

Chapter 1

Pushing Back: 'Greek Thinking' vs. 'Jewish Thinking' is a Dualistic Error

Bradley Jersak

"What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?" —Tertullian

Backstory

A standard trend—virtually an assumption, even among some biblical scholars and theologians—is the common rejection of ‘Greek thinking’ for its supposed ‘Platonic Dualism’ that somehow eclipsed the Hebrew essence of Christian faith, infecting our theology with Hellenistic sophistry disguised as ‘doctrine.’

Some have traced this account to the German theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). At the heart of his project¹ was a desire to recover Christianity’s historical (i.e., Jewish) center and expunge it of compromising accretions (i.e., Greek thought). Said another way, he wanted to complete the Reformation project of purging the Jesus gospel of fourth-century neo-Platonic creedal dogma. In some ways, he was echoing St. Tertullian’s concerns in the late second century:

From philosophy come those fables and endless genealogies and fruitless questionings, those “words that creep like as doth a canker.” To hold us back from such things, the Apostle testifies expressly in his letter to the Colossians that we should beware of philosophy. “Take heed lest any man circumvent you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the tradition of men,” against the providence of the Holy Ghost. He had been in Athens where he had come to grips with the human wisdom which attacks and perverts truth, being itself divided up into its own swarm of heresies

by the variety of its mutually antagonistic sects. What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for we begin by believing that there is nothing else which we have to believe.²

With the repudiation of the popular ‘whipping boy’ comes the call (quite reasonably) to hear Jesus as a first century Jewish Rabbi, rather than a wandering Greek philosopher. This would seem fair, except that the assumptions involved are loaded with misrepresentations about the importance of Greek language and categories that are essential to the New Testament itself, and to the subsequent development of Christian orthodoxy.

I will expand my critique below, but for now, I propose that:

1. To pit Jewish thinking against Greek thinking is a dualistic error.
2. Plato was simply not a dualist. No good Platonist is. Plato and Plotinus were all about mediation and participation.
3. Plato was not a rationalist. It is *our* modernist (Cartesian) lenses that wrongly project Rene Descartes’ mind-material dualism onto Plato’s worldview.
4. So-called Greek thinking is not an infection that distorts the ‘biblical God.’ It is integrated and embedded within second temple Judaism and the New Testament itself.
5. Platonic Christianity is not dualistic. There is One (God) and all else participates in that God. The universe is a sacrament of the One who created it.

I will expand this proposal into an extended critique, but I would first exhort those Christians who claim to report what Plato did or did not

believe to do so only after studying Plato *in context* and *in his language*. For those who haven't, Dr. Simon Oliver's chapter in this work is a good primer.³

Critique

When I hear about the problem of 'Greek thinking,' it raises questions for me.

Let's start with *which* 'Greek thinking'? Polytheism or monotheism? Mythology, poetry, mysticism, or philosophy? Which philosophy? That of the Pre-Socratics? Socrates? Plato? Aristotle? Middle- or Neo-Platonism? Stoicism? Cynicism? Pythagoreanism? Epicureanism?

Which century? Epimenides or Homer in 600 BC? Plato or Aristotle around 300 BC? Or Philo's Hellenistic Judaism (early first century)? Shall we strip away the great legacy of Greek thinking that gave us the *logos*? Would the Gospel of John be purified by deleting its prologue? Or perhaps Hebrews and James should be removed from the New Testament, since they borrow the Platonic concepts of shadow/reality and immutability (and preach them to Jewish readers). Perhaps we've also failed to notice that the entire New Testament was written in Greek? The Reformers had already deleted the Greek books from the apostles' Bible. Why stop there?

Which 'Greek thinking'?

Again, not all Greek thinking is even close to the same. Much of this critique of 'Greek thinking' is based on faulty assumptions that come from reading the Greeks with Cartesian lenses (Rene Descartes, early 1600's). *Plato was not some Enlightenment era rationalist*. Though he used reason and the Socratic method, the point of his famous Cave analogy (*Republic*, 514a–520a) was *not* to condemn and escape material existence, but rather, that reason (*dianoia*) alone could not rescue us from the shadow of delusion. It might get us to the threshold of the Cave, but only through contemplation (*noesis*) could we perceive the Good—and that by revelation. Weil rightly called Plato the father of

mysticism, as we can see from Socrates' final appeal to the prophecies of Diotima expounding on love in *The Symposium* (210a - 212c).

