others,” in *Roman Literary Cultures: Domestic Politics, Revolutionary Poetics, Civic Spectacles*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson and Alison Keith [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016], 254–277); see also ANDO, *Roman Social Imaginaries*.

<sup>20</sup> For a reading of the Cassiciacum dialogues in light of Augustine’s projects of the late 380s and early 390s see Sabine MACCORMACK, *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augus-*

tions than he allowed himself later to do. What is more, he did so through acts of reflection and literary forms – not least dialogue and the so-called soliloquy – that he perforce abandoned as he became ever more implicated, indeed, invested in structures of institutional authority and worldly power.<sup>21</sup> Among his very early works, problems of epistemology receive particularly intense scrutiny.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the very earliest work of Augustine to survive is the first book of a three-book dialogue, *Against the Academics*; the work in its entirety was written simultaneously with the other dialogues from his retreat to Cassiciacum in 386.

The title of Augustine's work responds to a treatise of Cicero's on Academic scepticism, and Augustine explicitly acknowledges his reliance on Cicero's *Academica* as a doxographic matter.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the focus of Augustine's treatise resolves at the close of its third and final book not to conclusions regarding epistemology in general, but rather to conclusions regarding epistemology in matters of religion. Thus, at a substantive level, Augustine's *Against the Academics* should in fact be read as responding to Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, nor was Augustine the only late ancient Christian to regard that work as the one great study of religious epistemology in the Latin tradition.<sup>24</sup>

Like *On the Nature of the Gods*, Augustine's *Against the Academics* is a dialogue, in which Augustine's younger protégés struggle to describe, defend, and critique some version of Academic scepticism. However, where Cicero declined to speak *in propria persona*, Augustine contrives to provide an authoritative doxography and final statement in his own voice. In more respects than one, Augustine and the Christians thus deployed the vocabulary of classical epistemology and forms of classical inquiry in support of a very different model of social authority and its forms of institutionalization.<sup>25</sup>

*Against the Academics* is a problematic work, but its peculiarities need not concern us here.<sup>26</sup> Here, I wish only to discuss the premises from which it begins

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*tine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 45–88; see also Catherine CONYBEARE, *The Irrational Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> No recent work has done so much to illuminate the importance of literary form to Augustine's intellectual projects as Brian STOCK, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); and IDEM, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue: The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> André MANDOUZE, *Saint Augustin. L'aventure de la raison et de la grâce* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), 93–111.

<sup>23</sup> On Augustine's *Against the Academics* see Karin SCHLAPBACH, ed., *Augustin: contra Academicos (vel De Academicis)*, Vol. 1: *Einleitung und Kommentar* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003). The quotations are adapted from the translation in John J. O'MEARA, ed., *Augustine: Against the Academics* (New York: Newman Press, 1951).

<sup>24</sup> See Ernst BEHR, *Der Octavius des M. Minucius Felix in seinem Verhältnisse zu Ciceros Büchern De natura deorum* (Gera: H. Rudolph, 1870), on Minucius Felix.

<sup>25</sup> ANDO, "Scripture, Authority and Exegesis," offers one portrait of this issue.

<sup>26</sup> CONYBEARE, *The Irrational Augustine*, 11–41, offers a fine reading of *Against the Academics*, with particular insight into the two prefaces, and to the difficulty Augustine encounters

and then rehearse three moments in the conversation before I turn to its climax. Augustine opens with an address to Romanianus, in which he declares that, “Philosophy promises that it will make known the most true and most hidden God, and even now is on the very point of deigning to present him to our view, as it were, through shining clouds.”<sup>27</sup> Here, Augustine performs a double move. First, he asserts that the truth is not simply hidden but removed from worldly processes of discovery. Second, he implicitly meets and attempts to bracket critiques like that made by Velleius or Balbus. Velleius, it will be recalled, sought to identify a gap between the metaphysical status that Balbus ascribed to the objects of his knowledge (a transcendent divine) and the means Balbus brought to bear to get to know them (observation of objects of a lower metaphysical status and quite different ontology). Velleius voiced this critique in part by exposing to scrutiny the epistemic limitations of philosophical metaphor. By revealing himself to be self-conscious precisely about his use of metaphor (*quasi per lucidas nubes*, “as it were through shining clouds”), Augustine seeks to disarm such critiques.

A second act of framing is performed by Trygetius in the first book. What shall we do about persons whose statements occasionally turn out to be true?

(Trygetius) “Shall I then say that a man has knowledge, even if he has often said things that were not true, a man whom I would not say had knowledge even if with hesitation he had said true things? You can take what I say about him as my opinion on haruspices, augurs, all those who consult the stars, and all interpreters of dreams [...]”<sup>28</sup>

Augustine here engages and dismisses the possibility of a correspondence theory of knowledge. What is more, it is not simply that, on his view, mere correspondence between an occasional statement and truth does not validate a system of knowledge; the preeminent examples of persons who are unsystematically sometimes right and sometimes wrong are classical Roman religious experts. No conclusion, Augustine urges, can be drawn about their knowledge, and thus no authority should be granted them, on the basis of any pattern of truth or falsehood in what they say.

To appreciate the dogmatic claims advanced by Augustine himself as speaker in the third book, it might be helpful to consider the depth of his engagement with the classical vocabularies of religious epistemology in the second. Let me illustrate the matter by reference to two moments.

First, Augustine cautions his interlocutors not to allow a properly rigorous definition of knowledge to overdetermine their sense of how one may come to knowledge.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, they should remember that they know only those things that they know in the same way as they know the sum of one, two, three

in reconciling the commitments he brought to Cassiciacum, as it were, with the reading of Paul that he was then undertaking.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Acad.* 1.1.3.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *Acad.* 1.7.19.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *Acad.* 2.3.9.

and four is ten; while on the other, they should not doubt that philosophy can produce similar knowledge: “Believe me or, rather, believe Him who says: Seek and you shall find” (Matt 7:7). Here, Augustine invokes a Platonizing metaphysics and epistemology: true knowledge concerns only things with a stable ontology, for which category he offers as a paradigmatic instance mathematical objects and relations, which is to say, avowedly abstract creations whose only criterion of truth is internal self-consistency. But Augustine also allows for the gap identified by Velleius: he can specify no means to get to know such objects of knowledge. He therefore invokes trust in authority or, rather, in a self-correction, he invokes what he believes to be a higher authority whom he interprets as urging trust in authority as the means to knowledge (*nam mihi credite, uel potius, illi credite qui ait [...]*).

Second, according to Augustine, the Academics worried that a too radical suspension of *assentio*, “assent” or “agreement,” would lead to inactivity and thus ethical failure on the part of the wise man.<sup>30</sup> They therefore devised the categories of the probable and verisimilitude, the “like-truth,” as bases for social action, while still urging that “the very refraining from or, so to speak, suspension of assent, was a great act in itself on the part of the wise man” (*et ipsam refrenationem et quasi suspensionem assensionis*).<sup>31</sup> Augustine here gestures at the crux of the dispute between Balbus and Cotta. The dogmatic ascription of the status of knowledge exclusively to transcendent objects produced in Balbus only aporia, which Cicero’s Cotta resolved by the double move in the domains of metaphysics and epistemology outlined above. Augustine rightly sees the Stoic category of the “like-truth” as a related solution in the domain of objects in this world, though Augustine regards it as an inappropriate self-subversion on the part of the Stoics of their own metaphysical commitments. But at least one speaker, Trygetius, defends the Academics, urging that whatever one makes of the notion of suspension of agreement, they pursue verisimilitude by means of *rationes*, reason, while Augustine’s caricature of them follows only *fama*, rumour, which is the vilest of authorities (*auctoritates*).<sup>32</sup>

*Against the Academics* then climaxes with an impassioned statement of fundamentalism from Augustine:

For that philosophy is not of this world – such a philosophy our sacred mysteries most justly detest – but of the other, intelligible world. To which intelligible world the most subtle reasoning would never recall souls blinded by the manifold darkness of error and stained deeply by the slime of the body, had not the most high God, because of a certain compassion for the masses, bent and submitted the authority of the divine intellect even to the human body itself.

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<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Acad.* 2. 5. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *Acad.* 2. 5. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *Acad.* 2. 8. 20.

## Index of Ancient Sources

### Hebrew Bible / Old Testament

<i>Genesis</i>		40:5	193 n. 22
5:16	179	40–55	193 n. 22
		45	193 n. 22
<i>Numbers</i>		45:5	193 n. 22
11:21–23	16	49:6	193 n. 22
20:2–12	16		
20:10	16	<i>Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)</i>	
		9	31
<i>Isaiah</i>		9:7–10	31 n. 19
7:9	11–12		

### Ancient Near Eastern Texts

<i>Book of the Death</i>	<i>Tale of the Eloquent Peasant</i>
175	27 n. 14
	B1.338 – 342
	25 n. 8
<i>Dialogue between a Man and his Ba</i>	<i>Teaching of Ani</i>
56–68	26–27
142–143	27
	17.11–18.4
	24 n. 6
<i>Gilgamesh</i>	<i>Teaching of Hordjedef</i>
Si 3.1–15	30–31
	2
	24 n. 5
<i>Pyramid Texts</i>	<i>Teaching of Ptahhotep</i>
459a	22
	186–193
	32 n. 22
<i>Instruction for Merikare</i>	<i>Theban Tomb</i>
P 53–57	23
P 127–128	25
	50
	30 n. 17
	131
	26 n. 10
	296
	33 n. 23

### New Testament

<i>Matthew</i>	
5:19	172 n. 22
7:7	10, 237
14:31	217 n. 70
28:9	215 n. 61
	28:17
	214–215, 217 n. 70
	<i>Mark</i>
	16:7
	194
	16:9–14
	214

<i>Luke</i>		24:46–49	193
1:1	186–187, 189, 195	24:48	200
1:1b	187 n. 7, 189	24:49	190, 192
1:1–2	186	24:50–51	190, 197
1:1a–3b	185	24:51	197
1:1–4	186, 189, 200	24:52–53	190
1:2	187–188	24:53	190
1:2–3	188		
1:2b–3a	189	<i>John</i>	
1:3	186–187, 189, 192	1:14	211
1:3b	185–187	1:32–34	222 n. 91
1:3–4	191	1:38	222 n. 91
1:4	186–187, 189	1:39	211 n. 40
2:2	197 n. 27	1:41	216 n. 64–65
3:3–22	188	1:42	214, 216 n. 65
3:6	193 n. 22	1:43	211 n. 40
3:7–22	194	1:45	225 n. 102
3:14	191 n. 15	1:46	225 n. 102
3:15–22	194	1:48	225 n. 102
3:15–23	192	1:49	225 n. 102
3:16	194	1:50	225 n. 102
3:20	194	2:7–8	211 n. 40
3:21–24:53	190	2:9	213
5:14	197	2:23	222 n. 91
5:30	192 n. 21	3:11	222 n. 91
6:12	191 n. 15	3:34–35	212 n. 46
7:30	192 n. 20	4:7	211 n. 40
7:34	192 n. 21	4:25	216 n. 65
9:41	16	4:48	206 n. 9
9:51	197	4:53	222 n. 91
11:13	191 n. 15	5:8–9	211 n. 40
15:2	192 n. 21	6:10	211 n. 40
19:7	192 n. 21	6:14	222 n. 91
22:16	200 n. 33	6:22	222 n. 91
22:18b	200 n. 33	7:8	211 n. 40
22:19	200	7:10	211 n. 40
22:37	186	9:7	211 n. 40, 216 n. 65
24	190, 194	11:4	220
24:1–49	199	11:6	220
24:11	214	11:15	219–220
24:13–43	190	11:16	205, 207, 214, 216–217, 218 n. 76, 220–221
24:21–24	214		
24:25	214	11:39	211 n. 40, 213
24:36–49	190, 193	11:41	211 n. 40
24:37–38	214	11:44	211 n. 40
24:39	199–200	11:47–53	220
24:39–41	215	12:3	213
24:41	214	13:22	222 n. 91

