Any texts can be compared, but not all comparisons are equally relevant or meaningful. When we compare texts, it is of crucial importance to know why we are doing so, because the rationale for the comparison is going to determine which aspects of the text or textual elements will be the focus of attention. There may indeed be many different reasons for comparing two texts. The texts concerned may have obvious similarities in content that require explanation, for example, whether there is a genealogical relationship between the two texts, or whether the similarities are due to other factors. Texts may furthermore be compared to determine the characteristics of a particular form, genre, or rhetorical strategy. A third reason may be to identify the religio-historical locus of a text in comparison to other texts, or to establish the probable cultural, religious, conceptual and other frames of reference of the first readers of a text. In the case of the latter, further selection criteria have to be applied as well, because any ancient text could conceivably contribute to our understanding of the social and cultural world of early Christianity.

1 For further discussion of the problem of comparison, with a recent bibliography, see Johan C. Thom, “‘To Show the Difference by Comparison’: The New Wettstein and Cleanthes’ Hymn,” in Reading Religions in the Ancient World: Essays Presented to Robert McQueen Grant on His 90th Birthday (ed. David E. Aune and Robin Darling Young; NovTSup 125; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 81-100.

2 Cf. Jonathan Z. Smith’s warning that any comparison is a construction made by the scholar for his or her own reasons (Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity [Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 14, CSJH; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990], 51, 115).

3 Some NT scholars, especially in Germany, increasingly use Umberto Eco’s concept of the ‘encyclopedia of the reader’ to indicate these frames of reference. See Umberto Eco, Lector in fabula: La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi (Studi Bompiani 22; Milano: Bombiani, 1979); The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts (Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979). The concept of ‘encyclopedia’ was first explained in Eco’s A Theory of Semiotics (Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 98-100, 105-21.

4 Cf. the criteria applied in the Neuer Wettstein (Gerald Seelig, “Einführung,” in Texte zur Briefliteratur und zur Johannesapokalypse [ed. Georg Strecker and Udo Schnelle;
In the case of the Wisdom of Solomon and Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus* there are good reasons why a comparative reading would be appropriate and productive. There is general consensus that the Wisdom of Solomon shows clear signs of Stoic influence, while Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus* is one of the best representative texts of early Stoicism. It is therefore not surprising that these two texts have important central topoi in common, such as the role of Reason (*Logos*) or Wisdom (*Sophia*) in structuring and maintaining the cosmic order, and the moral problem presented by people who do not recognise God’s providential care of the world. The two texts use comparable strategies to address these issues: both contain hymnic celebrations of the divine beings responsible for the world-order, as well as a protreptic element in which human beings are exhorted to recognise and obey the divine dispensation. In the analysis that follows I will concentrate on those elements the two texts have in common, and not attempt to give a detailed analysis of wisdom discourse as it functions in each of the two texts. The aim of this analysis will nevertheless be to contribute to our understanding of wisdom discourse in general by comparing the similarities and differences between the shared topoi and strategies in these two texts.

1. Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus*

Cleanthes of Assos (331/30-230/29 B.C.E.) followed Zeno of Citium to become the second head of the Stoa in Athens in 262/61. His *Hymn to Zeus*...