So, what many critics of Plato are describing is actually a modernist projection through which they read (and translate⁴) the entirety of Greek literature. This shows how deeply conditioned we are to reading the Greeks through the very lenses we think they're critiquing. Ironically, it blinds us to Plato's own critique of rationalism and his actual epistemology, the core of which is contemplative.

Which 'Dualism'?

Dualism is derided these days with insufficient thought to careful definition. When I hear 'dualism,' I always ask, 'which one?' because I don't want to assume. Sometimes the dualism referred to is the hostility of us-them exclusionary thinking. Amen. "For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one [Jews and Greeks!] and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14). After all, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). So, if there is neither Jew nor Greek in Christ, why this effort to create a Jew-Greek dualism by the critics of Greek thinking?

Others, speaking of Greek thinking or of Platonism, are referring to 'dualism' as the separation of reality into two realms: this material world and the invisible world. Here, we need to be careful to emphasize the real problem. The problem is *not* that there are two realms, but rather, the error is in thinking that they are *separate*, and that the material realm is to be rejected and escaped (as in so much Christian theology today).

Yes, this notion of anti-material dualism is Gnostic but it is not Platonic in the least. Not all 'Greek thinking' is dualistic, and especially not in the Pythagorean cosmology of Plato. The dualism we would and should reject is the kind of Gnosticism that the Greek theologians of the early church overcame—how? They defeated Gnosticism by carefully employing Platonic categories against it.⁵ Even in Aristotle's critique of

his former mentor, he says concerning Plato's forms/particulars distinction, that he was decidedly *not* a dualist.⁶ Indeed, *no good Platonist is a dualist* because the forms *always* form and the particulars *always* participate in the forms (aka ideas).

On the other hand, are there no true dualities? Here's one: "Let your kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven." Here's another: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and dust corrupt, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." Here's another: "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord," and so on. "Jewish thinking" includes a range of quite valid dualities. But perhaps they are not dual-isms if the *-ism* implies separation rather than participation and/or mediation.

What the Greeks (and especially Plato) contribute is their quest to show how divine truth, beauty, and justice is *mediated* into our world by love. "Mediation" implies and admits that two 'somethings' (Creator/created, transcendence/immanence, eternity/time, 'in heaven' and 'on earth') are in essential relationship and mutual participation. It was primarily Greek philosophy and Christian theology that worked together on this idea of mediation of the Good. The Greeks show us how this happens through Christ as the *logos made flesh*. That is not something we want to erase from our faith.

Jewish vs. Greek?

Moreover, the history of thinking cannot be categorized simply into Jewish-Christian versus Greco-Roman. Rather, certain streams of Judaism and Roman religion held in common a notion of God as a naked supreme will and divine violence, while Christianity and the kinds of Greek philosophy it engaged were about a higher Good manifest as beauty, truth, and justice of which self-will and violence had no part.

As Greek thought was incorporated into Alexandrian Judaism and Eastern Christian theology, it enabled us to see that the wrath of God was a metaphor and literalizing it was idolatry. Jewish Rabbis (such as Philo) prior to Christ began to see this as they interacted with Hellenism

in Alexandria. The Jewish image of the tribal, patriarchal God of Israel who ordered genocide gave way to the prophetic vision of a God who creates, loves, and fills the *cosmos*. In this, the Jews found some Greeks to be good interlocutors, and this was common in second temple Judaism. Let me repeat that: second temple and New Testament Judaism (i.e., Paul in Athens) conversed with and incorporated Greek thinking helpfully. *Not* to see this is, in fact, a false dualism!

Dramatic Faith vs. Sterile Philosophy?

Another mistaken (and frankly, sloppy) idea that is bandied about as a truism is that Jewish thinking was dynamic and narrational and that Greek thinking (and language) was something sterile, analytical, and rationalistic. The notion ignores the poetry and mythology of the Greek tradition—the great triumphs and tragedies of Homeric saga. And these critics seem unaware of the image-driven roots of the Greek language that fill the minds and undergird the imaginations of the great philosopher-mystics. They were every bit as into story, supra-rational reflection, and pictorial language as the Jewish prophets ... and both Jews and Greeks together were primarily concerned with how their tales of the Good are to be expressed by the just men and women whose aim it is to construct a just society.