13:37	211 n. 40	1:1-8	186, 190-191, 200
14:1	220	1:2	189, 191
14:5	205, 207, 216-217, 218 n. 76, 220	1:3	190
		1:3a	191
14:5-6	206	1:3-4a	191
14:6	221	1:3-8	194
14:17	223	1:4a	190
14:18	224	1:4b	194, 199
14:25-26	223	1:4b-5	190-193, 195, 196
14:31	211 n. 40	1:4-5	192-193
17:20	223	1:5	199
18:11	211 n. 40	1:6b	199
19:6	222 n. 91	1:6-8	199
19:33-34	212	1:6-11	190
19:34	212 n. 46	1:7-8	191, 195
19:35	222 n. 91	1:8b	193 n. 22
20	204, 209, 212	1:8	191, 200
20:3-10	212	1:12-14	190
20:8	222 n. 91	1:15-16	190
20:11-18	212, 215 n. 61	1:22	188-189
20:17	212, 212 n. 44	1:22a	190
20:18	212	2	200
20:19	207	2:23	192 n. 20
20:19-23	205, 212, 215	2:33b	199
20:20	212 n. 46	2-5	193
20:24	216, 224	4:12b	193 n. 22
20:24-29	203, 213, 215, 217	4:28	192 n. 20
20:25	205-206, 218 n. 76, 221, 222 n. 91, 225 n. 102	5:23	192 n. 17
		5:38	192 n. 20
20:26	207	7-8	197
20:27	210, 213, 221-222, 225 n. 102	9-14	190
		10	192 n. 21
20:28	205-207, 218 n. 76, 221, 225 n. 102	10:1-48	192
		10:9-16	192
20:29a	221	10:14	194
20:29	207, 212, 221 n. 88, 225 n. 102	10:28	192 n. 20, 194
		10:37	194
20:30-31	204, 222	10:37-38	194
20:31	204 n. 6, 222	10:39	194
21	205	10:41b	194
21:2	216, 224-225 n. 102	10:41-42	194
21:6	211 n. 40	10-11	193
		11:1-4	192
<i>Acts</i>		11	192 n. 21
1:1	186-187, 190, 195	11:1-18	192
1:1-3	193	11:2	194
1:1-4a	190, 197	11:2-3	192
1:1-5	197	11:4-18	192 n. 19

11:8-9	194	12:10	178, 180
11:15b	193	12 - 14	180
11:15-18	192	12:2	181, 183
11:17	193	14:29	181
13:36	192 n. 20	15	177
14:22	197	15:3-5	177
15	192 n. 21		
17	176	<i>2 Corinthians</i>	
17:32	176	5:1	182
20:27	192 n. 20	5:1 - 10	182 n. 50
21:34	191		
23:22	197	<i>Galatians</i>	
23:26	187	1:8	170
24:3	187	1:13	171
25:20a	191-192	1-2	171
25:26	192	2:1-10	171
25-26	192	2:11-21	171
26	191		
26:25	187, 191	<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	
27:42-43	192 n. 20	1:3	176
		1:6	174
<i>Romans</i>		1:9-10	174
4:17-21	178	2:14-16	174
4:20	217 n. 70	3:1-5	175
4:22	179	3:2-3a	175
4:17	178	4	182
4:19	178	4:13	175
9-11	181	4:13-15	175 n. 31
14:23	179-180, 217 n. 70	4:14	176
		4:15	182
<i>1 Corinthians</i>			
1:2	182	<i>James</i>	
1:11	170	1:6	217 n. 70
1:18-25	238	1:8	217
1:17-2:16	172 n. 22	2:14-26	172 n. 22
4:7	178	3:13-18	172 n. 22
5	172 n. 21	4:8	217
5:1	172 n. 21		
6:5	178	<i>2 Peter</i>	
8-9	179	3:15-16	170 n. 15
10:14-11:1	179		
11:29	180	<i>1 John</i>	
11:31	180	1:1	210 n. 36
12	180 n. 43	1:1-3	224
		1:1-4	213 n. 50

Ancient Christian Literature  
(incl. Nag Hammadi writings)

Acta Cypriani		8.5.16	236
3.4	15		
Apocryphon of John (BG 2)		Epiphanius	
19.6–20.18	238	<i>Panarion</i>	
21.15	227	9.22	237 n. 70
Apocryphon of John (NH III, 1)		9.33	237 n. 70
1.1–24	238	9.34	237 n. 70
Augustine		30.14.3–4	172 n. 23
<i>Contra Academicos</i>		Epistula apostolorum	
1.1.3	9	12	213 n. 50
1.20	262 n. 68	Eugnostos the Blessed (NH III, 3)	
1.7.19	9	70.8	233 n. 37
2.3.9	9	70.8–12	230 n. 19
2.5.12	10	70.12–24	233
2.8.20	10	70.13–14	238 n. 79
3.9.42–20.43	11	Eugnostos the Blessed (NH V, I)	
<i>Confessionum libri XIII</i>		1.9–10	233 n. 37
6.4.6–5.7	11	7.15	233 n. 35
<i>De civitate Dei</i>		Eusebius	
4.27	72 n. 10	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>	
5.7	262	2.15.2	185 n. 2, 185 n. 3
6.5	72 n. 10	3.24.14–16	185 n. 4
6.10	245 n. 9	3.39.4	216 n. 66
8.24	17	<i>Praeparatio evangelica</i>	
<i>In Evangelium Johannis tractatus</i>		5.4	116 n. 17
121.5	208	5.17	116 n. 17
<i>Quaestiones in Heptateuchum</i>		Exegesis of the Soul (NH II, 6)	
4.19	16	127.19	233 n. 37
Clement of Alexandria		Gospel of the Hebrews	
<i>Stromateis</i>		4	172 n. 23
1	239 n. 81	Gospel of Truth (NH I, 3)	
1.11.51.4	237 n. 69	19	233 n. 37
6	239 n. 81	Ignatius	
6.7.56.2–58.3	236	<i>To the Smyrnaeans</i>	
7	236	3.2	213 n. 50
7.91.3–4	240 n. 90	<i>Infancy Gospel of James</i>	
8	236	20.1	213 n. 50
8.1.1–2.2	236		
8.2	227 n. 2		

Irenaeus		Tatian	
<i>Adversus haereses</i>		<i>Oratio ad Graecos</i>	
2. 13. 10	237 n. 68	29	153 n. 22
2.30.2	237 n. 68		
3.1.1	186 n. 5	Tertullian	
3.14	186 n. 5	<i>De anima</i>	
5.33.4	185 n. 2	17.14	210 n. 36
		<i>De praescriptione haereticorum</i>	
John Chrysostom		8	237 n. 68
<i>Homiliae in Acta apostolorum</i>			
1.1	200 n. 32	Theodoret	
<i>In principium Actorum</i>		<i>De Graecarum affectionum curatione</i>	
3.54	195 n. 23	10.1–11	116 n. 17
11.2	196 n. 26		
Justin Martyr		Theophylact	
<i>Apologia I</i>		<i>In Joannis Evangelium</i>	
34	197 n. 27	(PG 124.300)	217 n. 67
<i>Dialogus cum Tryphone</i>		Treatise on the Resurrection (NH I, 4)	
78	197 n. 27	44.1–2	230 n. 17
Lactantius		Tripartite Tractate (NH I, 5)	
<i>Divinarum institutionum libri VII</i>		109.5	238 n. 78
1.9	148	109.5–21	233
4.3	148	109.24	233 n. 37
4.15	148	109.32–33	238 n. 80
On the Origin of the World (NH II, 5)		Wisdom of Jesus Christ (BG 3)	
94.24–27	230 n. 23	80.14	233 n. 37
Origen		Wisdom of Jesus Christ (NH III, 4)	
<i>Contra Celsum</i>		92.14	233 n. 37
2.61	210 n. 36	Zostrianos (NH VIII, 1)	
<i>Fragmenta in Evangelium Joannis</i>		3.14–15	240 n. 92
106 Preuschen	217 n. 68	3.25–28	240 n. 93
		3.28–4.20	241 n. 95

### Greek-Roman Literature (incl. Philo of Alexandria)

Aelius Aristides		37–38	132 n. 18
<i>Orationes</i>		37–46	129
21.10	143 n. 61	40–41	132 n. 18
23.8	143 n. 61	39	132
26.32	107 n. 51	39.6	132
33.18	141	42	132
37.23	141	42.1	132

43	131	<i>Florida</i>	
45	128, 131, 142	15.15	13 n. 38
45.1	143, 143 n. 58	<i>Metamorphoses</i>	
45.1–2	142 n. 56	2.12	13 n. 38
45.4	142 n. 55, 143	Aristophanes	
45.13	143 n. 58	<i>Aves</i>	
46	128, 133	690	62
46.1–2	133 n. 22	958–990	124 n. 36
46.1–4	133	961	50
46.3	131, 131 n. 15	988	50
46.5	134 n. 25, 134 n. 26	1382	45
46.5–19	134	<i>Equites</i>	
46.6	134 n. 26	30–34	61
46.7	134	194–209	124 n. 36
46.20–31	134	997–1111	124 n. 36
46.32	135 n. 28	<i>Lysistrata</i>	
46.32–41	134	762–780	124 n. 36
46.33	139 n. 50, 141	<i>Nubes</i>	
46.34	139 n. 49	247–248	62
46.35	140 n. 51	250–251	50 n. 57
46.36	137	265	46
46.38	139 n. 48, 140	360–361	62
46.39	141	816–821	62
46.40	137	830	66
46.41	137, 137 n. 43	1469–1471	62
46.42	133	1480	64 n. 44
47–51	132	<i>Pax</i>	
Aeschylus		1023–1126	124 n. 36
<i>Agamemnon</i>		1045–1126	50 n. 55
717–736	261	<i>Plutus</i>	
1084	47 n. 36	497	50 n. 54
1254–1255	124 n. 38	<i>Ranae</i>	
<i>Choephoroe</i>		936	61
957	47 n. 36	<i>Tagenistae</i>	
Anaxagoras		F 506 K/A	64
T1.23	45	<i>Thesmophoriazusae</i>	
T1.60	45	450–451	61
T1.86	45	668–674	59 n. 25
Anthologia Palatina		Aristoteles	
7.95	45 n. 30	<i>Poetica</i>	
Apuleius		1450a55	143 n. 57
<i>Apologia</i>			
47	13 n. 38		

