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THE GREEKS, PUPILS OF THE HEBREWS

John Moorhead

In early Christian literature* one frequently encounters discussions of the legitimacy of the church taking over elements of pagan culture. Frequently this procedure was justified with reference to a biblical analogy: just as the children of Israel had spoiled the Egyptians in the time of Moses, so, with due precaution, it was proper for the faithful to avail themselves of whatever was found to be true in the teachings of Plato, for example, 'since these things will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason'.¹ But such broadmindedness entailed a difficulty. If there was some truth in the teaching of such a one as Plato, who stood beyond the limits of God's revelation contained in Scripture and passed on within the church, how had it come to be there? Various ways of overcoming this problem were suggested. Perhaps φιλοσοφία was a special gift of God, or perhaps some pagan thinkers had been able to derive truths even of a religious nature by unaided reason. But many early Christian thinkers adopted an explanation which neatly reversed the concept of spoiling the Egyptians. The pagan Greeks, it was suggested, had been the pupils of the inspired Hebrews. In the following pages I propose to examine the history of this concept in early Christian writings and to offer some comment on the intellectual needs it was felt to answer.

The first Christian writer to make use of this theory seems to have been Justin Martyr. In his first *Apologia*, written early in the second half of the second century, Justin discusses a passage in *Isaiah* in which God urges his people to be free of wrong-doing, and concludes: 'If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken' (Is. 1:19f). Justin states that this thought was borrowed by Plato, when he wrote 'The blame is his who chooses: God is blameless'.² Justin immediately goes on to point out that Moses was older than the Greek writers, and that all they had to say concerning the immortality of the soul, punishment after death, and the heavenly bodies was based on the prophets, not

* Standard abbreviations: CCSL = *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*; CSEL = *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*; PG = *Patrologia Graeca*; PL = *Patrologia Latina*.

1. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* 2.115 (trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, New York 1978). See too Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.40.61 (CCSL 32 p. 74f), followed by Cassiodorus, *Institutiones* 1.28.4 (ed. R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford 1937, p. 70f).

2. Plato, *De Republica* 10. ed. Steph. 617; trans. Paul Shorey, London/Camb. Mass. 1935.

properly understood.³ Later he gives examples: Plato's teaching on the making of the world is similar to the earlier account of Moses in *Genesis*, and his opinion concerning the role of the letter X in creation is based on a misunderstanding of a passage of Moses (Num. 21:8f) which describes the setting up of a bronze serpent.⁴

The theory of Greek indebtedness to the Hebrews is more strongly expressed by the author of the *Cohortatio ad Gentiles*, a work which has been attributed to Justin but which appears likely to have been written in the later second century or the third century. Throwing all caution to the winds he names Orpheus, Homer, Solon, Pythagoras and Plato as having been among those who went to Egypt and learned from the works of Moses.⁵ It was in Egypt that Plato learned of the one true God,⁶ and a reference in the *Timaeus* to those who are dear to God refers to Moses and the other prophets.⁷ However, fearing the Areopagus, Plato had to conceal his indebtedness to Moses, and he wrote of the creation of heaven at a time (χρόνος) rather than a day (ἡμέρα, Gen. 1.5) lest he be denounced in the presence of the Athenians.⁸

Some early Latin Christian writers were aware of this theory. It occurs fleetingly in two works written by the African Tertullian in 197. In his *Ad Nationes* Tertullian suggests that the philosophers may have read the divine scriptures out of curiosity, as coming from an older period.⁹ His *Apologeticum* is more forthright:

Who among the poets and who among the sophists did not drink from the fountain of the prophets? The philosophers quenched their intellectual thirst at the same place, so that the things which they have are from our people.¹⁰

Writing at a slightly later date, the mysterious Minucius Felix was more explicit: concerning the end of the world,

3. Justin, *Apologia* 1.44 (ed. J. K. T. Otto, *Iustini philosophi et martyris Opera* 1, Jena 1876 (= *Corpus apologetarum christianorum saeculi secundi* 1), pp. 122-4).

