

William Heegaard

L&S 20C The Bible in Western Culture

Professor Ronald Hendel

The Interpretative Differences between Philo and The Secret Revelation of John

Comparing Philo's biblical interpretations with those made in The Secret Revelation of John illuminates the differences between Platonic thought as it is applied to Judaism and Christianity. Through his writing, Philo attempts to legitimize Judaic belief by merging it with the philosophical theories of Platonism. Similarly, the authors of The Secret Revelation of John retell Genesis in a way that brings Christianity into agreement with Plato's theories. While both texts carry Platonic elements, The Secret Revelation of John is infused with Christian apocalypticism, leading to stark differences in its interpretation of Genesis 1-3.

This essay attempts to evaluate these differences as caused by the presence, or absence, of apocalyptic theory. I start by examining the nuances of Philo's interpretation of Genesis, putting his writing in the context of his Judaic heritage and Platonic education. I then outline the theories of The Secret Revelation of John, tracing the apocalyptic influence. Within my analysis I use three specific areas of Genesis that are interpreted by both sources to offer acute means of comparison: God's formation of the Garden of Eden, the creation of Eve, and the Original Sin. I end with the argument that while both texts entertain a similar view of a transcendent god, they differ in their goals of interpretation, and therefore in their interpretations themselves.

Philo's interpretation of Genesis 1-3 exemplifies his lifelong attempt to assert his cultural identity while maintaining academic reputability. Philo originally studied Hellenism, and only later did he inquire into his Jewish heritage, subsequently resolving to "concentrate all his energies on the task of harmonizing his ancestral faith with his philosophical world view"

(Winston 1). Philo's dual interests are reflected in his writing. He uses Platonic cosmology – the theory that there is the ideal *World of Forms*, which is governed by wisdom and used as a model for the *Cosmos*, our world of emotion and opinion – to argue that there cannot be an anthropomorphic god nor a paradise on Earth. He writes, “Let not such impiety ever occupy our thoughts as for us to suppose that God cultivates the land and plants paradises... for even the whole world would not be a worthy place or habitation for God” (Philo 43).

Instead, God's Garden of Eden represents the imitation of heavenly virtue that is planted on Earth. Philo uses virtue, an idea discussed at length in The Republic, as an early replacement for the word paradise and continues to discuss it throughout his writing, describing how the “the road which leads to it is philosophy in three of its parts—the reasoning, and the moral, and the physical part. It also includes action; for virtue is art conversant about the whole life; and in life all actions are exhibited” (Philo 56). By mentioning virtue at the outset of his writing and using it throughout his analysis, Philo proves his academic legitimacy to the prevailing Greek culture.

Other areas of his biblical interpretation illustrate more of this attempt to walk the line between Platonism and Judaism. Genesis 9-15 describes how God created the trees and rivers of Eden. Since God in the Platonic sense is not anthropomorphic and would not literally plant trees or dig out rivers, Philo interprets these acts as the infusion of particular virtues into the soul. Some of the trees represent virtues of science, such as astronomy and geometry, and some symbolize virtues of art, such as architecture and metalwork. The river flowing out from Eden, in Philo's academic opinion, stands a metaphor for generic moral virtue, and its four distributaries represent four the moral subsets: prudence, temperance, courage, and justice. In this way, Philo reconciles the literal Judaic story with the Platonic theory of an internal morality and a transcendent higher power.

Philo's comments on the creation of Eve further display his interpretive style. He asks specific questions about the text to disregard the possibility of a verbatim meaning, saying, "The literal statement conveyed in these words is a fabulous one; for how can any one believe that a woman was made of a rib of a man...? And what hindered God, as he had made man out of the earth, from making woman in the same manner?" (Philo 19). Instead, Philo argues, the story of Eve represents the creation of human reasoning power through the joining of the mind (man), and the external senses (woman). This explanation satisfies Platonism through the discussion of human reason while remaining textually defendable.

Philo continues to use the interaction of the mind and external sensation in his discussion of Original Sin. He argues that the serpent is a metaphor for pleasure, which binds the mind and external sensation, also discussed as love and desire. In addition, since God is all-knowing, it is only plausible that he arranged the soul in this way on purpose. Philo clarifies that the mind, or man is hierarchically more important than external sensation, below external sensation lays pleasure. Only when the serpent beguiles Eve, and subsequently Adam, does God inflict punishment. In other words, God's punishment relates to the reversal the soul's order, an argument that satisfies both biblical theory on sin and Platonic philosophy concerning the soul's hierarchical structure.

