



McKenzie Study Center, an Institute of Gutenberg College

Handout 8

The Bible and the History of Ideas

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Middle Platonism and Neo-Platonism

A. Middle Platonism

1. Eclectic / So what makes it “Platonism” at all?

B. Philo (25 B.C.–40 A.D.)

1. **Project: to unify Judaism and Plato**

- a. Plato was a disciple of Moses.

2. **Contribution to hermeneutics**

- a. Allegorical interpretation extended to the whole of Jewish Scripture, not just the awkward parts.
- b. Text has two levels of meaning.

3. **Logos doctrine**

C. Alexandrian Fathers [esp. Clement (150–215 A.D.), Origin (185–254 A.D.)]

1. **Impact on Alexandrian Fathers**

- a. Biblical interpretation
- b. Logos doctrine / view of God in general

2. **Impact on “orthodoxy”**

- a. Arian controversy conducted in Middle and Neo-Platonic (Philonic) terms

D. Plotinus (about 203–270 A.D.) and Neo-Platonism

1. **Concept of the ONE (*protos theos*)**

- a. Beyond all distinctions / utterly transcendent, transcends being itself.
 - i. *Never, in any sense, ‘in’ the world (not a ‘monist’)*
- b. Nothing positive can be asserted of God, only denied (Via Negativa).
 - i. *Cannot attribute thought or will to the One.*
 - ii. *God is ‘The Good’, but he cannot be said to be ‘good’ .*

c. Nothing can be said except analogically.

2. God does not create by a free act of creation.

a. The world comes into being by way of 'emanation' from the One.

b. Being 'flows from' the One but in such a way that the One is not the least bit diminished by it.

i. *Like the rays of the sun do not diminish the sun, the reflections in a mirror do not diminish the object reflected*

3. Hierarchy of being

a. First emanation: nous (thought, mind = intuition or immediate apprehension)

i. *Whole multitude of (Plato's) Ideas is contained INDIVISIBLY in the Nous.*

ii. *Nous is eternal, beyond time / knows all simultaneously, not sequentially.*

iii. *Nous is thought thinking of itself (and the One), with no other object of thought yet distinct from itself.*

b. Second emanation (from Nous): Soul or World-Soul (Plato, *Timaeus*)

i. *Incorporeal and indivisible*

ii. *Intermediary between super-sensible world and sensible world / looks up to Nous, looks "below" to world*

iii. *Comes in two parts:*

(A) Higher Soul (closer to Nous)

(1) Contains *protoi logoi spermatikoi* (first seeds of logos), reflections of the Ideas in Nous.

(B) NATURE = Real soul of phenomenal world (lower soul)

(1) Contains *logoi spermatikoi* (seeds of logos), reflections of the Ideas reflected in the Higher Soul.

iv. *Human souls 'proceed' from World-Soul and have two parts: a higher part which has a connection to the sphere of Nous, a lower part directly connected with the body.*

(A) Human souls existed before the body, being embodied constituted a 'fall'.

(B) Survives death, but no memory of bodily existence.

(C) Transmigration of souls occurs.

c. Third emanation: material world

i. *Like light, the further emanation gets from the One, the dimmer it gets; "pure matter" is complete darkness.*

ii. *It emanates from the One, ultimately, but it is the antithesis of the One.*

d. A multiplicity of other star gods and demons exist between the intelligible world and the tangible, material world.

4. Matter is the principle of evil (Orphic / Pythagorean theme).

- a. Almost a dualist (against the foremost principle of his project); but note that evil is a privation.
- b. However, when it comes to the visible, tangible universe, Plotinus emphasizes the unity and harmony of the cosmos, praising it as the work of the World-Soul (and Demiurge).
 - i. *He vehemently opposes the Gnostic contempt for the visible world.*
 - ii. *No cosmos could be better than the one we know.*

5. The ethical ascent of the soul

- a. *Katharsis*, purification from dominion of body and senses.
- b. Practice of cardinal virtues / phronesis being the highest of these virtues.
- c. Soul must rise above sense perception, turning toward Nous, becoming occupied with philosophy and science.
- d. Soul rises above discursive thought and becomes united with Nous (soul still maintains self-consciousness).
- e. Mystical union with the One (loss of all self-consciousness); an ECSTASY characterized by the lack of all duality; the human being becomes one with the One (God)— he is no longer distinct from the One (from God).
 - i. *In this life, this ecstasy is only of short duration for the philosopher.*
 - ii. *Philosopher looks forward to a future state when, being no longer hindered by the body, this ecstasy will become a complete and permanent possession.*

6. Other Neo-Platonists

- a. Porphyry (about 230–300 A.D.) (wrote *Life of Plotinus* and *Isagoge* (Introduction to the *Categories* [Aristotle])
 - i. *Virulently anti-Christian*
- b. Syria: Iamblichus (died about 330 A.D.)
- c. Athenian school (about 400–550 A.D.): Plutarch, Syrianus, Dominnus, Proclus, Marinus, Isidorus, Damascius, Simplicius
- d. Alexandria: Hypatia (died about 415 A.D.), other obscure individuals