- |                         |                  |                             |           |
|-------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| 1451a29                 | 143 n. 57        | 3.10                        | 7 n. 18   |
| 1452a18                 | 143 n. 57        | 3.15                        | 141 n. 53 |
| 1453a31                 | 143 n. 57        | 3.77                        | 83 n. 41  |
| 1455a22                 | 143 n. 57        |                             |           |
| <i>Rhetorica</i>        |                  | <i>In Catalinam</i>         |           |
| 1400b7                  | 138 n. 45        | 1.6                         | 157 n. 38 |
| 1407a31–b6              | 122 n. 31        | Codex Theodosianus          |           |
|                         |                  | 16.8.19                     | 17 n. 51  |
| Aristoxenus             |                  | Craterus                    |           |
| F 45 Wehrli             | 66 n. 57         | 342 F16 (FGrH)              | 66 n. 53  |
| Cicero                  |                  | Cratinus                    |           |
| <i>De divinatione</i>   |                  | F 167 K/A                   | 67        |
| 1.4.7                   | 77 n. 22         | Critias                     |           |
| 1.5.9                   | 78 n. 29         | B 25 DK                     | 45 n. 29  |
| 1.37                    | 111 n. 1         | Cyranides                   |           |
| 1.38                    | 114              | 3.2                         | 264 n. 77 |
| 1.79                    | 114              | Dio Cassius                 |           |
| 2.87–99                 | 261              | 44.51.1–2                   | 106 n. 46 |
| 2.115                   | 122              | 51.20.6–7                   | 95 n. 9   |
| 2.115–118               | 114              | 60.35.2–3                   | 96 n. 12  |
| 2.148–149               | 79 n. 30         | 62.2                        | 98 n. 16  |
| <i>De legibus</i>       |                  | Dio Chrysostom              |           |
| 1.58–62                 | 5 n. 12          | <i>Orationes</i>            |           |
| <i>De natura deorum</i> |                  | 11.24–25                    | 143 n. 60 |
| 1.1.1                   | 76 n. 21         | Diodorus Siculus            |           |
| 1.1.1–2                 | 77 n. 22         | 1.51                        | 25        |
| 1.1.2                   | 63, 77 n. 24     | Diogenes Laertius           |           |
| 1.3                     | 3 n. 9, 78 n. 26 | 2.12                        | 45 n. 30  |
| 1.3.6                   | 75               | 2.15                        | 45 n. 30  |
| 1.6.13–14               | 75               | 9.74–76                     | 232 n. 32 |
| 1.6.14                  | 75 n. 19         | 9.78–79                     | 235 n. 58 |
| 1.10                    | 4 n. 7           | 9.88–89                     | 239 n. 83 |
| 1.17.44–45              | 79               | 9.90                        | 230 n. 22 |
| 1.19                    | 5 n. 11          | Dionysius of Halicarnassus  |           |
| 1.23.63                 | 79               | <i>Antiquitates Romanae</i> |           |
| 1.27.77                 | 79 n. 32         | 2.19.1–2                    | 71 n. 7   |
| 1.42.117                | 79 n. 33         | <i>De Thucydide</i>         |           |
| 1.42.118                | 79 n. 31         | 9–13                        | 188 n. 9  |
| 1.43.121                | 80 n. 34         |                             |           |
| 1.61                    | 4 n. 10          |                             |           |
| 2.4                     | 5 n. 13          |                             |           |
| 2.28.71–72              | 79 n. 30         |                             |           |
| 3.5                     | 6 n. 15          |                             |           |
| 3.6                     | 6 n. 16          |                             |           |
| 3.7                     | 7 n. 17          |                             |           |

Dorotheus of Sidon		<i>Supplices</i>	
<i>Apotelesmatica</i>		731–732	59 n. 25
1.1.1–2	251 n. 3		
Eupolis		Firmicus Maternus	
F 157 K/A	67	<i>Matheseos libri VIII</i>	
F 386 K/A	64 n. 44	1.5.7	251 n. 30
F 388 K/A	64 n. 44	Gorgias	
		12.53.1–3 DS	67
Euripides		Hecataeus of Miletus	
<i>Andromache</i>		1 F 305 (FGrH)	44 n. 26
439	48 n. 44		
<i>Bacchae</i>		Heraclitus	
1325–1326	59 n. 25	B 92 (DK 22)	122 n. 30
<i>Bellerophon</i>		Hermippus	
F 286 Kannicht	48	F 43 K/A	65
F 304a Kannicht	60		
<i>Electra</i>		Hephaestion	
583–584	59 n. 24, 59 n. 25	1.1	251 n. 33
<i>Helena</i>		Herodotus	
13	48 n. 44	<i>Historiae</i>	
922	48 n. 44	2.78	32
<i>Hercules furens</i>		7.188	44 n. 26
62	48 n. 44	9.65.2	48 n. 42
841	59 n. 24		
772	59 n. 25	Hippocrates	
<i>Hippolytus</i>		<i>De morbis mulierum</i>	
1102–1103	60 n. 31	68	44 n. 26
<i>Iphigenia Taurica</i>		110	44 n. 26
270	270 n. 33	Homer	
547	50 n. 53	<i>Ilias</i>	
572	48 n. 44	7.99	134 n. 26
<i>Melanippe sophē</i>		11.37	145 n. 65
F 484 Kannicht	54	14.201	134 n. 26
<i>Oenomaos</i>		14.301	134 n. 26
F 577 Kannicht	59 n. 25	<i>Odyssea</i>	
<i>Phrixos A</i>		5	138
F 912b Kovacs	61	5.333–335	138 n. 47
<i>Phrixos B</i>		8.266–270	198
F 820b Kannicht	60–61	8.367	198
<i>Scyrii</i>		11.235–45	1 40 n. 51
F 684 Kannicht	60 n. 31	24.351	59 n. 25

Horace		<i>Juppiter tragoedus</i>	
<i>Carmina</i>		18	161 n. 47
4.5.31–36	103 n. 37	35–37	162 n. 48
		47	149 n. 6
Isaeus		<i>Philopseudes</i>	
8.15–16	55 n. 8	16	149 n. 6
Livy		<i>Toxaris</i>	
4.30.8–11	247 n. 17	2	154 n. 27
Lucian		<i>Vera historia</i>	
<i>Alexander (Pseudomantis)</i>		10	148
25	154 n. 28		
38	155 n. 29	Lucretius	
60	149 n. 6	1.62–79	82 n. 38
<i>Calumniar non temere credendum</i>		1.83	82
14	153 n. 25	4.469–470	229 n. 13
<i>De luctu</i>		Manilius	
21	32 n. 20	<i>Astronomica</i>	
<i>De morte Peregrini</i>		1.247–252	250 n. 29
13	149 n. 4 f.	2.57–2.59	252 n. 36
21	155 n. 32	2.60–2.81	250 n. 29
7–31	155	2.63	251
<i>De sacrificiis</i>		2.244–264	253
13	157 n. 35, 157 n. 38	Maximus of Tyre	
<i>Demonax</i>		11.10	139 n. 48
5	158	Melanthius	
11	158 n. 42	326 F3 (FGrH)	66 n. 53
<i>Deorum concilium</i>		Menander Rhetor	
4–5	99 n. 21	1.337.17–19	134 n. 25
5	99 n. 22	1.341.11–17	144 n. 64
<i>Dialogi deorum</i>		333.21–24	144
15	148	Ovid	
<i>Icaromenippus</i>		<i>Epistulae ex Ponto</i>	
7.20	45 n. 29	2.8.1–4	103 n. 38
<i>Juppiter confutatus</i>		4.9.105–110	103 n. 39
7	159	<i>Metamorphoses</i>	
11	159	1.21	84 n. 42
12	159	1.33	84 n. 42
12–14	159	1.79–83	84 n. 42
17–18	159	1.89	84
18	160	1.94	84
19	160 n. 44, 160 n. 45	1.113	84 n. 42

1.161	84	Photius	
1.199–208	84 n. 43	<i>Bibliotheca</i>	
1.200–201	84	128	149 n. 3
1.220	84		
1.222	84	Pindar	
1.225	84	<i>Isthmionica</i>	
5.551	85 n. 46	F 5 S/M	136 n. 34
7.234–293	247 n. 17	<i>Olympionica</i>	
10.238–242	85	1	128 n. 5, 140 n. 52
10.222–237	85 n. 47	1.25	128 n. 5
<i>Tristia</i>		1.28–34	128 n. 5
3. 8. 13–14	103 n. 37	1.29	128 n. 5
5. 2. 45–46	103 n. 37	1.41	128 n. 5
Pausanias		<i>Pythionica</i>	
<i>Graeciae descriptio</i>		9	128 n. 5, 140 n. 52
1.42.8	136	9.5	128 n. 5
1.44.6	136	9.13	128 n. 5
2.1.3	137 n. 41	Plato	
2.2.1	137 n. 41	<i>Apologia</i>	
Philo of Alexandria		10–11	46 n. 31
<i>De aeternitate mundi</i>		23c	56
47	45 n. 29	26c	152 n. 20
<i>De posteritate Caini</i>		26c–d	45 n. 28
2.4	153 n. 21	30e	153 n. 25
<i>De somniis</i>		<i>Cratylus</i>	
1.22	45 n. 29	401b	64 n. 46
<i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>		<i>Charmides</i>	
353–357	101 n. 31 f., 107 n. 50	163d	63 n. 40
367	102 n. 33	<i>Euthyphro</i>	
Philodemus		5a	41 n. 1, 46 n. 32
<i>De pietate</i>		<i>Hippias major</i>	
525 Obbink	66 n. 56	282c	63 n. 40
Philolaus		<i>Leges</i>	
F 11.20	48 n. 42	10	5 n. 10
F 11.30	50 n. 53	885c7	13 n. 39
		898c6–8	5 n. 13
Philostratus		<i>Minos</i>	
<i>Imagines</i>		96d	63 n. 40
16	135 n. 31, 137 n. 41	<i>Phaedrus</i>	
<i>Vita Apollonii</i>		260a	64 n. 46
3.31.3	140 n. 52	<i>Protagoras</i>	
		316a	63 n. 40

