

# Julian and Themistius

*T. D. Barnes and J. Vander Spoel*

THE DATE of the emperor Julian's *Letter to Themistius* occasioned lively discussion in the early years of this century. On the one side, Otto Seeck argued firmly that Julian wrote it very shortly after he was appointed Caesar on 6 November 355, and when others dissented, not only did Seeck reiterate his views, but R. Asmus and A. Rostagni offered additional arguments in his support.<sup>1</sup> On the other side, J. Geffcken and Joseph Bidez dated the work significantly later, to the period when Julian had become sole ruler of the Roman Empire: they contended that Julian probably wrote it not long after he heard of Constantius' death on 3 November 361.<sup>2</sup> Those who have subsequently written about Julian and Themistius appear to have accepted the conclusions of Bidez with virtual unanimity.<sup>3</sup> It is hard, however, to reconcile this date with the tone and content of the letter, which contrast sharply with other writings of Julian from the winter of 361/2 (most notably his open letter to the city of Athens). We wish to offer a new interpretation which does justice to the arguments advanced on both sides of the controversy: in our view, Julian wrote most of the letter early in 356, but added the final two paragraphs and despatched it shortly after he had been proclaimed Augustus in the first months of 360.

Julian wrote the extant letter in answer to a letter from Themistius, which has not survived, and the reply indicates that Themistius' letter was one of congratulation on Julian's appointment as Caesar. Themistius had said, You have left the philosophy of the study for the philosophy of real life—*μεταβῆναί με φῆς ἐκ τῆς*

<sup>1</sup> O. Seeck, *Die Briefe des Libanios* (Leipzig 1906) 296; *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt* IV (Berlin 1911) 470; R. Asmus, *WKP* 31 (1914) 522; A. Rostagni, *Giuliano l'Apostata* (Turin 1920) 371ff.

<sup>2</sup> J. Geffcken, *Kaiser Julianus* (Leipzig 1914) 147ff; *Der Ausgang des griechisch-römischen Heidentums* (Heidelberg 1920) 287f; J. Bidez, *La tradition manuscrite et les éditions des Discours de l'Empereur Julien* (Ghent/Paris 1929) 133ff; *La vie de l'empereur Julien* (Paris 1930) 204ff.

<sup>3</sup> J. Croissant, *Serta Leodiensia* (Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège 44 [1930]) 8; G. Dagrón, *Travaux et mémoires* 3 (1968) 222; *PLRE* I 890; R. Browning, *The Emperor Julian* (London 1975) 129; G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1978) 31; L. J. Daly, *BZ* 73 (1980) 2.

ὑποστέγου φιλοσοφίας πρὸς τὴν ὑπαίθριον (262d); he had compared Julian's position to that of Heracles and Dionysus, with his task to combine philosophy and monarchy in order to cleanse the world of evil; and he had urged Julian to "cast off all thought of leisure and all idleness," to be worthy of his calling and to imitate the great lawgivers of ancient Greece (253c–254a). Such sentiments were appropriate if Themistius wrote to Julian in the winter of 355/6. At any later date, the observation that Julian had abandoned the study for real life, though true, would have been pointless, and advice to avoid laziness would have been downright offensive to a Caesar who had campaigned vigorously and won battles in the field. Seeck was surely close to the truth when he characterized the letter of Themistius which Julian answers as a protrepticus to the new Caesar.<sup>4</sup> Themistius was an avowed pagan, to whom comparisons of Julian to Heracles and Dionysus came naturally: the significant aspect of the comparison may not be that Themistius mentioned pagan gods, but that he compared Julian not to Zeus, the supreme deity, but rather to two gods who play a subordinate role in the traditional pantheon.<sup>5</sup>

Various features of Julian's letter also point to an early date for its composition. Julian writes at some length about his life in the years before his appointment as Caesar, and he writes as if the events of these years, particularly his perilous situation at court in 354/5 and his few months in Athens, are vivid and recent in his mind.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, although he complains of "the pomp which now surrounds me" (260b), no hint can be discovered of anything which happened after the winter of 355/6. Moreover, Julian refers to a "relative by blood made still closer to me by friendship": this should be his brother, the Caesar Gallus, whom Constantius deposed as Caesar in 354 and then executed.<sup>7</sup> Gallus was buried as a criminal and his memory condemned, until Julian rehabilitated him—as soon as he heard of the death of Constantius (*Ep. ad Ath.* 271a). Writing after November 361 Julian would not have needed or desired to be so allusive.

