
Cosmological speculations: the alleged influence of philo in early christian philosophy

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O principal objetivo desse artigo é demonstrar a influência de Filo de Alexandria sobre as especulações cosmológicas na filosofia do cristianismo primitivo. Um judeu conhecedor do pensamento grego clássico, Filo criou um precedente para a fusão da religião com o Helenismo. Quando apologistas cristãos sentiram a necessidade de defender sua fé ao mundo pagão, eles utilizaram métodos e ideias já conhecidas a seus leitores, a filosofia grega. Este artigo compara a reinterpretação de Filo do platonismo com o uso do dualismo platônico dos principais pais da igreja em suas diferentes formas a fim de mostrar a extensão da influência de Filo sobre a visão de Deus cristã.

Palavras-chave: Filo de Alexandria; Apologistas; Helenismo; Filosofia grega; Platonismo; Especulações cosmológicas.

The main goal of this article is to show Philo of Alexandria's influence on cosmological speculations of early Christian philosophy. As a Jew well versed in Greek classical thought, he created a precedent for the fusion of religion with Hellenism. When Christian apologists felt the necessity to defend their faith to the pagan world, they did so using methods and ideas already known to their readers, namely Greek philosophy. This article compares Philo's reinterpretation of Platonism with leading Church fathers' use of platonic dualism in its different forms in order to

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show the extent of Philo's influence on their view of God.

Keywords: Philo of Alexandria; apologists; Hellenism; Greek philosophy; Platonism; Cosmological speculations.

Introduction

When the topic of Hellenism is discussed, one must ask: what exactly is meant by Hellenization? Especially when talking about Philo of Alexandria, a Jew immersed in the Greek culture of a city founded by Alexander himself, the issue of his true identity rises. This culture was not only one of language and dress; it involved architecture, way of thinking, even religion. To what extent did Philo embrace his surrounding worldview? It is clear from his writings that he was a devout Jew, even promoting Judaism as the highest and purest philosophy, though in a way that differs from rabbinic Judaism precisely *because* of his vast use of Greek philosophy. Samuel Sandmel distinguishes between two aspects of Hellenism: philosophy and mystery religions. The blending of culture represented by Philo was clearly limited to the former, a Hellenization “without any loss of identity or loss of essential characteristics”, which enabled an implementation of Greek culture into his Judaism (SANDMEL, 1978, p. 258).

To some degree, this same process happened to the church fathers, who developed a Christian philosophy also linked to the prevailing Greek thought. Edwin Hatch (1995, p. 128-129) even goes as far as to say that it was Jewish philosophy that paved the way for early Christian philosophy, since both share two dominant elements: the allegorical method of interpretation and cosmological speculations. It is precisely here that Philo enters the picture, for he is considered the precursor of the allegorical method in biblical interpretation and whose theological-philosophical view of God finds echoes in later Christian thought (CROSS; LIVINGSTONE, 1997, p. 1279). Although the influence of Philo's allegory on the church fathers belonging to the Alexandrian School such as Clement and Origen is beyond dispute, his supposed influence on the church's view of God demands further assessment. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the extent and the real nature of Philo's influence on the cosmological speculations found in Christian philosophy and, more specifically, on the church fathers' view of God, since this derivation is not as clear. For such, the use of Greek philosophy by the church fathers will be analyzed in light of the sociological background of the 2nd and 3rd century Christian church.



The Philosophy of Philo

Philo was a diligent scholar of Greek philosophy and was intimately familiarized with its different schools and poets (FLUSSER, 2009, p. 219). Even his vocabulary and writing style was “modelled on that of classical authors”, and though he could be considered an eclectic³, it was Plato who exercised particular impact (see Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit* 13; MORRIS, 1987, p. 871). Though he does not provide a systematization of his thought, most of his theories are presented with consistency (MORRIS, 1987, p. 875), his philosophical understanding of Plato and others seen as a means of “strengthening and deepening his understanding of the God of Moses” (SCHOLER, 1997, p. xiii). That is what Philo is ultimately trying to prove: that philosophy and religion are one and the same, and that Judaism is the true philosophy (see Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, 8).