There's a start, but you can see how poorly informed von Harnack's disciples seem to be. And the irony of the current anti-Greek trend is that it attacks rationalism (good) and gnostic dualism (good), while scape-goating the very Greeks who overcame them (oops). Even Tertullian seemed unaware that the earliest seeds of proto-Gnosticism and the Colossian heresy were most likely aberrations of Judaism.⁷

Naked Monotheism, Trinity, and Mediation

Another tension at play is that some see the Greek notion of the 'One' as undermining trinitarian theology with bare monotheism. But in context (*Republic*), Plato's idea of the One was primarily an attack on the

fickle and wicked polytheism of the pagan pantheon of gods. In effect, he was saying, “There aren’t hundreds of gods who are conniving bastards. There is one God, and that God is perfectly Good.” This certainly lays the groundwork for classical theism’s Christian doctrine of *divine simplicity*, which states that while God is triune, the Father, Son, and Spirit are “one in essence and undivided.”⁸ That is, God is without *parts*—and the being of God (infinite Love) is identical to the attributes of God. In other words, every attribute of God is ever only a facet of the Love of God—*never* “love but also...”

How then does early Greek thinking anticipate trinitarian language? Again, Plato leads the way. Where the Father is the Sun, the Son is the light proceeding from the Sun, and the Spirit is the experience of light as it enters and illumines our eyes. As the apostle John will say, “The *true light that gives light* to everyone was coming into the world” (John 1:9). Or as the Epistle to the Hebrews says, “The Son is the *radiance of God’s glory* and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:3). Or as the dogma of the Greek Creed says (dispensable to von Harnack, apparently), “Light from light, true God of true God.”

There is no lack of such confessions in early Christian theology, composed by Jewish believers like Paul who had both rabbinical training and a classical Greek education. The combination empowered the early church to transpose the Jewish *shema* into a Trinitarian confession, rather than leaving us a less-than-divine Messiah. But maybe that’s the draw for some?

Immutability and Divine Love: Stasis is not static

The trend further assumes, wrongly, that supposedly Greek-based doctrines such as *divine immutability* would injure God’s relationality. How so? Open theologians, for example, regularly misconstrue the Greek word *stasis*, as if it means *static*, rather than *constant*—as in unflinching love! Immutable love hardly denies dynamic relationship.

The fact is that Christian immutability is a Platonic repudiation of the pagan belief that God could turn his back on you. Only immutable love enables us to say, “There is nothing you can do to make God love you more or less. God will never leave you or forsake you.” James himself (writing to Jews!) calls God “the Father of Lights and in him is *no shadow or turning*.” This means that God loves us no matter what. The *stasis* is that God is constant, stable, and faithful in love and to his covenant. God *is* a continuous, constant flow of self-giving love that never increases (because divine love is already infinite) and never decreases (because infinite love cannot be diminished).

The god who is *not* immutable is not *more* relational. Such gods are unreliable, prone to tantrums, incredibly arbitrary, subject to emotional rollercoasters, and reactive rather than responsive.

Jesus Christ, by contrast, “is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Our immutable God is love, and this love, though constant, is experienced in a variety of ways that reflect changes in me, not in God. Whether I turn to Love or from Love, that Love is always for me, always with me, and always flowing over me. I know this by experience, but I also thank ‘Greek thinking’ for confirming it.

Hook, Line, and Sinker?

Early church Platonism/Neo-Platonism is complex because various authors appropriated aspects of Platonic thought (from various eras) according to their own interpretations and misinterpretations ... and then integrated them in a variety of ways (some helpful and some not). I’m thinking here of how St. Augustine’s discovery of Neoplatonism helped him wrestle with the leftovers of his previous Manichean dualism and made Christianity possible for him. And, while he’s thrilled that Neoplatonism counters his previous cult with an image of God that is finally trying to imagine God as “incorruptible and inviolable and unchangeable” (VII.1-7), he is also critical of what that philosophy was missing. Particularly “the Word made flesh.”