4. *ibid.* 1.59f (ed. Otto, pp. 158-62). It must be said in partial defence of the implausible argument concerning the serpent that traditional Christian exegesis of this passage of *Numbers* has seen in it a prototype of the Cross (John 3:14, followed for example by Augustine *Civ. Dei* 10.8; *In Ioh* 12.11).

5. *Cohortatio ad Gentiles* 14 (ed. Otto, *Iustini . . . Opera* 2, Jena 1879 (= *Corpus . . .* 3), p. 58).

6. *ibid.* 20 (p. 70).

7. *ibid.* 26 (p. 90).

8. *ibid.* 22 (p. 76); 33 (p. 110), where the reference is to *Timaeus* ed. Steph. 38B.

9. Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 2.2.5 (CCSL 1 p. 42). On the date I rely on Timothy D. Barnes, *Tertullian*, Oxford 1971, p. 55.

10. Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 47.2 (CCSL 1, p. 163). According to the interpolated *Fragmentum Fuldense*, Solon taught 'non aliter quam propheticae' (*4 p. 120), but this is not to say Solon gained from study of the prophetic books.

the disputations of the philosophers are the same as our teachings, not because we have followed in their footsteps, but because they imitated the shadow [*umbra*] of the truth which they found in the divine preaching of the prophets, changing it somewhat. First Pythagoras, and then outstandingly Plato, passed on the teaching of rebirth, half correctly but with changes.¹¹

But speculation along these lines was much more common among eastern authors. According to Tatian, the Greeks

drew [Moses'] doctrines [as] from a fountain. For many of the sophists among them, stimulated by curiosity, endeavoured to adulterate whatever they learned from Moses and from those who have philosophized like him.¹²

Another writer of the late second century, Theophilus of Antioch, held that the poets and philosophers stole their predictions from the prophets, and stole other things from both the law and the prophets.¹³ A more extensive discussion occurs in the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria. Commenting on a text in John's Gospel, 'All that came before me were robbers and thieves' (John 10, 8), Clement states:

There is in philosophy, even if stolen as was the fire by Prometheus, a tender spark capable of being fanned into flame, a trace [*ἵχνος*] of wisdom and a divine impulse. Well, the 'thieves and robbers' are the philosophers among the Greeks, who received fragments of truth from the Hebrew prophets before the coming of the Lord, although not with complete knowledge. These they proclaimed as their own teaching, debasing some things, treating others sophistically with their ingenuity, and discovering other things, for perchance they had the 'spirit of perception' [Ex. 28:3].¹⁴

Plato was familiar with the Old Testament and took many things from 'our books' into his own system of doctrine, for as Numenius the Pythagorean writes, 'What is Plato but a Moses speaking in Attic Greek?'¹⁵ Elsewhere, Clement supplies an intimidatingly long list of Greeks who plagiarized 'barbarian philosophy', which at the very least constitutes impressive testimony to the literary culture of Alexandria in the second century,¹⁶ and suggests that even the miracle stories related by Greek authors were plagiarized from

11. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 34.5f (ed. and trans. Jean Beaujeu, Paris 1964, p. 58).

12. Tatian *Ad Graecos* 40; trans. B.P. Pratten, Edinburgh 1883, (= *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* 3), p. 43.

13. Theophilus, *Ad Autoclytum* ed. and trans. R. M. Grant, Oxford 1970, 1.14, 2.37 (*fin.*).

14. Clement *Stromateis* (PG 8) 1.17.

15. *ibid.*, 1.22. Numenius was a Pythagorean of the second century A.D. Text in E.-A. Leemans, *Numenius van Apamea*, Brussels 1937, (= *Academie Royale de Belgique Classes des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques* vol. 37), no. 10 (p. 130).