Philosophy in general and Plato in particular affected Philo’s concept of God. Evidently, being a Jew, he was against the polytheism of the mystery religions, but his Jewish conception of God could easily be harmonized with Greek philosophy, the foundation of which is the dualism between God, who is perfect, and creation, whose only perfection derives from God. Because of this large gap between God and the world, it would taint God’s perfection to come into contact with imperfect created matter. Such interaction is only possible through intermediaries, the *logoi*, who have a very ambivalent position “in so far as the powers must be identical with God if they are to be the means of participation in the deity for the finite, and yet they must be distinct from God if he is to remain outside all contact with the world” (MORRIS, 1987, p. 880-883). At times, the *logoi* seem to be in the philosophical realm as “heavenly principles”; in other places, they can be understood as “heavenly figures such as angels and archangels”. Thus, though God is unknowable, his actions and influence in the world can be known (BORGEM, 1984, p. 273).

Philo also uses the singular *Logos*⁴, which designates the bridge between God and creation in the sense that *it* is in contact with the world: the *Logos* is responsible for creating and maintaining the universe (Philo, *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit* 205; *De Somniis* 1.239; *De Confusione Linguarum* 147-148; *De Opificio Mundi* 25.

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³ “Philo’s (*Preliminary Studies*, 79) view that general education prepares for philosophy and his definition of philosophy as ‘the practice or study of wisdom, which is the knowledge of things divine and human and their causes’ are Stoic, as is also his division of philosophy into logic, ethics and physics. From the Platonic tradition he takes over the distinction between the ‘forms’ or ideas and the visible world, and between soul and body. From the Pythagoreans come speculations on numbers” (BORGEM, 1984, p. 256).

⁴ Since this paper is limited to the discussion of *Logos* only within the scope of philosophy, the issue of the Johannine *Logos* will not be approached.

Sandmel explains: “God, in relationship to the universe below Him, appears in that universe not in His totality, but only in His Logos”. And try as men might, using all their reasoning, they can never reach God, they can only reach the *Logos*, which is “the upward limit to which even the best mind can attain, as it is the lower limit to which To On [God] descends”. In other words, the *Logos* is the term used for the divine actions men can reason about (SANDMEL, 1978, p. 289-290).

God, who is perfect and good, is therefore pushed into total transcendence. Philosophy, for Philo, becomes the means of understanding God’s actions in the world. In a later section we will show how this view derives from Plato and will compare Philo’s adaptation of Platonic dualism with other current interpretations to then analyze how this affected early Christian philosophy.

The Era of the Apologists

40 Soon after its birth, Christianity spread beyond its Jewish backgrounds into Greek territory. This clash of ideologies led to questions concerning the new religion. In Tertullian’s question “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” is summarized the core of the conflict between Hellenists and Christians: how could two distinct worlds ever live side by side? Christianity was often misrepresented by outsiders as “immoral and barbarous atheism” (HATCH, 1995, p. 129). Such misconceptions led to the wish of justly portraying Christianity to the pagan world, a task the apologists took upon themselves. The apologists however went beyond simply opposing defamation and aimed to show that “Christianity was the embodiment of the noblest conceptions of Greek philosophy and was the truth *par excellence*”, thus seeking converts among their readers (BARNARD, 1997, p. 1-2). As Edwin Hatch (1995, p. 129) says, “the defense naturally fell into the hands of those Christians who were versed in Greek methods; and they not less naturally sought for points of agreement rather than of difference, and presented Christian truths in a Greek form”.