341a	63 n. 40	15.418c–d	116
<i>Respublica</i>		40.432	116
2.377a	56	40.432c–f	116
		40.432d	116
<i>Symposium</i>		43–44.433f–434c	116
187e	50 n. 53	42–43.433d–e	118
		46.434f–435e	117
<i>Theaetetus</i>		46.435b	157 n. 37
151b	63 n. 40	48.436f	117
		51.438c–d	117
Pliny the Elder			
<i>Naturalis historia</i>		<i>De E apud Delphos</i>	
2.3	13 n. 40	385a	112
2.14	14 n. 41	386e	124 n. 39
30.1–18	248		
30.2	248	<i>De garrulitate</i>	
		511b	124 n. 37
Pliny the Younger		<i>De Iside et Osiride</i>	
<i>Panegyricus</i>		17	32 n. 20
11.2	102 n. 35	23	89
Plotinus		<i>De Pythiae oraculis</i>	
<i>Enneades</i>		5.396c–d	121
2.9	237	6.397a	121 n. 30
2.9.33.15	237 n. 71	7.397	122
32	237 n. 72	7.397c	121
		8.398a–b	125
Plutarch		17.402	119 n. 21
<i>Adversus Colotem</i>		18.402e	113 n. 10
1118c	124 n. 39	18.402e–403a	119 n. 21
		19–20.403a–404a	119 n. 24
<i>Agessilaus</i>		20.404b	120 n. 26
3.3	50 n. 55	20–21.404b–c	120
		22.405c–d	120
<i>Amatorius</i>		25.407a	124 n. 37
763b–c	127 n. 4	25.407b	118 n. 18
<i>An seni respublica gerenda sit</i>		26.407d	123
792f	112 n. 4	29.408f	112
<i>De audiendis poetis</i>		<i>De superstitione</i>	
35e–f	127 n. 3	164e–166b	127 n. 2
		171e	138 n. 46
<i>Apophthegmata Laconica</i>			
228e	138 n. 46	<i>Nicias</i>	
		23.4	45 n. 28
<i>De defectu oraculorum</i>			
7.413a–d	115	<i>Quaestiones Graecae</i>	
8.414c	115 n. 15	292c	44 n. 27
9.414e	125		
14–15.400f–401d	125	<i>Pericles</i>	
		5.1	45 n. 28

32.2	42 n. 15, 59 n. 27	Sextus Empiricus	
<i>Septem sapientium convivium</i>		<i>Adversus mathematicos</i>	
2.148a–b	32 n. 20	8.299–481	230 n. 22
		<i>Pyrrhoniae hypotyposes</i>	
Polybius		1.3	229 n. 14, 229 n. 15, 238 n. 73
6	71	1.8	232 n. 31
6.56.6	71	1.10	239 n. 86
6.56.9	71	1.16	227 n. 2
6.56.6–15	70 n. 5	1.22	231 n. 26
Propertius		1.154	235 n. 57
4.1b	252	1.155	235 n. 55
4.1b 33–38	253 n. 37	1.159	235 n. 57
Pseudo-Plato		1.164–167	239 n. 83
<i>Sisyphus</i>		1.165	239
389a	44 n. 26	1.188–205	232 n. 32
Ptolemy		1.196	229 n. 16
<i>Apotelesmata</i>		2.134–192	230 n. 22
1.21	254 n. 45	3.3	230 n. 20
4.4.4	260 n. 58	3.9–12	235 n. 54
4.5.3	260 n. 59	3.12	235 n. 55
4.10.3	258 n. 54	3.215	235 n. 57
Res Gestae Divi Augusti		Socrates and Dionysius	
3	97 n. 14	<i>De lapidis (Peri lithon)</i>	
20	97 n. 14	34	264 n. 76
Quintilian		Sophocles	
<i>Institutio oratoria</i>		<i>Oedipus coloneus</i>	
8. 6. 37–38	198 n. 29	1537	50
Seneca (the Younger)		<i>Oedipus tyrannus</i>	
<i>Apocolocyntosis</i>		857–858	49
10.1–2	96 n. 14	899–911	49 n. 46
11.3	96 n. 13	<i>Philoctetes</i>	
11.3–4	96 n. 15	452	49
<i>De clementia</i>		Strabo	
1.10.3	102 n. 34	9.3.4	111
<i>Epistulae morales</i>		9.3.5	118
95.50	14 n. 42	Suetonius	
117	14	<i>Divus Augustus</i>	
117.6	14 n. 43	52	95 n. 9
		98.2	108 n. 55
		<i>Divus Julius</i>	
		85	106 n. 46

<i>Divus Vespasianus</i>			
7.2–3	107 n. 48		
Suda			
Λ 683	149 n. 7		
Tacitus			
<i>Annales</i>			
1.54.2	106 n. 46		
1.73.2	101 n. 29		
2.27.2	248 n. 19		
4.37.3	95 n. 9		
4.52.2	106 n. 46		
6.20.3	262 n. 66		
6.21	262 n. 66		
14.12.1	100 n. 25		
14.44.3	15 n. 44		
16	100		
16.21–35	100 n. 23		
16.22	100 n. 26		
16.22.3	100 n. 27		
16.31.2	101 n. 28		
Thales			
F 1.137	47 n. 37		
		<i>Theophrastus</i>	
		<i>Characteres</i>	
		7	244 n. 7
		28	244 n. 6
		<i>De fato</i>	
		571b	44 n. 27
		Vettius Valens	
		<i>Anthologia</i>	
		1.1	251 n. 32
		Virgil	
		<i>Aeneis</i>	
		8.184–189	82 n. 38
		Xenophanes	
		VS A 13	138 n. 45
		Xenophon	
		<i>Memorabilia</i>	
		1.1.1	46 n. 31
		F 913 Kannicht	64

### Inscriptions, Papyri, and Coins

CIL		IV 918	262 n. 84
10.3757	109 n. 56	IV 1035–1036	262 n. 84
13.1366	104–105	IV 1436	262 n. 83
		IV 1480	262 n. 84
CIL II <sup>2</sup>		IV 2096	262 n. 84
5.900	101 n. 29	IV 2446–2455	265 n. 81
		IV 2574–2577	262 n. 83
P.Berl.		IV 2684	262 n. 83
3024	26 n. 11	IV 2896	262 n. 83
9825	257 n. 52	IV 2915	262 n. 84
		IV 3007	265 n. 82
P.Chester Beatty		IV 3310	262 n. 83
IV, 2.5–3.11 v	28	V 435	262 n. 83
PGM		VII 439	265 n. 80
I 247	265 n. 82	VII 643	265 n. 80
II 63	262 n. 83	VII 919	265 n. 80
IV 161	265 n. 82	XIa 40	265 n. 82
IV 775	265 n. 80	XII 39	265 n. 82
		XII 114	262 n. 83

XIII 36	262 n. 83	P.Mich.	
XIII 55	262 n. 83	III 148	257 n. 53
XIII 382	262 n. 83	III 149	254 n. 42 and n. 44
XIII 426	262 n. 83		
XIII 549	265 n. 80	P.Oxy.	
XIII 560	265 n. 80	III 465	254 n. 43
XIII 738	265 n. 80	XII 1453	107 n. 52
XIII 752	262 n. 83		
LXII 28	262 n. 84	P.Prisse	
LXII 32	262 n. 84	7.9–10	32 n. 22
		RPC	
P.Harris		I 1, 377–379	95 n. 9
500, 6.2–7.3 r	29		
		SEG	
P.Herc.		II 718	106 n. 45
1428.19	63 n. 42		
		SIG / Syll. <sup>3</sup>	
P.Lond.		IV 829A	112 n. 4
I 98	257 n. 52	IV 843	112 n. 4
I 130	257 n. 52		



## Index of Modern Authors

- Albrecht, J. 245  
Alexander, L. 189  
Allen, J. P. 26, 27  
Allinson, F. G. 150  
Allison, D. C. Jr. 172  
Alter, R. 222,  
Ando, C. vii, viii, 2, 3, 7, 8, 11, 12, 17, 18,  
69, 72, 74, 78, 110, 245  
Annas, J. 74, 77, 227, 229, 230, 232, 235,  
238, 239  
Arzt-Grabner, P. 170  
Ashton, J. A. 219  
Assmann, J. vii, ix, x, xi, 1, 2, 3, 7, 23, 26,  
27, 30, 33  
Atkins, J. W. 87  
Attridge, H. W. 74, 77, 212, 219, 233  
Atwood, C. D. 211  
Auffarth, C. 54, 66
- Babut, D. 113, 241  
Bailey, A. 229, 230, 232  
Bailliot, M. 248  
Baker, E. 86  
Baldwin, B. 148, 150  
Balthasar, H. U. von 223  
Banfi, A. 41  
Barc, B. 229  
Bardon, H. 85  
Barnes, J. 63, 227, 229, 230, 232, 235, 239  
Baronowski, D. W. 70  
Barry, C. 229  
Barth, K. 210  
Barton, C. A. viii, 38, 40, 53, 93  
Baumbach, M. 125, 151  
Baumert, N. 168, 177  
Beard, M. 27, 76, 94  
Beaumont, L. A. 55  
Beck, M. 158  
Beck, R. L. 248  
BeDuhn, J. 227  
Behr, C. A. 129
- Behr, E. 8  
Beirne, M. M. 207, 211  
Belayche, N. 132, 148, 150, 157  
Benay, E. E. 209  
Bendlin, A. 94, 109, 112, 120, 122  
Bennema, C. 204, 216  
Berdozzo, F. 150  
Berti, S. 88  
Bierl, A. 97  
Biron, I. 106  
Bömer, F. 84, 85  
Bonazzi, M. 227, 231, 239, 240, 241  
Bonney, W. 204, 216  
Bontempi, M. 57  
Borchert, G. L. 210  
Borromeo, G. E. 104  
Boschung, D. 104  
Bouché-Leclercq, A. 251, 253, 260  
Boulangier, A. 130  
Boulogne, J. 73  
Bourdieu, P. 56  
Bouton-Touboulic, A.-I. 227, 230, 231,  
235, 240  
Bowersock, G. W. 94  
Bowie, A. M. 63  
Boyarin, D. viii, 1, 38, 40, 53, 93  
Brakke, D. 167, 228, 229  
Brancato, G. 143  
Branham, R. B. 151, 158, 162  
Braund, S. 102  
Bremmer, J. N. ix, xi, 4, 37, 54, 56, 64, 65,  
67, 152, 153, 155, 166  
Brenk, F. E. 112, 113, 116  
Brickhouse, T. C. 46  
Broek, R. van den 228  
Broer, I. 173, 175  
Brown, C. G. 72  
Brown, R. E. 210, 221  
Brox, N. 237  
Bruit Zaidman, L. 247  
Brulé, P. 55

- Brunshwig, J. 230, 231  
 Brunt, P. A. 97  
 Buddeus (Budde), J. F. 78, 89  
 Bühler, P. 243  
 Bultmann, R. 210, 215, 216, 218, 222,  
     224  
 Burkard, G. 32  
 Burkert, W. 58, 112, 114, 125, 156  
 Butler, H. E. 198  
  