16. *ibid.* 5.14.

the Old Testament. For example, we are told that when Aeacus climbed a hill at Delphi to pray that the common God would have mercy on Greece, thunder was heard, clouds built up, and heavy rain fell; clearly, this is related to the occasion when Samuel called upon the Lord, and 'the Lord sent thunder and rain' (I Sam. 12:18).¹⁷

Writing in Alexandria shortly after Clement, Origen develops the same theme in a tentative way. In his *Contra Celsum*, Origen confesses that it is not altogether clear whether Plato hit upon some matters by chance or whether, as some people think, he met philosophical interpreters of the Jewish tradition on a voyage to Egypt and learned from them.¹⁸ An opinion of the Greeks concerning the conflagration of the world was probably borrowed from the very ancient people of the Hebrews,¹⁹ while Plato's dictum that no earthly poet could properly sing of the region above the heavens where the ultimate being lives was doubtless written, as some people have said, after he had studied the sayings of the prophets.²⁰ Origen's hesitant discussion, with its intriguing references to the opinions of 'some people', is altogether different from the laborious and heavy-handed discussion of Eusebius of Caesarea.²¹ Eusebius sets himself to show that the Greeks imitated Hebrew dogmas. It is clear that they stole from the Egyptians and Chaldeans, but their greatest gain was from the Hebrews, from whom they derived even the alphabet. There are close similarities between the teachings of the philosophers, particularly Plato, and the Old Testament. One of Eusebius' examples may stand for all: the division of the state into twelve which Plato recommended is similar to the twelve tribes of Israel. Eusebius' lengthy discussion operates on this level.

Various later patristic writers make the same point, while expressing it in various ways. Gregory of Nazianzus, writing in about 380, states it as a personal opinion that the Greeks took material from the books of Moses.²² According to a later patriarch of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, if the Greeks came to see God as incorporeal it was after talking with 'our people' in Egypt.²³ The fifth century author Theodoret of Cyrrhus states that all rivers and seas flow from Moses. Anaxagoras, Pythagoras and Plato took elements of truth from him, and Socrates learned from his fellow Greeks what Moses had taught of God.²⁴ Plato and the Platonists took things from

17. *ibid.* 6.3.

18. Origen, *Contra Celsum* (PG 8), 4.39 (*ad fin.*)

19. *ibid.* 5.15.

20. *ibid.* 6.19.

21. Eusebius, *Evangelica Praeparatio*, ed. and trans. E.H. Gifford, Oxford, 1903, Books 10-12.

22. *In laudem Basilii magni* 23 (PG 36: 528BC).

23. *In Iohannem homilia* 66.3 (PG 59: 370).

24. *Graecarum affectionium curatio* PG 83: 841C.

the divine scriptures; in support of this Theoderet can quote the aforementioned tag of Numenius: 'What is Plato but a Moses speaking in Attic Greek?' The Greeks, he feels, decked out their books with matter taken from the divine fountains.²⁵

In his *Contra Julianum*, Cyril of Alexandria points out that Moses lived before the Greek thinkers, and that the Greeks, being curious, travelled very widely. So it happened that Pythagoras and Thales spent some time in Egypt. As Plato's *Timaeus* indicates, Solon spent some time there as well, where he was told that the Greeks were mere children. Both Solon and Plato wondered at Moses' writings.²⁶ Cyril notes elsewhere that Pythagoras and Plato spent some time in Egypt, where they came to know of Moses. Because of this, he believes, of the Greeks their opinions concerning God are the soundest.²⁷

Another theologian to hold this view was archbishop Ambrose of Milan (374-97), in whose writings it takes an unrivalled variety of forms. 'The philosophers' imitated David's concept of the highest heavens praising God.²⁸ The teaching of the Delphic oracle *cognosce te ipsum* is really the teaching of Solomon and Moses, although it is not clear whether Ambrose postulates a direct borrowing.²⁹ Some of Plato's doctrine came from the Song of Songs,³⁰ while the teachings of Esdras were borrowed by the Greeks.³¹ For the sake of learning Plato went to Egypt, where he came to know of the deeds of Moses, the oracles of the Law and the sayings of the prophets;³² Pythagoras, too, imitated the Old Testament.³³ The Pythagorean counsel to avoid travelling on a common road was taken from Scripture.³⁴

But Augustine of Hippo was to cast doubt on the theory. In a passage of his *De Doctrina Christiana* which probably dates from the late fourth century, Augustine discussed an opinion, which he attributed to Ambrose, that Plato had gone to Egypt in the time of Jeremiah. On this basis, Ambrose showed that it was rather likely (*probabilius*) that Plato came to know 'our writings' through Jeremiah, and so was able to teach and write things which are rightly praised. Augustine finds this more plausible (*credibilis*) than what he seems to take as the necessary alternative: that Jesus Christ was in-

25. *ibid.* 860C-861A.

26. Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Julianum* PG 76: 524f.

27. *ibid.* 548A.

28. *Exameron* (ed. CSEL 32) 2.2.6; cf. Ps. 148:4 (*Vulg.*)

29. *ibid.* 6.6.39; cf. Cant. 1:8 (*Vulg.*), Deut. 4:9.

30. *De bono mortis* (ed. CSEL 32) 5.19.

31. *ibid.* 11.51.

32. *In Psalmum CXVIII expositio* 18.4 (PL 15: 1529A).

33. *ibid.* 2.5 (PL 15: 1275).

34. *Ep.* 28.1 (to Irenaeus; PL 16: 1095B).

structed in the books of Plato.³⁵ It is a qualified assent, weakened in a crucial passage of the *De Civitate Dei*, in which Augustine examines the suggestion that Plato had been in Egypt where he had listened to Jeremiah or read books of the Old Testament. He finds that Plato was born approximately a century after Jeremiah flourished, and that the translation of the scriptures into Greek was only undertaken in the time of King Ptolemy, some sixty years after Plato died. Of course, it remains possible that Plato made use of the services of an interpreter, or was informed orally of what the scriptures say. Some passages of Plato are reminiscent of the Old Testament, and in particular Augustine is almost convinced (*paene assentior*) by the similarity of the biblical names for God, *Qui sum* and *Qui est*, (Ex. 3:14) with Plato's concept of an unchangeable God who is quite distinct from the changeable things of the creation. Augustine cannot decide whether Plato derived this information from books, or from considering the evidence of the created world.³⁶ Finally, in the book of *Retractiones* composed towards the end of his life, he withdraws his imputation of the opinion that Plato had visited Egypt in Jeremiah's time to Ambrose, and one is left with the impression that he had turned against the theory of borrowing.³⁷

By the mid-fifth century the theory of Greek borrowing from Hebrew sources seems virtually to have run its course. It was briefly endorsed by John of Damascus in the eighth century, according to whom the Greek philosophers appropriated (σφετερισάμενοι) the teachings of Moses concerning the heavens.³⁸ An extraordinary sixteenth-century fresco of the Tree of Jesse at Sucevita, Romania, which is still quite well preserved, includes portraits of Porphyry, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and people presumably intended to represent other Greek thinkers, among them apparently Solon.³⁹ Iconographically this clearly places these thinkers within the framework of those with a genuine knowledge of some of God's activities, but it does not imply that they were dependent upon the Hebrews. In the West, as far as I have been able to discover, revivals of this theme arose out of encounters with patristic discussions. Thus, Otto of Freising, writing in the twelfth century, states that Plato treats the power, wisdom and goodness of the Creator, the birth (*genitura*) of the world and the creation of man so clearly and wisely that it is believed by certain Christian

35. *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.18.43 (CCSL 32 p. 63).

36. *De Civitate Dei* 8.11f (CCSL 47 pp. 227-9).

37. *Retractiones* 2.4 (PL 32: 632).

38. *Expositio fidei* 20, 2.6 (ed. B. Kotter, Berlin/New York 1973 (= *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos* 2), p. 50).

39. Paul Henry, *Les Eglises de la Moldavie du Nord*, Paris 1930, p. 274f with plate LXVI(i); Wilhelm Nyssen, *Bildgesang der Erde Aussenfresken der Moldaukloster in Rumänien*, Trier 1977, pp. 114-16 with plate VI.

authors (*a quibusdam ex nostris*) that he heard Jeremiah in Egypt.⁴⁰ John of Salisbury, à propos of Augustine's discussion in the *De Civitate Dei*, states that the opinion of certain people that Plato met Jeremiah in Egypt and read the prophetic writings there is false. It is true that many things consonant with the sayings of the prophets are to be found in the Platonic books, and moving beyond Augustine John instances an expression of the doctrine of the Trinity in the *Timaeus* as one of these. But by citing S. Paul (Rom. 1:18-20) John implies, as does Augustine, that Plato may have discovered such truths by contemplating the created world.⁴¹ The fifteenth-century scholar Bessarion was able to cite Augustine and Cyril of Alexandria concerning the travels of Pythagoras and Plato to Egypt.⁴² But it seems clear that such later Western writers were doing no more than reproducing and embroidering discussions they encountered in their reading of the Fathers.