The Secret Revelation of John uses the Bible to strike a different balance, one between the philosophical elements of Hellenism and the apocalyptic, esoteric nature of Christianity. According to this Gnostic interpretation, the god that created the Earth was the son of Sophia, who represents wisdom. She created him in ignorance and named him Yaldabaoth. Yaldabaoth illustrates the element of anthropomorphism present in the story: he has friends, experiences jealousy, and is essentially evil. He also physically travels between the higher realm and Earth, a

key element of apocalypticism. In this way, The Secret Revelation of John greatly contrasts with Philo's writings over the nature of the god in Genesis. However, the story places Yaldabaoth in the context of an entire kingdom of higher beings, describing the *true* God as illimitable, unsearchable, immeasurable and ineffable (Secret 2). "He does not exist in something inferior to him, since everything exists in him. For it is he who establishes himself... He is eternal, since he does not need anything. For he is total perfection" (Secret 2). This portrayal is almost identical to Philo's, and shows the Platonic characteristics present in the story. The Secret Revelation of John thus combines Platonist theory with Christian apocalypticism by placing the evil Yaldabaoth in the context of the philosophical realm of the *true* God.

The effects of this union are better seen in the retelling of three specific areas of Genesis. In discussing the creation of the Garden of Eden, The Secret Revelation of John focuses on the fact that Yaldabaoth organized everything in our world "according to the model of the first aeons which had come into being, so that he might create them like the indestructible ones" (Secret 6). The "indestructible ones" parallels Plato's *World of Forms*, suggesting an attempt to legitimize the text's abstract interpretation of Genesis, and its radical argument that the god that created us is evil, in the eyes of the pervading Greek culture. However The Secret Revelation of John does not connect the *World of Forms* with our internal moral struggle, as Philo does. Instead, it focuses on the external conflict between Yaldabaoth and Sophia, which caters directly to the apocalyptic battle between good and evil. Sophia tries to lock Yaldabaoth in "a luminous cloud, she [places] a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it" (Secret 5). In addition, the theoretically evil nature of our worldly creator resounds with a more apocalyptic mindset, which argues for the presence of two eras: the present, which is ruled by evil; and the future, which is ruled by good. The comments on the creation of Earth and The Garden of Eden

illustrate the interpretational imbalance between Platonism and apocalypticism, providing a possible reason for its rejection by the public.

When discussing the creation of Eve, The Secret Revelation of John shows a much stronger Platonic influence. According to the text, when Yaldabaoth realized that Adam was more intelligent than him, he “threw him to the lowest region of all matter” (Secret 9). However, the *true* God “sent, through his beneficent Spirit and his great mercy, a helper to Adam, luminous Afterthought which comes out of him, who is called Life” (Secret 9). The Afterthought hid in Adam, and when Yaldabaoth tried to surgically remove it, it manifested itself as Eve. This interpretation parallels many Platonic beliefs. First, the *true* God is not anthropomorphic, and instead interacts with Earth through his Spirit, which is analogous to Philo’s Logos. Second, Adam now has an internal wisdom that guides and protects him. This idea corresponds to the Platonic theory of internal morality. While Yaldabaoth may represent an apocalyptic theory of God, the *true* God’s actions and creations correlate more with Platonism.

Finally, the discussion of Original Sin in The Secret Revelation of John differs from Philo’s interpretation in that the serpent gave Adam the wickedness of begetting, lust, and destruction, but “Adam knew that he was disobedient to him the chief ruler due to light of the Afterthought which is in him, which made him more correct in his thinking that the chief ruler” (Secret 11). Instead of Original Sin representing the disorder of the soul, as Philo argued, it instead acts as a metaphor for the conscious control of potential evil that allows us to combat true evil and eventually ascend to the Devine Realm. In this way, the text promotes revolt against the evil world rulers and “offers hope, for in the end all humanity will be saved and brought into the eternal light” (King 5). The combination of discussion concerning internal consciousness and external moral struggle illustrates the line The Secret Revelation of John walks between

apocalypticism and Platonism.

In conclusion, the interpretive differences between Philo's writing and The Secret Revelation of John stem from the respective amalgamations of Platonism with traditional Judaic thought and Platonism with apocalyptic Christianity. Philo's analysis hinges on using the literal text as a metaphor for the creation of virtue and the merging of the mind, external sensation and pleasure. The Secret Revelation of John puts Genesis in the context of a greater divine story allowing the externality of apocalypticism and the internality of Platonism to be addressed simultaneously. Using each text's comments on the formation of the Garden of Eden, the creation of Eve, and the beginning of Original Sin as reference points, the differences between the interpretations are clear. However these texts are just two of many that have used the Bible to shape Western thought into what it is today.

Works Cited

The Secret Revelation of John. “Nag Hammadi II and IV (abridged).” Trans. Frederik Wisn.p.

n.d. Print.

King, Karen. The Secret Revelation of John. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. Print.

Philo of Alexandria. Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis 2-3. “Legum Allegoriae (abridged).”

Trans. C. D. Yonge. n.p. n.d. Print.

Winston, David. Ed. Arthur Green. Philo and the Contemplative Life. “Jewish Spirituality: From

the Bible Through the Middle Ages.” New York: Crossroad, 1989. Print.