 Caballos, A. 101  
 Cadbury, H. J. 195  
 Camerotto, A. 151  
 Canart, P. 41  
 Cancik, H. 69, 73, 109  
 Cancik-Lindemaier, H. 37  
 Capelle, W. 44, 45  
 Casevitz, M. 62  
 Caster, M. 150  
 Chadwick, H. 210  
 Chaniotis, A. 98, 107  
 Charlesworth, J. H. 214  
 Chaudhuri, P. 85  
 Clauss, M. 94, 104, 106  
 Clay, D. 151, 158  
 Coady, C. A. J. (Tony) 19  
 Cohen, D. J. 42  
 Cole, S. 98  
 Collins, R. F. 212  
 Compton, M. B. 196  
 Conway, C. M. 203, 207  
 Conybeare, C. 8  
 Conzelmann, H. G. 180  
 Corradi, M. 63  
 Cottrell, E. 66  
 Crégheur, É. 228, 240  
 Cudworth, R. 89, 90  
 Culpepper, R. A. 212, 218  
 Curtius, L. 104  
  
 Dawe, R. D. 49  
 Decharme, P. 37  
 DeConick, A. D. 214  
 DeFilippo, J. G. 77  
 Degelmann, C. 245  
 Denzey Lewis, N. 228  
 DePhilippo, J. G. 246  
 Derenne, E. 41  
  
 Descamps-Lequime, S. 106  
 Di Benedetto, V. 63  
 Dickie, M. W. 136, 150, 248  
 Dixon, D. W. 60  
 Dodd, C. H. 210  
 Donaldson, J. 197  
 Dorival, G. 37  
 Dover, K. J. 42, 43, 44, 45, 50, 59  
 Downie, J. x, 131, 132, 142, 143  
 Drachmann, A. B. 37, 136  
 Dschulnigg, P. 203, 206  
 Dubel, S. 151  
 Dubois, J.-D. 228, 230, 232  
 Dunderberg, I. 214, 229, 234  
 Durkheim, É. 40  
 Dziobek, E. 26  
  
 Eck, W. 101  
 Edelmann, B. 99  
 Edelmann-Singer, B. ix, 95, 267  
 Eden, P. T. 96, 97, 98  
 Eder, J. 218  
 Edwards, M. J. 151  
 Eidinow, E. 59, 109, 168, 245, 246, 247  
 Ellis, B. A. 58  
 Emde Boas, E. van 56  
 Emmel, S. 229  
 Emmenegger, G. 213  
 Erdas, D. 42  
 Estes, D. 204  
  
 Fahr, W. 47, 49  
 Faraguna, M. 42  
 Faraone, C. A. 348  
 Farelly, N. 222  
 Feeney, D. 83  
 Feldmeier, R. 125  
 Fernández, F. 101  
 Festugière, A.-J. 263  
 Filonik, J. 59  
 Finglass, P. 48, 49  
 Finnern, S. 218  
 Fishwick, D. 94, 103, 104, 106  
 Flacelière, R. 112, 113  
 Fögen, M. T. 262  
 Fontenrose, J. 118  
 Forster, E. S. 55  
 Fortna, R. T. 223

- Fosl, P. S. 87  
 Foucault, M. 38, 249  
 Fowler, R. L. 54  
 Fox, M. xii, ix, 76, 87  
 Fraser, K. A. 248  
 Frey, J. 57, 93, 168, 177, 213, 215, 219, 220, 224  
 Friedrich, H.-V. 263  
 Friesen, S. J. 94, 95, 136  
 Fuentes González, P. P. 158  
 Fuhrmann, M. 98  
  
 Galinsky, K. 94, 95, 244  
 Gantz, T. 136  
 Garcia, J. P. 215  
 Garland, R. 41  
 Gartenschläger, R. 87  
 Gawlick, G. 87  
 Geagan, D. J. 137  
 Gebhard, Elizabeth 135, 136, 137  
 Geißler, H. 165, 169  
 Genette, G. 190  
 George, A. 31  
 Giglioni, G. 89  
 Giuliani, A. 43  
 Goeken, J. 129, 130, 133, 134, 137, 143  
 Golden, M. 55  
 Goldhill, S. 73, 151  
 Goold, G. P. 250, 252  
 Gordon, R. L. xi, 93, 248, 249, 252, 261, 264, 265, 267  
 Gothóni, R. 79  
 Gradel, I. 96  
 Graf, F. 65, 148, 156, 157  
 Graziosi, B. 74,  
 Green, P. 103  
 Green, S. J. 250, 253  
 Grotius, H. (Huig de Groot) 207  
 Grube, G. M. A. 188  
 Gruber, M. 212  
 Gummere, R. 14  
 Gundel, H.-G. 263  
 Gundel, W. 254, 263  
  
 Hacking, I. 18, 19  
 Hadot, P. 227, 229, 232, 239  
 Haensch, R. 71  
 Hägg, T. 158  
  
 Hakola, R. 203  
 Hall, J. 151  
 Hammerstaedt, J. 122  
 Harland, P. A. 94, 108  
 Harrison, T. 47, 57, 109  
 Hartenstein, J. 203, 206, 214, 217, 224  
 Haug, C. 88  
 Haussleiter, J. 185  
 Hawthorne, J. G. 136  
 Heckel, T. K. 224  
 Hegedus, T. 262  
 Heidel, A. 32  
 Heineman, K. M. 113, 115  
 Henrichs, A. 49, 63, 64, 265  
 Herrmann, P. 108  
 Higbie, C. 42  
 Highet, G. 150  
 Hirsch-Luipold, R. 111, 112, 114, 153, 213, 223, 224  
 Hodgkinson, O. 129, 144  
 Hoffmann, V. 243  
 Höfler, A. 142  
 Hölscher, F. 65  
 Holzberg, N. 98  
 Holzhausen, J. 120  
 Hornblower, S. 65, 66  
 Horsfall, N. M. 54  
 Hose, M. 56  
 Hübner, W. 249, 250, 251, 253, 254, 256, 258, 260, 261, 263  
 Humble, N. 151  
 Hunt, S. A. 204, 212, 254  
 Hurtado, L. W. 221  
 Hylén, S. 204, 207  
  
 Iser, W. 203  
  
 Jacobs, F. 145  
 Jäger, S. 249  
 Jaillard, D. 113  
 Jakubiec, A. 58  
 Jenkyns, R. 69  
 Jewett, R. 179  
 Jim, T. 66  
 Jones, A. 253, 254, 257  
 Jones, C. P. 150, 158  
 Jong, I. J. F. de 198, 199  
 Jonge, M. de 223

- Kahlos, M. 79  
 Kapferer, B. 265  
 Karadimas, D. 130, 131, 143, 146  
 Karavas, O. 56, 150  
 Kasser, R. 234  
 Kaufmann, F.-X. 18  
 Kaufmann-Heinemann, A. 71  
 Keil, B. 129, 142, 143  
 Keil, C. F. 217  
 Kendeffy, G. 227  
 Kierkegaard, S. 218  
 Kindstrand, J. F. 145, 146  
 Kindt, J. 57, 109, 168, 245, 246  
 King, C. 96, 107  
 King, K. L. 228  
 Klein, H. 180  
 Klöckner, A. 65  
 Knox, B. 261  
 Knuuttila, S. 78, 235  
 Koester, C. R. 219, 224  
 Komorowska, J. 266  
 König, J. 73, 137  
 Konradt, M. 174  
 Koortbojian, M. 98, 101, 109  
 Kooten, G. van 127  
 Kors, A. C. 77  
 Köstenberger, A. J. 223  
 Kotansky, R. 264  
 Kotwick, M. E. 62, 67  
 Kremer, J. 181  
 Kühn, W. 232  
 Kuin, I. ix, 99, 153
- La Matina, M. 116  
 Labahn, M. 215  
 Lagrange, M.-J. 216  
 Lake, K. 185  
 Lampe, F. A. 210, 217  
 Lang, M. 215  
 Langlois, J. 106  
 Larson, J. 110  
 Le Boulluec, A. 227, 236, 237, 238  
 Lee, D. A. 213  
 Lefkowitz, M. R. 60  
 Levin, S. 111, 115  
 Levinson, J. viii  
 Lévy, C. 227, 229, 230, 231, 232, 235, 240, 241
- Ley, H. 37  
 Li, S. Y. 180  
 Lichtheim, M. 28, 29  
 Lieban, R. W. 265  
 Lieberg, G. 72  
 Lietaert Peerbolte, B. J. 169  
 Linder, M. 94  
 Linderski, J. 246  
 Lloyd, G. 252  
 Lloyd-Jones, H. 49  
 Lohfink, N. 31  
 Long, A. 250, 262  
 Luthardt, C. E. 217
- MacCormack, Sabine 7  
 MacKendrick, P. L. 87  
 MacRae, Duncan xii  
 Mahé, J.-P. 228, 230, 231  
 Malherbe, A. J. 175  
 Mandouze, A. 8  
 Mansfeld, J. 44  
 Marchand, S. 240  
 Marcovich, M. 210  
 Marquis, E. 154  
 Marrou, H.-I. 11  
 Martin, M. 248  
 Matytsin, A. M. 87  
 Mayer, F. 88  
 Maystre, C. 35  
 McNamara, C. 157  
 Meert, A. 65  
 Meid, W. 57  
 Meißner, N. 288  
 Merkt, A. 171, 172, 178  
 Meyer, H. A. W. 216  
 Mheallaigh, K. ní 151  
 Millar, F. 107  
 Modini, F. 128, 140  
 Moede, Katja 71  
 Moessner, D. P. xi, xii, 186, 187, 188, 189, 191, 192  
 Möllendorff, P. von 151  
 Monat, P. 266  
 Montet, P. 32  
 Moore, J. M. 97  
 Morgan, T. 12, 57  
 Moser, P. K. 72  
 Most, G. 206, 208, 209, 210, 215, 223