Mindful of both the contributions and limitations of his new discoveries, he adopts Neoplatonic practice in service of Christian devotion. Specifically, he turns inward, opening the eyes of his soul where he is captivated by the vision of God:⁹

And being thence admonished to return to myself, I entered even into my inward self, Thou being my Guide: and able I was, for Thou wert become my Helper. And I entered and beheld with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light Unchangeable. Not this ordinary light, which all flesh may look upon, nor as it were a greater of the same kind, as though the brightness of this should be manifold brighter, and with its greatness take up all space.... He that knows the Truth, knows what that Light is; and he that knows It, knows Eternity. Love knoweth it. O Truth Who art Eternity! and Love Who art Truth! and Eternity Who art Love! Thou art my God, to Thee do I sigh night and day.¹⁰

My point here is that Christian theologians, starting with the New Testament, exercised discernment in adopting or adapting Greek philosophy for their purposes. Sometimes they erred. Sometimes they excelled. But it was never simply a hook, line, and sinker affair.

Body-Soul Dualism

An important dialectic occurs in Christian doctrinal development of the soul and the body, or flesh and spirit, already in Christ and in Paul. It doesn't despise the material world—it just doesn't regard it as ultimate. It doesn't despise the material body—it dignifies it.

Even then, being honest, Paul can sound as tired and ready to leave his “earthly tent” as much as Plato had. And while I affirm the wholistic Jewish anthropology of embodied souls and resist Greek notions of disembodied spirits, I want to beware of anathematizing the apostle who said, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” But here is the point: Paul was not looking to become a bodiless spirit. He longed

for the resurrection of his body. Let's listen carefully to Paul in context:

¹For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ²Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, ³because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. ⁴For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

⁶Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

—2 Corinthians 5:1-10 (NIV)

A certain (mis)interpretation of Origen imagines a body-soul dualism derived from Plato that the church came to critique. Certainly Gregory of Nyssa, perhaps the greatest of all Christian Platonists, clarifies and corrects where needed. In *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and elsewhere, he corrects any notion that our bodily state was the fall of pre-existent souls. That was never what Origen meant when speaking of humanity's return to God. More likely, we should read him as describing the restoration of unbroken relationship—as Christ did in the parable of the prodigal son. But Gregory leaves absolutely no doubt: union with God is not simply 'going back' to Edenic innocence. We are

moving forward by *theosis* to our glorification. Nor is it about abandoning this life for a bodiless existence (despite what Plato might have believed). Rather, the Incarnation ensures our *telos* in a glorified resurrection existence.

And yet ... while Paul sees the glorification of the body in resurrection as an integrated state, he does not overplay this in the way that some modern, supposedly “Hebrew thinking” people do. There is enough of a body-soul duality in Scripture that I cannot castigate the author to the Hebrews for his vision of Mount Zion, where he sees “the spirits of the righteous made perfect,” even while apparently awaiting the final resurrection.

Hebrews 12 speaks of the cloud of witnesses and these perfect, righteous spirits worshipping at Mount Zion after death and prior to the general resurrection. (Of course, the author is a Hebrew Platonist after the pattern of Philo). Even in the OT, there are sufficient Scriptures on the nature of *sheol* that describe a dreary, intermediate bodiless existence. Some sound like annihilationist texts while others do not. But unlike the Greek myths, they do not regard that to be our final state of existence.

We recall that Paul’s brilliant sermon in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) was proceeding swimmingly until he proclaimed the resurrection of the dead. Some sneered at that point (vs. 32), a reaction that is not unheard of in Christian circles today. Gratefully, N.T. Wright now leads the charge to remember (rightly) that a spiritual existence apart from the body in some heavenly realm is not our final Christian *telos*.¹¹ Our hope is in a resurrection after the pattern of Christ in a renewed world.

The Righteous Man

Finally, as I think of the way Plato serves as a prophet whose foresight is fulfilled in Christ, I would come at it this way: If there is a God *perhaps* (kudos to John Caputo), a generative, organizing principle to the universe, then I believe—I premise, I theorize, I hypothesize—that

God is love. I want to believe this; I prefer to believe this. And actually, I'm not embarrassed to want others to believe it too. In my opinion, it might be morally better for everyone to practice belief in God/Love than either a no-God of determinism/chaos or a violent God of hatred. If there were an ultimate reality worthy of the label "God," I would subjectively envision that to include the perfection of all that we call "Good," including truth, beauty, and justice (a la Plato).