In conclusion, one may ask why this theory of Greek borrowing from the Hebrews exerted such an attraction among early Christian thinkers, and why it later passed out of use. While even in the early patristic period its acceptance was by no means universal⁴³ it was remarkably common and can be documented, as we have seen, both in Greek and Latin writings, and among the former in both the Alexandrian and Antiochene traditions. One can only sympathise with the author who claimed that 'literary history knows no other example of such an enormous mystification'.⁴⁴ If one accepts that the Greeks were habitually uninterested in the thinking of the Jews, or indeed anyone other than themselves,⁴⁵ the phenomenon seems even more curious. But some points seem fairly clear. Assuming the substantial identity of Jewish and Christian teaching on many points, by establishing that the Greeks were the pupils of the Hebrews Christian apologists could not only refute charges that they were preaching novel doctrines⁴⁶ but effectively turn the tables on pagan controversialists. In developing this theory the church fathers were able to operate within a

40. *Chronica siue Historia de Duabus Civitatibus* 2.8 (ed. Adolf Hofmeister, Hannover 1912, p. 75f).

41. *Policriticus* 7.5 (ed. C.C.I. Webb 2, Oxford 1909, pp. 108-11).

42. *In Calumniatorem Platonis Libri IV* 3.2 (ed. L. Mohler, Paderborn 1927 (= *Quellen und Forschungen* 22), p. 245).

43. In particular, Lactantius almost explicitly argues against it: 'Pythagoras, and later Plato, inflamed by a love of seeking out the truth, went as far as [the lands of] the Egyptians, the Magi and the Persians, to find out about the rites and sacred things of these peoples, but they did not make their way to the Jews'. *Divinae Institutiones* 4.2.4 (CSEL 19, p. 277).

44. M-J. Lagrange, *Saint Justin philosophe, martyr*, Paris 1914, p. 132.

45. See the most interesting suggestions of Arnaldo Momigliano, 'The Fault of the Greeks', *Daedalus* 104 no. 2 (1975), 9-19.

46. Suetonius, *Nero* 16: 'Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae. . .'

classical tradition which had Plato going to Egypt, for example,⁴⁷ but I would place much more weight on the antecedent tradition of Jewish thought, particularly as it developed in Alexandria. According to Eusebius, the theory of Greek borrowing from the Hebrews was first upheld by Eupolemos, and subsequently by Artapan, both of them Hellenized Jews who flourished in Alexandria during the second century B.C.⁴⁸ The works of these scholars are not known to us, but in the first century A.D. two Jewish scholars whose works survive can be shown to have accepted the theory. According to the Alexandrian Jew Philo, the opinions of Heracleitus on opposites were derived from 'our theologian', that is, Moses.⁴⁹ Josephus argues for extensive knowledge of the Hebrews among the Greeks. Pythagoras, Theophrastus, Herodotus, Choerilus, Aristotle, Hecataeus and Agatharchides are named in this regard, and Josephus asserts the failure of other Greeks to mention the Hebrews was due to envy more than ignorance.⁵⁰ Plato followed the example of Moses, and more generally the Greek philosophers are said to have imitated the Hebrews.⁵¹

Perhaps, then, the Christian thesis of Greek indebtedness to the Hebrews can be traced to an earlier tradition of Jewish thought. Certainly its development within Christian thought can be related to Hellenist Jewish currents: the important role of Philo in the thought of Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and of a Jewish-influenced Alexandrian milieu in the thought of Eusebius and Ambrose, needs no emphasis, and it is among such authors that the theory is most insistently expressed. Indeed, were it not for the reticence of Origen, who lacked enthusiasm for a theory with which he was clearly well-acquainted, one could almost argue that the weight early Christian authors give the theory is connected with their direct or indirect relationship with Alexandrian thought; with those intellectually furthest from Alexandria (Lactantius, Jerome, Augustine) betraying the least interest. The argument does not quite work, but it covers a large amount of the evidence, and one can be left in no doubt as to the influence of Jewish thought in the development of this theme in Christian writing.