- Moyer, I. S. 264  
 Mulroy, D. 81  
 Mulsow, M. 88  
 Murphy, E. 25  
 Murray, O. 65  
 Musker, R. 253  
 Muth, R. 71
- Nagel, S. 249  
 Naiden, F. S. 59  
 Nappa, C. 261  
 Nauerth, C. 32  
 Nesselrath, K.-H. 129, 130, 132  
 Nestle, W. 156  
 Neugebauer, O. 247, 253, 254, 258  
 Nickelsburg, G. W. E. 176  
 Nicklas, T. vii, x, 167, 168, 169, 170, 172, 174, 176, 178, 213  
 Niehoff, M. R. viii, 101  
 Niiniluoto, I. 239  
 Nongbri, B. viii, 38, 39, 40, 51, 53  
 North, J. 94  
 Notomi, N. 64  
 Nutton, V. 231
- O'Brien, K. S. 222  
 O'Daly, G. 72  
 O'Meara, J. J. 8  
 O'Sullivan, P. 64  
 Ogilvie, R. M. 148  
 Oikonomopoulou, K. 73  
 Oliver, J. H. 107  
 Olson, S. D. 61  
 Opsomer, J. 124  
 Orbe, A. 237  
 Osborne, C. 89  
 Osborne, R. 65, 168, 246  
 Osing, J. 33  
 Ostwald, M. 41
- Paganini, G. 88  
 Pagels, E. 214, 233  
 Painchaud, L. 230, 231, 240  
 Pape, W. 217  
 Parke, H. W. 111, 116, 118, 122  
 Parker, R. 41, 42, 43, 55, 56, 57, 58, 64, 66, 67, 129, 130, 131, 133, 137, 143, 145, 146, 247
- Parker, S. 88  
 Parkinson, R. B. 25  
 Parmeggiani, G. 44  
 Pecorella Longo, C. 42  
 Peppel, M. 109  
 Pérez Jiménez, A. 256  
 Pérez-Jean, B. 231  
 Pernot, L. 129, 134, 138, 143, 151  
 Petersen, A. K. 53  
 Petridou, G. 252  
 Pfeffer, F. 116  
 Pflugk, U. 208, 209  
 Philipps, J. T. 88, 90  
 Piérart, M. 136  
 Pilhofer, P. 156  
 Podlecki, A. J. 43  
 Poirier, P.-H. 228, 230, 231  
 Popp, T. 212, 220, 222  
 Posener, G. 24, 25  
 Pralon, D. 37  
 Preisendanz, K. 265  
 Preston, R. 73  
 Price, S. F. R. 93, 94, 101, 107, 108, 112
- Quack, J. F. 23, 24, 249
- Race, W. H. 135, 136, 145  
 Rackham, H. 3, 14  
 Radice, B. 102  
 Rafanelli, L. M. 209  
 Rajak, T. 189  
 Reeve, C. D. C. 152  
 Reger, J. 243  
 Reid, R. S. 188  
 Reimann, J. F. 88, 89  
 Reiser, L. A. 88, 89  
 Reiterer, F. V. 176  
 Reitzenstein-Ronning, C. 97  
 Rescigno, A. 112  
 Reymond, E. A. E. 35  
 Richter, D. S. 151  
 Riedweg, C. 48, 60, 61  
 Riley, G. J. 214  
 Ringleben, J. 221  
 Robbins, F. E. 254  
 Roberts, A. 197  
 Robinson, J. M. 228, 230, 233  
 Romer, F. E. 66

- Roose, H. 174  
 Rosenberger, V. 80, 150, 261  
 Rosenthal, F. 66  
 Rubel, A. 42, 65  
 Rubel, G. 220  
 Rudich, V. 100  
 Rügge-meier, J. 203, 218  
 Ruiz, H. J. B. 263  
 Rüpke, J. viii, 71, 73, 80, 83, 110, 244, 245, 248, 252  
 Russell, D. A. 129, 130, 144, 145  
 Russo, G. 149  
 Rutherford, I. 249  
  
 Sachot, M. 79  
 Saïd, S. 151  
 Sánchez, A. V. 59  
 Schäfer, P. 168  
 Schaff, P. 196  
 Schaffer, S. 19  
 Schaper, J. xii  
 Scheid, J. 69, 79, 81, 94, 110, 245  
 Scheidel, W. 55  
 Schell, V. H. 176  
 Schenke, L. 219  
 Schlapbach, K. 8, 262  
 Schliesser, B. x, xi, xii, 57, 93, 168, 177, 178, 179, 208, 210, 211, 215, 219  
 Schlögel, H. 174  
 Schmid, A. 262  
 Schnackenburg, R. 206, 210  
 Schneider, B. 104  
 Schneiders, S. M. 212, 223  
 Schnelle, U. 168, 171, 210, 211, 213, 215, 222  
 Schofield, M. 76, 246  
 Schrimm-Heins, A. 18  
 Schröder, H. O. 141  
 Schröder, S. 112, 119, 120, 123  
 Schröder, W. 70, 78, 87, 88, 89  
 Schumacher, T. 168  
 Schwitzgebel, E. 57  
 Scott, J. W. 74  
 Scott, M. 111, 122  
 Sedley, D. N. 37, 152, 153  
 Sfameni Gasparro, G. 113  
 Shapin, S. 18, 19  
 Sharpe, M. 87  
 Sidwell, K. 151  
  
 Siegert, F. 207, 218  
 Sihvola, J. 78, 231, 235, 239  
 Sim, D. C. 172  
 Simonetti, E. G. 112, 121, 124  
 Sizgorich, T. N. 1  
 Skinner, C. W. 204, 212, 214, 219  
 Smallwood, E. M. 101, 107  
 Smith, M. F. 122  
 Smith, N. D. 46, 152  
 Smith, W. C. 38  
 Sofroniew, A. 103  
 Solmsen, F. 79  
 Sommerstein, A. H. 56  
 Speyer, W. 72  
 Spickermann, W. 110, 150  
 Spinelli, E. 231, 235  
 Spittler, J. E. vii  
 Spitzel, G. 88  
 Squires, J. T. 186  
 Stadter, P. A. 59, 111, 112  
 Stanford, W. B. 122  
 Stock, B. 8  
 Strauss, B. S. 67  
 Stroumsa, G. G. xii  
 Syme, R. 100  
  
 Tajfel, H. 203  
 Taplin, O. 49  
 Tardieu, M. 228, 229, 232  
 Tatum, W. J. 81  
 Taylor, C. M. 72, 243  
 Telò, M. 60  
 Theißen, G. 172  
 Theobald, M. 224  
 Thom, J. C. 134  
 Thomassen, E. 228, 229, 234, 248  
 Thorsrud, H. 229, 230, 232  
 Thyen, H. 210, 215, 216  
 Todd, S. C. 65  
 Tolmie, D. F. 204, 212  
 Torallas Tovar, S. 248  
 Trampedach, K. xi, 119, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125  
 Trapp, M. 129, 130  
 Tuckett, C. M. 207, 211, 224  
 Turcan, R. 69  
  
 Ullucci, D. C. 246

- Ueberschaer, N. 57, 93, 168, 177  
Urbanová, D. 248
- Vaahtera, J. E. 70  
Vaan, M. de 57  
Van Camp, J. 41  
Van den Kerchove, A. xi, 229, 232, 240  
van der Horst, P. W. 64  
Van Hoesen, H. B. 253, 254, 258  
Van Nuffelen, P. 72, 73, 162  
Varhélyi, Z. 148, 267  
Vassilaki, E. 129  
Vergados, A. 129  
Verheyden, J. 167, 169, 172, 176, 178  
Versnel, H. S. 13, 47, 48, 58, 60, 65, 94, 95,  
96, 99, 101, 107, 160  
Victor, U. 155  
Vogel, M. 182  
Volk, K. 73, 98, 250
- Wagener, F. 225  
Walker, H. J. 244  
Walter, L. 221  
Wang, S. K.-H. 206, 213, 216, 222  
Watts, J. W. xii  
Wehnert, J. 172  
Weidemann, H.-U. 173, 175  
Weir, R. 112, 114  
Weiß, A. 171
- Weiss, B. 221  
Weltecke, D. 58  
Wengst, K. 219  
Wesele Scholten, B. P. van 87  
Whitmarsh, T. viii, ix, 4, 38, 39, 48, 60, 64,  
67, 68, 70, 74, 91, 151, 153, 165, 166,  
168, 170  
Wielema, M. R. 88  
Willey, H. 41  
Willi, A. 56, 62, 67  
Williams, J. 71  
Williams, M. A. 228  
Wilson, N. G. 144, 145  
Wimbush, V. L. xii  
Winiarczyk, M. 65, 78, 153  
Wischmeyer, O. 172  
Wolter, M. 177  
Wormell, D. E. W. 111, 116, 118, 122  
Wright, N. T. 206
- Zahn, T. 207, 216, 217  
Zecharya-Giordano, M. 47  
Zedelmaier, H. 88  
Zeller, D. 170, 177, 180, 181  
Ziegler, K. 112, 113, 115  
Zimmermann, J. J. 89  
Zimmermann, R. 204, 212  
Zumstein, J. 204, 213, 219



## Index of Names, Places, and Subjects

- Abraham 178–179, 194  
Academia/Academician 4, 6, 8, 75, 77  
    n. 23, 78–80, 87, 115, 116 n. 16, 231, 234  
Accerae 108  
Achaemenid Empire 248  
Acts of the Apostles 176, 185, 196 n. 24,  
    199–200  
Aelius Aristides x, xi, 107, 128–146, 153  
Aeneas 82–83  
Agrippina the Younger 100, 106  
Akhenaten xi, 33, 34  
Albertus Magnus 209  
Alexander of Abonuteichos 149, 151, 154,  
    156  
Alexander the Great 42, 166  
Alexandria 108  
Allegory 144  
Al-Mubashshir ibn Fātik 66  
Amarna xi, 29, 33  
Ambiguity 47, 55, 70, 122, 137, 139, 154,  
    156, 163, 203–207, 218, 220  
Ammonios 113, 115, 117  
Anaxagoras 42–46, 51, 59  
Antigonos of Nicaea 258  
Antioch 171, 195, 196 n. 24, 264  
Apocalypse of John 172  
Apollodorus 66  
Apostles 93, 186, 190–191, 193–194, 196,  
    199–201, 205, 216  
Apotheosis 98–99, 109, 136, 138, 141  
Apuleius 13, 17  
Arabic 251  
Arachne 85  
Aramaic 216–217  
Arethas 149  
Aristophanes 43–45, 50–51, 60–64,  
    66–67, 124 n. 36  
Aristotle 122, 138, 143, 244  
Aristoxenus 66  
Asia (Roman province) 95 n. 9  
Asia Minor 107–108, 185 n. 2  
Astrology 150, 157, 243–267  
Atespatus 106  
Athamas 61, 135, 136 ns. 32 and 34, 139  
Athens/Athenians viii, ix, xi, 37, 41–45,  
    47, 51, 53, 56, 57–58, 59 n. 26, 60,  
    62–67, 115, 125, 154, 158–159, 176,  
    244, 246–247, 264  
Atum 27–28, 33  
Augustine viii, 3–4, 7–12, 16–17, 19, 72,  
    86, 208, 227, 262  
Augustus (emperor) 82–84, 86, 94, 95  
    n. 9, 96, 97 n. 14, 98–100, 101 n. 29,  
    102–106, 108–109, 262  
*Auspicia* 75, 81, 252  
Atheism/Atheist viii, ix, xii, 4, 37–51,  
    53–68, 69, 70, 72, 74, 77–82, 85–90,  
    127, 147, 150, 152–155, 163, 166  
Babylonia 30, 248, 252, 262–263  
Balbus (Quintus Lucilius Balbus) 4–7,  
    9–10  
Baptism 171, 188–190, 193–194, 199–200  
Beloved disciple 212, 214  
Bethany 205, 207, 220  
Boethos 125  
Bolos of Mendes 263  
Book of Revelation, *see* Apocalypse of  
    John  
Borea Soranus 100  
Britannia 248  
Bruno, Giordano 89  
Cadmus 135, 138  
Caelicolism 17  
Caligula (emperor) 101–102, 107  
Caravaggio 209  
Cassiacum 7 n. 20, 8–9  
Cassius Dio 95 n. 9, 96 n. 12, 98, 101  
Chaldaean 13, 247–248, 252, 254  
China 88  
Chiron 128 n. 5