Some Christians, Tertullian himself included, wanted distance from Greek philosophy, because to do otherwise would be to allow paganism to taint the singularity of the Gospel. However, as an educated lawyer fluent in Greek and Latin and familiarized with current philosophic ideas, he “recognized that Christianity needed the language of reasoned discourse to interpret its doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity” (CHADWICK, 1966, p. 1-2). Others, among which Justin Martyr was the most enthusiastic, firmly believed in the possibility of harmonizing philosophy and Christianity. For Justin, Platonic philosophy had crucial elements for understanding the Gospel. Of course, Plato was not right about everything, but his comprehension of God as transcendent,



immutable and incorporeal was seen as accurate (CHADWICK, 1966, p. 1-2). Still others, specifically Clement and Origen, embraced Greek philosophy in order to explain Christianity and its metaphysical salvation (CHADWICK, 1966, p. 5).

Perhaps it was the fact that Philo was the Jewish counterpart and precursor of the apologists that led the Christian church to preserve Philo's writings, as opposed to fellow Jews who had no interest in foreign Greek philosophy. Sandmel (1978, p. 301) infers that "Christians preserved his writings, surely because they saw an affinity in their developed views and those he had written about". After all, it was Philo who incorporated Platonism into his thought to promote his religion to the world, and maybe Christians conceived him as a model for this fusion of Greek and Jew, reason and faith, Plato and God.

Platonic Interpretations

At the time when the church fathers began making use of Greek philosophy in their writings, Philo was not the only one to have interpreted and somewhat adapted Platonic thought. Basically, Plato's theory revolves around the concept of the world of ideas, where the true, perfect, unchangeable beings belong to. Everything outside that world is merely an imperfect copy. Of all the ideas, the highest one is the idea of the Good. To grasp the true meaning of things in the world of ideas, one cannot let the impressions of sense rule, but must exercise reason (CROSS; LIVINGSTONE, 1997, p. 1298-1299).

Platonism had been around for over five centuries by the time of our interest, its ideas being interpreted and reinterpreted by various others throughout the years. Harry Wolfson indicates that the church fathers could have come into contact with one or more of three different interpretations of Platonic ideas (WOLFSON, 1976, p. 257-258). The Aristotelian interpretation presented Plato's Forms as "self-subsistent real incorporeal beings", and identified the idea of the Good with God. Albinus represents the second group of interpreters, who portray the ideas as thoughts of God, as opposed to real beings (WOLFSON, 1976, p. 258).

Wolfson suggests that Philo renders a third interpretation, consisting of two stages. In the first stage, the ideas are the thoughts of God, and in the second, as real beings created by God (WOLFSON, 1976, p. 258). First, God created "the spiritual archetypes of all things". At the same time, in the second stage, these archetypes are "powers which bring the disordered material into order", by means of which "God is active in the world". In other words, when Philo refers to the *Logos*, or the *logoi*, he is making reference to the Platonic ideas either as God's thoughts or as real created beings (MORRIS, 1987, p. 882).

These examples of different Platonic interpretations show the variety of literature and ideas the church fathers could have come across. Can it be shown whence they drew the inspiration for their cosmological speculations and their conception of God?

The Church Fathers and the Platonic Ideas

In *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, Wolfson dedicated an entire chapter to analyze the *Logos*, different Platonic interpretations, and how they were found in writings of the church fathers.⁵ The interest here is especially the Platonic ideas in the realm of cosmological speculation, the foundation for the comprehension of God in the 2nd and 3rd century approach of Christian philosophy.

In Justin Martyr's (100-165 AD) writings, we encounter the concept of what he calls "incorporeals," his term for the Platonic ideas. These ideas are depicted as the thoughts of God, while God Himself is "a self-subsistent incorporeal real being distinct from the ideas" (WOLFSON, 1976, p. 258-259). Justin (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 2) uses specific words in the exact same sense as Albinus, and at the same time presents God following the Aristotelian interpretation, reflecting a mixture of these two views (BARNARD, 1997, p. 14). In relation to the *Logos*, Chadwick portrays Justin as the one responsible for introducing the concept of *Logos* into Christian theology, but he agrees with Wolfson that Justin's thought had no direct influence from Philo.⁶