But suggesting how is not the same as explaining why. What intellectual needs did the theory of Greek borrowing meet? Clearly, in the first place, those of Hellenized Jews, presumably in Alexandria. Some scholars have

47. Cicero, *De Finibus* 5.29.87 notes that Plato travelled to Egypt 'ut a sacerdotibus barbaris numeros et caelestia acciperet'.

48. *Praeparationis Evangelicae* (ed. W. Dindorf *Eusebii Caesariensis Opera* 1, Leipzig 1867), 9.17, 9.26f, 9.30.

49. *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 3.5 (trans. Ralph Marcus, Camb. Mass./London 1953, p. 188).

50. *Against Apion*, ed. and trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, London/Camb. Mass. 1926, pp. 161-222.

51. *ibid.*

tended to emphasise bad relations between the Alexandrian Jewish community and native Egyptians. For example, according to the standard work of S. W. Baron, Jewish teaching on the historical role of Egypt, particularly at the time of the Exodus,

wounded the national susceptibilities of the Egyptians, and, before long, of their Hellenistic overlords. Although somewhat toned down in Alexandrian Jewish historiography . . . the story of the ten plagues, the drowning of the Egyptian hosts in the Red Sea, and so on, was told in full by the Septuagint translators to the chagrin of many patriotic Egyptians.⁵²

Perhaps the matter should be viewed rather differently. It is by no means clear that Alexandria was properly a part of Egypt: the Byzantines, for example, officially described it as *ad Aegyptum* rather than *in Aegypto*.⁵³ In any case, the application of such terms as 'national susceptibilities' and 'patriotism' to inhabitants of the Hellenistic world seems questionable.⁵⁴ Against this emphasis, I would stress the need of Jewish intellectuals to assert the validity of their own heritage against the powerful and tempting force of Greek thought, particularly in the Hellenistic city of Alexandria. Whatever the truth may be concerning the origins of the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, Jewish thinkers must have been subject to complex pressures, and by adopting the notion of Greek borrowing they could both refute claims for the superiority of Greek philosophy, and yet, in a sense, legitimate some of the content of that philosophy in such a way as would render its attractiveness more palatable. So too for Christian adherents of this theory: at a time when the faith had to be defended against the pagan thought it so evidently controverted, yet which proved a temptation to more than one of the Fathers, a theory which allowed one to maintain that some of the enemy's strong points were in fact one's own, whether or not properly understood, proved highly acceptable.

Accepting, then, the continuity of this *motif* from Jewish into Christian thought, and that it fulfilled similar needs for Jewish and Christian thinkers, it becomes a simple matter to account for its decline in the fifth century. What was essentially a defensive mechanism ceased to be useful as the enemy vanished. It is the need which the theory fulfilled, rather than the enormous influence of Augustine, which accounts for its atrophy in the West earlier than the East: its defensive role made it relevant in the East for a longer period, while by the time of Pope Gregory I, for example, it was no

52. S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed. 1, New York 1952, p. 189.

53. Cyril Mango, *Byzantium the Empire of New Rome*, London 1980, p. 20.

54. Alleged 'nationalism' in Egypt and Syria at a later date is examined by John Moorhead, 'The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasions', *Byzantion* 51 (1981), 579-91.

longer necessary in the West. Hence, too, the general lack of interest medieval thinkers show in the theory. Their discussions of it appear to have been prompted by their respectful reading of the Fathers; it was not a line of thought which occurred to them as speaking to their own needs. A theory developed by Jewish thinkers in answer to real intellectual needs, and taken over by Christian authors for the same reason, was no longer necessary.