

Kenneth Mayer
Plutarch and the Missionary Position

Mission and conversion were never important concepts for Greek and Roman religions, although they had their place in the practices of philosophical schools. This paper will focus on an unstudied aspect of ancient mission: figures who go *inter gentes* to spread the word of Greek culture. In his essays and in his *Lives* Plutarch's protagonists are constructed as missionaries bringing Hellenic culture to the *barbaroi*.

The *De Alexandri Fortuna* envisions an Alexander armed with philosophy and a mission: taming foreigners and teaching them Greek customs, literature, and language. Thus Alexander is better than Socrates, who impiously brought foreign gods into Athens, because he brought Greek gods to India (*Mor.* 328C). Likewise Plutarch's *Alexander* is our sole source for the claim that Indians still in his day performed Greek rites and used Alexander's altar whenever they crossed the Beas (*Alexander* 62.8). Our other sources hint that Alexander's own sacrifices on this occasion and elsewhere were not Greek, and they focus on Alexander's extreme attachment to Ammon. For Lucian, e.g., Alexander's adoption of foreign religion and customs is the butt of several jokes (*Dialogus Mortuorum* 12, 13, 25).

Plutarch's portrayal of the missionary Alexander is in the context of an extended defense of Alexander's Persian attire: Alexander wears Persian clothes in order to tame and Hellenize his subjects. We are to imagine him acting like the Paul of I Corinthians 9:19-23: adopting the ways of others in order to promote one's own agenda, a process I term mimetic conversion.

Power relationships and the ultimate direction of cultural change also seem to dictate Plutarch's representation of the gymnosophist Calanus. Both Plutarch and Strabo (15.1.64) quote Onesicritus' account of his meeting with the gymnosophists. In Strabo's version Onesicritus tells how Alexander respected Indian custom and therefore did not attempt to summon the gymnosophists. This detail provides more telling insight into Alexander's character than the sequence of riddles found in Plutarch, but Plutarch does not include it in the *Alexander*. In both texts Calanus requests that Onesicritus strip before joining his gymnosophist disciples. In Strabo it is merely a request to conform to local practice. In Plutarch the request for a Greek to adopt local attire is represented as petulant and unreasonable. A Greek may dress as a barbarian only in order to promote his mission, not at the behest of barbarians and certainly not to learn their ways.

Outside of Plutarch's texts, there is little evidence of the Hellenizing mission ascribed to Alexander, or of those ascribed to Themistocles, Sertorius, and others. His heroes share traits with the protagonists of other narratives of mission produced in the Second Sophistic, such as the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Instead of abandoning Greek customs for foreign ones, the hero walks the earth as an active promoter of Greek culture.