- Christianity ix, xii, 1, 15–18, 5–58, 69, 86, 89, 134, 155, 166–167, 174, 176, 189, 203, 208–209, 213, 221, 228, 243–244, 246, 262
- Christology 204–205, 207, 218
- Cicero viii-x, 3–8, 10, 15 n. 56, 37 n. 1, 63, 72, 74–81, 83, 86–87, 89–91, 111, 114–118, 122, 124, 141 n. 53, 157 n. 38, 246, 261
- Claudius (emperor) ix, x, 96–99, 244
- Claudius Marcellus 244
- Cleanthes 134 n. 25, 144
- Clement of Alexandria 185, 227, 236–238, 239 n. 81, 240–241
- Clodius (Publius Clodius Pulcher) 80–81
- Comedy, *see* Humour
- Constantinople 195–196
- Consul 97, 100, 244, 258–259
- Coptic 228, 230, 232–234
- Corinth 13, 43, 133–137, 139
- Cotta (Gaius Aurelius Cotta) 4–7, 10–12, 15, 77 n. 23, 78–79, 246 n. 14
- Cotta (Marcus Aurelius Cotta Maximus Messalinus) 103 n. 38
- Counter-Reformation 208–209
- Craterus of Macedon 42–43, 45
- Critias 45 n. 23, 64, 66, 152
- Ctesias 41
- Cudworth, Ralph 89–90
- Cynics/Cynicism 49, 156–160
- Cyprian 15
- Cyprus 158, 264
- Cyranides 264
- Cyrene 128 n. 5, 140 n. 52
- Dämonen/Dämonenlehre, *see* Demons
- Daimonion*, *see* Demons
- Death 15, 17, 21–28, 30, 33–34, 49, 61, 89, 100, 106, 135–136, 138, 144, 149, 155, 210 n. 36, 212, 213 n. 50, 219–220, 254
- Demons 115–118, 120, 126, 181 n. 47
- Dedication 95 n. 9, 103–107
- Defixiones* 248, *see also* *Lamellae*
- Deisidaimonia*, *see* Superstition
- Delphic Oracle xi, 111–112
- Demetrius of Phalerum 43
- Demetrius Poliorketes 99
- Democritus 14, 63, 248
- Demodocus 198
- Demonax 147, 151–152, 157–159, 163
- Demosthenes 61, 114
- Demotic 35
- Descartes 19, 87
- Destiny, *see* Fate
- Diagoras of Melos 48 n. 43, 65–66, 68, 77, 79, 152
- Dialectic 45, 80, 91, 122, 124, 233
- Didymos (Thomas) 205, 214–217, 220
- Didymos Planetiades 115
- Dio Chrysostom 143, 153
- Diodorus Siculus 25 n. 9, 43–44, 66 n. 55, 188
- Diogenes of Apollonia 45
- Diogenes of Oinoanda 122, 158
- Diogenes of Sinope 157
- Diogenes Laertius 227 n. 3
- Diogenianus 121, 126
- Dionysius of Halicarnassus 71 n. 7, 145 n. 66, 188
- Diopithes 41–44, 46–48, 50–51, 59
- Disbelief vii–xi, 1–19, 21–35, 69–91, 102, 141, 204, 221
- Divinity ix, 13, 47, 57, 59, 85, 89, 94, 96, 99–102, 106 n. 44, 107 n. 48, 129–131, 136, 139, 143–144, 146, 210
- Divinization 96, 99, 101, 109
- Divus/Divi* 95–96, 98–101, 106
- Docetic, Docetism 210–211
- Domitian (emperor) 114
- Dorotheus of Sidon 251, 258
- Doxography 4 n. 8, 8, 231, 233–234, 236, 238
- Dreams 9, 30, 132, 244, 248, 265
- Durkheim, Émile 40
- Education 53–57, 67, 75, 91, 241
- Egypt ix, xi, 1 n. 1, 13, 21–35, 40, 107, 131, 138 n. 46, 142, 153, 228–229, 240, 247–250, 254, 258, 263–266
- Elea 138
- Eleusis, Eleusinian mysteries 65, 158, 163
- Elysium 23, 26, 27
- Emotion 71, 93, 95, 98 n. 18, 108–109, 127–128, 140, 203, 222 n. 90
- Empedocles 248
- Emperor cult ix, 93–96, 98, 102, 108–109

- Enlightenment ix, x, 38–40, 70, 72, 74, 77  
 n. 23, 78, 86, 87 n. 52, 91, 195–196, 97  
 n. 27, 205–206
- Ennius 83
- Ephorus of Cyme 43–44
- Epictetus 158
- Epicurus/Epicurean/Epicureanism 4–5, 7,  
 66, 78–80, 82, 117, 151–152, 154–155,  
 159, 161–163, 231, 234, 237
- Epiphanius 172 n. 23, 237
- Epistemology 1–19, 74
- Esther 31
- Eucharisty 180
- Euhemerus 89, 99, 127
- Eupolis 67
- Euripides 48, 54, 56, 59 n. 24, 60–61, 64,  
 157 n. 37
- Euthymius Zigabenus 208
- Euthyphro 41
- Evander 82–83
- Eyewitness 185, 187–188, 207, 223–224
- Fate, the Fates 27, 29, 109, 159–160, 163,  
 186, 216, 233, 258, 261–262
- Fides/Pistis* 12–13, 57, 75, 127, 132 n. 16,  
 179, 252
- Fides Christianorum* 17
- Firmicus Maternus 250, 251 n. 30, 266
- Firminus Catus 247
- Foucault, Michel 38, 249, 279, 284
- Funerary cult 21–24, 26, 27, 35
- Galba 262
- Galen 62–63, 231
- Galilee 186, 191, 194–195, 197
- Gallia 104
- Gilgamesh 30–31
- Giordano Bruno 89
- Glycon 54
- Gnostic, Gnosticism 167 n. 7, 210,  
 227–241
- Gods (Egyptian, Greek, and Roman)  
 – Ammon 115  
 – Aphrodite 40, 141, 198  
 – Apollon 49, 111 n. 2, 112 n. 5, 118–119,  
 121, 124, 128 n. 5, 141, 152  
 – Ares 141, 144–145, 198  
 – Artemis 154  
 – Asclepius 129, 129 n. 7 and 8, 130,  
 130–132, 141, 148, 254  
 – Athena 129–130, 139, 141, 158, 161, 163  
 – Bona Dea 80–81  
 – Dionysus 129, 135  
 – Fortuna 70, 108, 258  
 – Ge 118  
 – Hephaistos 41, 198  
 – Hera 135, 139, 141  
 – Hermes 65, 139  
 – Jupiter/Jove 84–85, 245, 254, 257–260,  
 266  
 – Jupiter Ammon 253  
 – Mars 253–254, 257–258, 260–261  
 – Minerva 245  
 – Momos 99  
 – Osiris 21–23, 27–28, 33, 35  
 – Poseidon x, 54, 127–146  
 – Ptah 34  
 – Re 21  
 – Sarapis 128–132, 142–143, 145  
 – Seth 27  
 – Tyche 70  
 – Venus 85, 253, 257–260  
 – Zeus 46, 49, 55, 62, 66, 106 n. 45, 118,  
 129–132, 134–135, 141, 143 n. 62,  
 144–145, 147, 149, 159–163
- Gorgias 67
- Gregory the Great 18
- Gymnasium 56
- Hades 25, 144 n. 63
- Hadrian 106 n. 45, 155 n. 12, 118, 137  
 n. 39, 265
- Hecataeus of Abdera 25, 30, 44
- Heliopolis 265
- Heracles, *see* Hercules
- Heraclitus 121, 122 n. 30
- Hercules 82–84, 129, 141, 147–148, 155
- Heresy/Heretic 173, 236–238
- Hermetic literature 254, 263 n. 72
- Hermippus 65
- Herodotus 31, 32 n. 20, 40, 44, 47 n. 39, 48  
 n. 42, 57 n. 20, 58 n. 21, 114, 119 n. 24,  
 122
- Hesiod 83, 121, 129, 145
- Hexameters 119, 121
- Hippocratic Corpus 41, 44

- Hippolytus 83  
 Hippon (sophist) 67  
 Historiography 38–39, 43, 67, 83, 189, 198  
 Homer 59, 65, 121, 127, 129, 133 n. 21,  
     134–136, 138–141, 143–146, 163, 190  
     n. 14, 198  
 Honorius 17  
 Horace 103, 106  
 Horoscope xi, 253–262  
 Hume 87  
 Humour 61, 64–65, 67, 143, 147–150, 154,  
     158 n. 41, 159–160, 163, 198  
 Hymns 128–137, 140–146  
  
 Immortality 22–23, 26, 28, 31, 89, 135  
*Impietas*/*Impiety*/*Impious* 4, 6, 44, 59–60,  
     82, 84, 89, 131, 137, 149, 153–154, 219,  
     235, 240, 246  
*Incredulitas* 15–17  
 Ino-Leucothea 128, 134–143, 145  
 Iphigeneia 154  
 Irenaeus 185–186, 236, 237 n. 68, 240  
 Irony 41, 51, 220  
 Isaeus 55, 279  
 Islam ix n. 12, xii, 1, 243  
 Israel 171, 181, 186, 189–194, 197,  
     199–201  
*Ius Iurandum* 75  
  
 Jerusalem 171, 186, 190–195, 197, 198  
     n. 28  
 Jesus x, 149, 167 n. 7, 169, 174, 176, 177  
     n. 34, 180 n. 43, 186, 188–191, 193–197,  
     199–201, 204–213, 215–225, 233,  
     237–238  
 Jews xii, 2 n. 4, 16, 101–102, 107, 153,  
     191–192, 194, 201  
 John the Baptist 188, 194  
 John Chrysostom 195–197, 200 n. 32  
 Josephus 177, 189 n. 12  
 Judaism ix, 1, 17  
 Judas Iscariot 188, 125 n. 102  
 Judea 194, 197 n. 27  
 Julio-Claudian Dynasty 99  
 Julius Caesar 75, 81–82, 84, 86, 95 n. 9, 99  
 Justice 25, 59, 235, 246  
  
 Kephias, *see* Peter  
  
 Kleombrotos 113, 115–116  
 Kritodemus 254  
  
 Lactantius 89 n. 59, 147–148, 27  
*Lamellae* 264 (*see also* *Defixiones*)  
 Lamprias 113, 115–117, 125  
*Lararium* 103–104  
 Late Antiquity 1, 8, 11, 18, 32, 127, 166,  
     262, 264  
 Laughter, *see* Humour  
 Lazarus 205, 207, 216 ns. 62 and 64,  
     219–221  
 Livia (empress) 103–106  
 Locke 87  
 Logos 135, 143–145, 232 n. 34  
 Lucian of Samosata ix, x, 99, 122, 147–164  
 Lucilius 148  
 Lucius 13  
 Lucretius 72, 81–82, 84–87, 91, 229  
 Lycaon 83–85  
 Lycophron 136  
  