<sup>4</sup> Seeck, *Briefe* (*supra* n.1) 296.

<sup>5</sup> On the implications of styling one emperor Iovius, another Herculus, see W. Seston, *Dioclétien et la Tétrarchie* I (Paris 1946) 231ff. Themistius' coupling of Dionysus with Heracles appears to reflect Julian's own attitude to the god (see esp. *Or.* 7, 219a–222c).

<sup>6</sup> 259c–260b, cf. Seeck, *Geschichte* (*supra* n.1) 470.

<sup>7</sup> 259c: τὰ δὲ ἐν Ἰωνίᾳ πρὸς τὸν καὶ γένει προσήκοντα καὶ φιλίᾳ μᾶλλον οἰκείον ὄντα μοιπραχθέντα πρότερον ὑπὲρ ἀνδρὸς ξένου μικρὰ παντελῶς γνωρίμων μοι γενομένου, τοῦ σοφιστοῦ φημί, λέληθεν οὐδέν σε. Gallus heard of Julian's leanings towards paganism and repeatedly sent Aetius to prevent his apostasy (Philostorgius, *HE* 3.27): Julian presumably refers to one of these occasions. The sophist may be Eusebius of Myndus (named only by Eunapius, *VS* 7.1.10ff).

The letter did not leave Julian's hands until four years had elapsed. The Leiden manuscript of Julian's works (*Vossianus gr.* 77), which scrupulously distinguishes between what he wrote as Caesar (*Or.* 1–3) and what he wrote as Augustus, gives its title as *Ἰουλιανοῦ Ἀὐτοκράτορος Θεμιστίῳ φιλοσόφῳ*.<sup>8</sup> Now Julian states explicitly that the last two paragraphs were written long after the rest of the letter.<sup>9</sup> Yet the postscript, like the main body of the letter, speaks of God in the singular and of the divine power in terms susceptible of a Christian interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Since Julian began to avow his pagan convictions openly, even ostentatiously, as soon as he learnt of Constantius' death,<sup>11</sup> it is not plausible to suppose that in November 361 or later he would have used such vague and guarded words to a known pagan. The evidence of its title and the last paragraph implies that the letter reached its final form between February 360 and November 361.

The hypothesis that Julian composed the *Letter to Themistius* in 356 but did not send it until shortly after his proclamation as Augustus both accepts and transcends the apparent contradictions in the evidence for its date. Nor is it difficult to discern why in 360 Julian should polish his long discarded draft, add a postscript and send the retouched product as an open letter to a leading pagan in the East. It served his propaganda perfectly. The bulk of the letter reveals the reluctant ruler—a pose in 360, but a genuine depiction of the Caesar of four years earlier. The final two paragraphs, despite their studiously vague language, carry a clear message to any who can read between the lines. Philosophy is not properly respected by “the men of today”: the champion who runs risks for the sake of philosophers is the leader of the pagan cause.<sup>12</sup>

THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
December, 1980

<sup>8</sup> Bidez, *La tradition* (*supra* n.2) 9, 137.

<sup>9</sup> 266d: *πάλαι τε ἔγραφον ἐκεῖνα καὶ νῦν τὰς παρ' ὑμῶν ἐπιτιμήσεις ἀπελυσάμην εἰς δύναμιν*.

<sup>10</sup> 266d–267b, *cf.* 253c, 254b–d.

<sup>11</sup> Bowersock (*supra* n.3) 61ff.

<sup>12</sup> Geffcken, *Ausgang* (*supra* n.2) 288 (adducing 266d). By *τοὺς νῦν ἀνθρώπους* Julian clearly means Christians.