Tertullian (160-220 AD) understands the Platonic ideas according to the Aristotelian interpretation as "ideas which have existed from eternity by the side of God and independently of God". He rejects this view in favor of a revised Philonic interpretation in which ideas, "after having existed from eternity as thoughts of God, have been brought forth into existence by God" (WOLFSON, 1976, p. 265). It is significant to reiterate that Tertullian did not want to prejudice Christianity by merging it with Greek philosophy, but he used philosophy as an educated means of better explaining the Gospel (CHADWICK, 1966, p. 1-2), adapting it accordingly.

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⁵ Wolfson analyzes all the church fathers that mention the *Logos*: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Augustine. I have decided to focus on Justin, Tertullian, Clement and Origen as examples of phenomena that certainly affected other writers who omitted the *Logos* discussion as well.

⁶ "It is not even certain that he [Justin Martyr] had read Philo" (CHADWICK, 1966, p. 4). Barnard (1997, p. 15) explains further: "The titles he applies to the *logos*... appear to have been taken from the biblical tradition or early Christian exegesis of the Old Testament rather than from Philo."



Both Clement of Alexandria and Origen, belonging to the Alexandrian school of theology, would have read Philo and in some way felt his influence in their writings (CROSS; LIVINGSTONE, 1997, p. 1279). Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) understands Plato the way Philo does, and incorporates these views into his Christian belief (Philo, *De Opificio Mundi* 5.20; *De Somniis* I.11.64; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, V.11). For him, the Christian *Logos* is first identical with God, then an independent personal being, but at the same time is still God. The ideas contained in the *Logos* have the same two stages of existence, in agreement with Philo (WOLFSON, 1976, p. 266-270).

Origen (182-254 AD) does not have a clear tendency to a certain line of interpretation. He distinguishes between a false and a correct theory of ideas. He discourses on the possibility of the existence of a real other world whence Jesus and the saints come (Origen, *De Principiis*, II.3. 6), but at the same time says the ideas, “whether as thoughts of God or as thoughts of man... cannot be identified with that other world,” because they are “in God,” a somewhat similar understanding to that of Albinus, but at the same time carrying elements found in Philo and in Neoplatonism (WOLFSON, 1976, p. 270-282).

It can be said, then, that while certain Philonic elements of the Platonic ideas can be found in some writings on the *Logos*, there are also enough dissimilarities. In Christian philosophy, “the *Logos* is never a creation of God, it is always God” (WOLFSON, 1976, p. 285). This has led modern scholars to stress the differences between Christian and Philonic views more than their similarities (CROSS; LIVINGSTONE, 1997, p. 1279). Thus, though some scholars might favor labeling the source of the Christian philosophy found in the church fathers, it is perhaps more fitting to associate their thought with the general Greek education of the time.

Conclusion

As a loyal Jew immersed in Hellenism with a love for classical authors, Philo demonstrated how to combine the Bible with Greek philosophy by providing not only the method, but the example of adapted cosmological speculations on God. The necessity of defending their faith led the apologists to seek an educated way of presenting Christianity. Like Philo did with Judaism, they found the answer in Greek philosophy. Though Clement and Origen, both of the Alexandrian school of theology, probably would have read Philo's works, since they adopted the allegorical method of interpretation as demonstrated by Philo, it is probable that the same did not happen with the other church fathers. When it comes to the conception of God, Christian philosophy undoubtedly drank from the well of Platonic



dualism, but its waters are so deep and diverse that source labeling makes little sense. Even the Alexandrian church fathers show no one line of interpretation, but a syncretism of ideas. In other words, while Philo's influence concerning allegory is quite clear, Philo's conception of God cannot be said to have directly impacted early Christian philosophy. The real nature of his effect on the church fathers is rather that Philo provided an example and a precedent for the fusion of biblical ideas with Greek philosophy in order to promote religion.

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