 Magic ix, 101, 150 n. 15, 155, 243,  
     247–250, 251, 261, 263–266  
 Magician xi, 101, 249  
 Manicheans 227 n. 6, 228 n. 7  
 Manilius 250–253, 261 n. 63  
 Mantic 113, 116, 119, 121–122, 124–126  
 Mary 211–212, 213 n. 50, 215 n. 61, 216  
     n. 64  
 Maximus of Tyre 139  
 Medea 247  
 Medicine 41, 150, 248, 252  
 Megara 136  
 Melanippe 54, 56  
 Meletus 41, 46  
 Melicertes 135–136, 140 n. 52  
 Menander Rhetor 134 n. 25, 144–145  
 Metalepsis 198–200  
 Metaphor 5, 9, 103 n. 40, 192, 219, 221,  
     223  
 Metaphysics 7, 10–12, 18–19, 40, 45, 50,  
     89, 131, 241  
 Miletus 108  
 Mnesippus 154  
 Monotheism 1, 130, 166  
 Mortuary Cult, *see* Funerary Cult  
 Moses 1, 16

- Muses 119, 121  
 Mysia 267  
 Mysteries 10–11, 17, 65–66, 108, 114  
   n. 11, 116, 137, 154, 158, 163  
 Mysticism 22, 210–211, 253  
  
 Neoplatonism 127 n. 4, 231  
 Nereids 135–136  
 Nero (emperor) 98, 100, 103–104, 140  
 New Academy, *see* Plato, Platonism  
 New Kingdom 28  
 Nile 21, 264  
 Niobe 85  
 North Africa 227  
  
 Oath 60, 62, 75, 100, 107–108, 137, 161  
 Octavian, *see* Augustus  
 Odysseus 138–141, 157, 198  
 Oedipus 48–50  
 Oinomaos of Gadara 122  
 Oknos 144  
 Old Kingdom 21, 24  
 Olympus 128 n. 5, 141  
 Omphale 147–148  
 Orestes 154  
 Origen 210, 217  
 Orphics 67  
 Orthodoxy 50, 82, 86, 88–89, 130 n. 13  
 Orthopraxy 70, 82  
 Ostanos 248  
 Ovid x, 81, 83–86, 91, 103, 106 n. 46, 136,  
   247  
 Oxyrhynchus 107 n. 52, 253–257  
  
 Paganism 3, 86, 90–92  
 Palaemon 133–137  
 Palmomancy 262  
 Pantheon 83, 96, 98, 99, 136  
 Papias 185, 216  
*Parousia* 175, 182  
 Paul x, xii, 9 n. 26, 93, 165, 167–183,  
   191–192, 195–196, 201, 238  
 Pausanias 135–137  
*Pax Romana* 124  
 Peloponnesian War 42–43, 65, 67  
 Peloponnesus 139  
 Pelops 28 n. 5, 140 n. 52  
 Peregrinus (non-citizen) 106  
 Peregrinus (the person) 149, 155–156  
 Pergamon 95 n. 9, 129 n. 7, 130, 132, 252  
   n. 35  
 Pericles 41–44  
 Peripatetics 43  
 Persia/Persian 40, 248  
 Pesach 31  
 Peter 171, 185, 192–194, 200, 209, 212,  
   216  
 Petronius 32  
 Phaeacia 138  
 Phaeton 83  
 Phemonoë 119  
 Philinus 125  
 Philipp II. (Macedonian King) 114  
 Philo of Alexandria 101, 153  
 Philodemus 63, 66  
 Philosophy 3–10, 18, 41, 45 n. 28, 46,  
   50–51, 53, 57 n. 19, 59, 63–64, 66–67,  
   71–81, 83, 86–90, 98 n. 16, 111–113,  
   114 n. 11, 118–121, 127–135, 139  
   n. 58, 141, 143–146, 149, 152, 157–159,  
   161–163, 210 n. 36, 227–241, 246,  
   261–262  
 Philostratus 135 n. 31, 37 n. 41, 140 n. 52  
 Photius 149  
 Phryne 56, 126  
 Physiologus 263  
*Pietas*/Piety/Pious 4, 15 n. 46, 19, 70, 71  
   n. 6, 74–75, 79, 80 n. 33, 82, 84–86, 89,  
   103 n. 39, 131, 156, 245–246  
 Pindar 28–129, 136, 140 n. 52  
*Pistis*, *see* *Fides*  
 Plague 48, 67, 195  
 Platon/Platonism 5, 7, 10–11, 18–19, 41,  
   46–47, 56, 63–64, 75, 89–90, 117–118,  
   120 ns. 25 and 27, 126, 127 n. 4, 129,  
   132 n. 16, 150, 152, 153 n. 25, 210 n. 36,  
   227–228, 231–232, 234, 237, 239–240,  
   262  
 Pliny the Elder 13, 14 n. 41, 248, 263  
 Pliny the Younger 102  
 Plotinus 237  
 Plutarch x, xi, 41–46, 59, 73, 89, 111–126,  
   127–128, 136, 137 n. 41, 138 n. 46, 143  
   n. 60, 144, 146, 153 n. 24, 157 n. 37, 227,  
   231, 239–241, 246  
 Polybius 70–73, 76, 80, 188

- Polyphemos 140  
 Polytheism 1, 49 n. 52, 130–132, 138, 144  
   n. 62, 146, 166  
 Pontus 154  
 Poppaea 100  
 Porphyry 66, 157 n. 40  
 Prayer 35, 54, 103, 106–109, 190, 191  
   n. 15, 237 n. 68  
 Priest/Priesthood 156–157  
   – College of Quindecimviri 100  
   – Delphic 112, 120, 123, 125  
   – Egyptian 13, 28, 35, 248, 263, 265  
   – in emperor cult 103, 106  
   – of Artemis 154  
   – of Ptah 34  
   – of Zeus in Pednelissos 106  
   – Pontifex 4, 6, 15  
   – Pontifex Maximus 81  
*Princeps* 96, 100, 262  
 Principate 81, 98, 197  
 Proconsul 15  
 Prodicus of Keos 63–64, 66–67  
 Proof 7, 55, 75, 98, 106, 153, 162, 205, 262  
 Propertius 252–253  
 Prophecy/Prophet xii, 41, 49, 51, 115, 117,  
   123, 125, 149, 154, 159, 169, 180–182,  
   193 n. 22, 194, 199, 201, 265  
 Protagoras 63, 67, 77, 79  
 Protestantism 69–70, 72, 86, 165, 209  
 Providence 149, 153, 156, 159–163, 186,  
   233–235, 237  
 Ptolemy 254–256, 258, 260, 263, 266  
 Purim 31  
 Puteoli 108  
 Pylades 154  
 Pythagoras/Pythagoreanism 73, 228–229,  
   248  
 Pythia 112, 114–115, 117–121, 123–125,  
   128, 136, 140, 283, 293, 297, 301  
  
 Quintus 111, 114, 116, 122  
 Quirinius 197  
 Quran 67, 243  
  
 Reformation 86, 208–209  
 Religion/*Religio* 15, 39 n. 6, 53, 75–76,  
   79–80, 81 n. 37, 82  
 Rembrandt 209  
  
*Res Publica*/Roman Republic 37, 70,  
   80–81, 93 n. 4, 96, 244, 262  
 Resurrection 174–178, 190–191, 193,  
   205–206, 208, 212–214, 218–219, 222,  
   223 n. 94, 225 n. 102, 230  
 Revelation (book), *see* Apocalypse of John  
 Rhetoric 41, 131, 138, 204, 227, 231, 247,  
   252  
 Rhodopis 126  
 Ritual 26, 31, 33, 41, 47, 49, 50 n. 54,  
   55–56, 69–70, 73, 81–82, 93–94, 98–99,  
   101–103, 109, 132, 133 n. 20, 137–139,  
   150, 156–157, 159, 164, 246–249,  
   263–266  
 Ruler cult, *see* Emperor cult  
 Ruth 31  
  
 Sacrifice 54–55, 75, 82–84, 93 n. 4,  
   100–101, 103, 106–108, 116–117, 138,  
   147–149, 154, 156–159, 161, 163, 179,  
   244, 246  
*Sanctitas* 75, 246  
 Sarra 178  
 Satire 43–44, 50 n. 55, 96–99, 148, 150,  
   157  
 Scythia 154, 156  
 Self-doubt (Selbstzweifel) 180  
 Semele 135  
 Senate/Senator 97, 100–101, 247, 266–267  
 Seneca the Younger ix–x, 13–14, 93,  
   96–99, 102, 245  
 Serapion 113, 121  
 Sethians 234, 236  
 Sextus Empiricus 77 n. 25, 227 n. 2,  
   229–232, 235–240  
 Sicily 65  
 Sisyphus 136–137  
 Socrates 41, 45–47, 50, 56, 58 n. 21,  
   62–63, 65, 152, 158–159, 247, 264  
 Sophocles 48  
 Sparta 50, 125  
 Spinoza, Baruch 87  
 Statue/Statuette 61, 65, 74, 103–104, 106,  
   154, 156  
 Statius 136  
 Stoa/Stoic/Stoicism 4–5, 7, 10, 73, 78, 87,  
   88–90, 98, 100, 134 n. 25, 143 n. 62, 144,  
   157, 161, 228, 234, 236, 245

- Strabon 111, 118  
 Suetonius 98, 108  
 Superstition 70–71, 79, 82, 87, 90, 93 n. 4,  
 127, 138, 150, 153 n. 24, 245, 247  
 Syracuse 65  
  
 Tacitus 15, 98, 100, 262  
 Tertullian 17, 210, 237 n. 68  
 Thebes 135, 251  
*Theion/Theia* 40–42, 46–51, 117, 153, 246  
 Theodorus of Cyrene 77, 79  
 Theodosius II (Eastern Roman Emperor)  
 17  
 Theology x, xii, 4, 7, 47, 69–70, 72, 75,  
 78–79, 81, 85–87, 89, 99, 113, 118, 120  
 n. 27, 125 n. 41, 128, 130, 132, 165,  
 167–169, 172–173, 174 n. 28, 182, 211,  
 222 n. 91, 223 n. 94, 246  
 Theon 113, 119–122, 124, 126  
 Theophrastus 44 n. 27, 244, 246  
 Theophylact 216–217  
 Thomas Aquinas 208  
 Thrasea Paetus 100–102  
 Thucydides 43, 66, 188  
  
 Tiberius (emperor) 103, 106 n. 46, 262  
 Timotheus 175  
 Toland 87  
 Torah 67  
 Truth xi, 6–7, 9–11, 14, 23, 25, 38, 49–50,  
 72, 85–87, 90, 128, 132 n. 16, 142–143,  
 191, 220–221, 229–230, 233, 236,  
 238–239, 243, 249, 253, 255, 263, 265  
 Trygetius 9–10  
 Twelve Tables 247  
  
 Valentinus, Valentinians 228 n. 10  
 Valerius Maximus 244  
 Varro 7, 72–73, 81–83, 86  
 Velleius (Gaius Velleius) 4–6, 9–10, 78–80  
 Vettius Valens 251, 254  
 Virgil 81–83, 91  
 Voltaire 87  
  
 Xenophanes 138, 152  
  
 Zoroaster 248  
 Zostrianus 229 n. 10, 232 n. 33, 240–241