Second, if that God were embodied and expressed in our world, I would not look for a glittering diamond, a towering sequoia, a majestic whale, or a noble eagle. I would look to see the divine enfleshed in the life of a man or woman who incarnates Plato's highest forms: beauty, truth, and justice mediated by love. I would watch for these divine qualities in a flesh-and-blood person who is willing to lay down self-centeredness and the will-to-power in order to live and die for love. I would immerse myself in that person's life and teaching and do my damndest to orient my own life around such an example.

Moreover, according to Glaucon in Plato's *Republic* (300 BC), if such a person did show up, the powers that be (individual ego, religious systems, or political hegemony) would feel so threatened that they would incarcerate, strip, torture, and crucify that person. Sounds familiar. It's worth hearing this prediction verbatim:

It becomes an easy matter, I fancy, to unfold the tale of the sort of life that awaits each. [361e] We must tell it, then; and even if my language is somewhat rude and brutal, you must not suppose, Socrates, that it is I who speak thus, but those who commend injustice above justice. What they will say is this: that such being his disposition the just man will have to endure the lash, the rack, chains, [362a] the branding-iron in his eyes, and finally, after every extremity of suffering, he will be crucified...¹²

What Glaucon, Socrates, and Plato did not foresee was that this manifestation would be an Incarnation, where one man would unite in

himself the fully divine and the fully human (unlike the Homeric half-human, half-gods). And what he did not anticipate was the resurrection of the crucified One. So, Christ fulfills the dimly seen prophecies of both Isaiah and Socrates through the hypostatic union, where heaven and earth become one through the mediation of a God who participates in fallen human nature, not defiled by contact, but rather, healing and restoring all things.

I've discovered my own belief in such a God and such a person, who indeed provides moral guidance and the grace to become just people who build a just society. Moreover, this person proffered a God who incites self-giving love instead of hatred and terror. I wish more people—more Christians especially—would find their way to the Cross to see that love. And after the Cross... Well, that's another faith statement.

Endnotes

1. Most famously, Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (*The History of Dogma*, 1886–89) and *Das Wesen des Christentums* (*What Is Christianity?* 1900).

2. Tertullian, *The Prescriptions against the Heretics*, 7 in S.L. Greenslade (ed./trans.), *Early Latin Theology, Library of Christian Classics V* (1956), 36. <http://www.tertullian.org/articles/greenslade_prae/greenslade_prae.htm>.

3. And for the definitive guide that should have ended these fallacies decades ago, Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*.

4. Cf. Lazar Puhalo's chapter on the nous.

5. Cf. Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*. His book is a masterpiece in delineating what specific elements of Platonism the fathers carefully rejected (and why) and which they adapted to win the Greeks and refute the heretics. Cf. also The Rev. Dr. Andrew Louth, "The Necessity of Platonism for Christian Theology," King's College Chapel, January 17, 2021. <<https://copiousflowers.com/2021/01/26/the-necessity-of-platonism-for-christian-theology/>>.

6. Political philosopher Phillip Blond says, "Forms are not full self-sufficient ontic presences but rather participatory attendances of the highest shapes that beings can fulfil." (Phillip Blond, "Introduction," *Post-Secular Philosophy*

(1998), 42). Blond adds, “Even Aristotle ... acknowledges that Plato’s teacher Socrates ‘did not treat universals as separate’ (*Met* 1078b30),” 63n60.

7. On the Jewish roots of Gnosticism, see Simone Petrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* HarperCollins (1993). On the Colossian heresy, see N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

8. Confessed weekly in the Orthodox divine liturgy, just prior to the Creed.

9. Plato, *The Republic*, Book 7, and Paul, in Ephesians 1.

10. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10.16 (trans. E.B. Pusey)

<<https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/Pusey/book07?>

11. Cf. N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2007).

12. Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 & 6 (trans. Paul Shorey) Harvard University Press, 1969. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>>.