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Translating, paraphrasing and rewriting the Bible: the Great Code in the Roman empire and late antiquity

This lesson will deal with a central aspect of the cultural interchanges between Pagans and Christians in the Roman world, the debate on classical literary forms and the creation of a new Christian poetry. From an initial attitude of refusal and closure to classical rhetoric and literature, Christian intellectuals began to take into consideration a different approach: to show that Biblical contents, underestimated by Pagans for their low stylistic level, were actually able to produce a new discourse and innovative literary forms. Poetry played a central role in the debate, especially after Constantine’s turning point. The Great Code (Frye) was translated, paraphrased, rewritten, in order to create a poetry that could be at the same level of the Pagan poetry, or even substitute it. The story of paraphrases is particularly interesting, since Christian poetry was born in West and East as biblical paraphrase inspired by this particular rhetorical exercise used in schools (Juvenecus, the poets of the Bodmer Papyri): the great amount of Christian paraphrastic poems in the fifth and sixth century was mainly concerned with the aim to express a sacred text in a high literary form. This literary genre was also adopted by Pagan writers, who rewrote their sacred texts in opposition to Christian ones. We will examine the interrelationships between these two languages, the horizon of expectations of their audience, the transformation of the concept of classicism in Late Antiquity, the new aesthetics of late antique poetry. We will therefore focus on answers that the multicultural society of Late Roman Empire gave to the problems of redefining the past and creating a new identity.

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